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Reconstruct.
Remember.
Rearrange.
Reshape.
Revise.
React.
Restart.
Reinvent.
Reconsider.
Reimagine.
Reacquaint.
Reform.
Reify.
Redo.
Reaffirm.
Reallocate.
Reassemble.
Reconstitute.
Recompose.
Reconcile.
Reclassify.
Realize.
Renew.
Redux.
Resign.
Recoup.
Respond.
Recharge.
Recognize.
Reconnoiter.
Recapitulate.

[re] generation

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LOCAL DANCE HISTORY PROJECT



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LOCAL DANCE HISTORY PROJECT

Philadelphia Dance Projects | Local Dance History Project
[re]generation

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Michael Biello and Ishmael Houston-Jones "What We're Made Of" (1980)
Photo: Thomas Moore

[right] *top row*: LDHP Artists 2010, Jano Cohen, William Robinson, Gregory Holt, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Terry Fox, *bottom row*: Heather Murphy, John Luna, Alie Vidich, Dan Martin, Michael Biello
[middle] Terry Fox and Dan Martin
[far right] Ishmael Houston-Jones and Michael Biello
Photos: J.J. Tiziou



[re]generation

contemporary dance | past meets future

Contents



Introduction Terry Fox	5
Essay & Artists' Comments Anna Drozdowski	7
The performances [February 26-27 and March 5-6, 2010 @ The Performance Garage]	
WHAT WE'RE MADE OF	10
D E A D	14
HE & HE	18
SNOW FALLING ON WAVES	20
WONDER OF LIVING THINGS	22
STOLEN POEM	26
CITIZEN'S FOOTBOOK & "INTERFERENCE...."	28
Forum [excerpts]	30
Artist Biographies	32
Acknowledgements	36

[left] Michael Biello "Into The Light" (circa 1980)
Photo: Thomas Moore

[right] Agape improvising at PMA
Wendy Hammarstrom, Elizabeth Luff and
Susan Tomita O'Connor
Photo: Steve Hebdan





Introduction

Terry Fox, Executive Director, Philadelphia Dance Projects

The impetus for this project was practical. Several card boxes had been following me around for over 30 years from place to place to where I now live, and it was time to clean and clear spaces. The contents of the boxes marked “archive” were a jumble of disintegrating papers and odd video formats, slides, photos and super-8 film reels. I decided, as I am far enough away from my performing artist days, to take a look. I don’t know how to begin the task of preparing for a formal archive, but was sensing that this was my ultimate goal. How to begin? So I did what I have always been doing when it comes to getting art out and about, and that is, to invite others into the fray.

I decided that an arbitrary starting point might be with the artists who appeared in the *Dance & Dancers* concert at the Harold Prince Theater in 1980. Thirty years ago I had invited some of my dancer friends and colleagues to join me in presenting our work in a formal theater. At the time there was no local dance presenter other than those in converted storefront galleries. (Etage, Painted Bride and Nexus, for example). Many of us had taken to the streets and parks quite literally. I felt it was time to place our work on a real stage and see how we fared. The Painted Bride helped us get support from the PA Arts Council. The two weekends of “post modern” artists at the Harold Prince Theater at Penn’s Annenberg Center sold out. Only the Alternative press took notice, (since there were no dance critics at the three daily papers at that time).

The choreographer/dancers featured were: Jano Cohen, Wendy Hammarstrom, me plus Ishmael Houston-Jones who collaborated with Michael Biello (who was also a “performance” and visual artist) and musician/composer Dan Martin, along with two other dancers Tonio Guerra and Jeff McMahon. Actually, some of the other works were collaborations with other dancers, musicians and visual artists, as well. So, I contacted Jano, Wendy, Ishmael, Dan and Michael to see if they were game to look back at that time and reconstruct or present in some way something of what we were doing then. They were all up for it. And so Philadelphia Dance Projects’ **Local Dance History Project** came to be.

With a small grant from the PA Humanities Council, we began planning. Further into the process The Pew Center for Culture and Heritage through Dance Advance awarded the Project a large enough grant to make it happen.

We five artists met over several months in 2009 along with Lisa Kraus and Anna Drozdowski, whom I had invited for their exemplary skills at articulation, and who would moderate discussions around the Forum and performances.

We kept Wendy, who is on the West Coast, in the loop via e-mail. We discussed the charge of delivering some sort of semblance to the work and flavor, and temper of those times to a new generation of artists and to contemporary dance-going audiences vis-a-vis reconstructed excerpts of works to be performed as part of Philadelphia Dance Projects Presents 2010. I hoped that the performances and the forum day would answer some questions I frequently get from younger artists who are curious about what “came before” on the Philly dance scene.

Essay & Artist Comments

Anna Drozdowski, Curatorial Advisor

The audition, rehearsal process and the organizing and administering of all the logistics around the project continually built toward the suspense of its realization. For me, the doing of all this never hinted at how fulfilling seeing the works in performance would actually be. To see the consummate performers in “He & He,” “What We’re Made Of,” “DEAD,” “The Wonder of Living Things,” “Snow Falling on Waves,” and “Stolen Poem,” was gratifying in every way. The works emerged fresh, alive—full of vigor, humanity and beauty.

The Project has also brought to the surface very meaningful and important aspects of being creative dance artists that we seldom give voice to:

what do we mean by a dance community?

what styles and creative pursuits are innovative or experimental?

what is the value of intergenerational exchange?

why is it important to share our history?

This catalog is meant to reflect on the past and the present as seen through the process and fruition of the Project. The Project models a way to the future in terms of to share and to keep a history. We hope it will serve to extend the conversation about the curated programming. In this way, as with a visual art catalog, the experience of the live event is given context and a home outside of the frame of the theater. Despite the technological advances of media, dance is predominately passed down in the same method as oral history. To capture that history in this catalog format gives weight to the ephemeral weekend when it all came together. It will become something to hold onto beyond the paper program, and enrich the experience of those who were there, as audience or performers, as well as illuminate the event for those who were unable to participate.

PDP’s **Local Dance History Project** could become an impetus to create mechanisms for people who want to access information about local dance artists and their history. I can envision a next-phase of making all the information and documentation that this Project has engendered readily accessible, as the assemblage of images and words in this catalog is commemorative but by no means complete.

The **Local Dance History Project** is getting a jump start on my card board boxes. Materials have been digitalized and on the way towards a 21st-century archive. It was so much more pleasurable and richer sharing this experience with everyone, of “re-membering” (to conjure the original root meaning of re-constituting the body back together) both physically and philosophically. To be continued....

[April 2010]

The shifting sands live near Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. This system of barchan dunes moves on average 17 kilometers a year, on average, traveling constantly across the desert, and altering the landscape as the dunes combine and create new configurations. This movement is defined by the Aeolian process—where the shape and trajectory of the sands are affected by the air current. Our dance history, too, is passed on the winds—transported across time in the way that the dune travels across the desert, occasionally absorbed or transferred or newly birthed. Each grain of sand takes its moment to rise to the top and then tumbles underneath. Like performers, some climb slowly and steadily, while others catapult to a prominent point and just as quickly, tuck into the fold.



The Local Dance History Project was about an experimental dance genre. For me it is also about a kind of people—people engaged with inquiry and openness. This integrity of investigation was so important to the process—the link among dance makers across generations. We are askers of questions, bodily hypothesizers concerned with the Zeitgeist. Many of us reject or ignore what has come before as our preoccupation with relevance for the present greatly overshadows our concern with a larger timeline. During the day of the forum, Michael Bilello referenced the fecund period of creation in his twenties and early thirties: “This was a time that has influenced my entire life until now—and it was my community that gave it to me.”

For the group of “post-moderns” who shared the Prince bill in 1980, it was a period of building and developing community, a period of finding partners (creative and relational) and finding a supportive group of like-minded art-makers. And, so sitting at the table with the Beta tapes and hand-printed programs it was easy for me to feel at home among “my people.” Though born in the year that they shared their bill, we share values about creating art and creating community. In a field that remains marginalized, these structures for endurance remain necessary across the sands of time. Dance is always about the hourglass—about mortality and eternity, and how these are wrapped up in our bodies, and our shifting relationships.

—continued page 8

There were some universals with our worm-like re-generation and investigation into our cultural/ancestral ecosystem: an early experience with Group Motion, an appreciation for brown rice, a story of taking one's clothes off onstage, an understanding of doing much with little, and a continued conversation with gravity—both fighting and giving in. What rides on top of all of this is an understanding of the individual performer—an inclination toward making work on the body that you have (had) rather than the one you aspire toward. In this way experimental movement of today and yesterday is idiosyncratic and falsely pedestrian—eschewing given techniques in favor of developing one's own.

It is easy to see the individual in the early works, simultaneously raw and with embryonic ideas for a life's worth of questioning. Terry Fox, clearly, as wry and magnanimous then as she is now; John Luna, dry and laconic—and I expect will only dehydrate more with time. Together we asked, "What of experimentation?"—concluding that experimenters are those committed to inquiry. Even with found success, they return to the studio with a question rather than a formula. In this way our community spans generations and geography—united by a sympathetic kinesthetic concern. The questions have changed some, as do the sands, but the ferocity with which we take to them endures—even as the wind blows.

[April 2010]

Anna Drozdowski formulated seven questions for performers in the Local Dance History Project.

How has working on this project affected your idea of "local"?



HEATHER: I thought I knew most of the dancers here in Philly, but I was happily surprised to be cast with ALL folks that I have never performed with, and have actually only seen few in other performances. My sense of the local scene was expanded by this experience, and I know the Philly modern dance community, now, to be larger than I had originally thought.

SCOTT: Having lived in Philly for the past 6 years, the local dance community can, at times, seem very small and all too familiar. However, after completing this project, I have a different perspective regarding those who make up the local dance community. I first met Dan Martin and Michael Biello at their gallery three years ago, during the Fringe Festival. However, only after PDP announced the Local Dance History artists did I realize that they are performers and have been making work here for over thirty years. This project has certainly made me wonder what other inspiring artist are just beyond my "local radar."

Forum Dance Workshop
Photo: Brian Mengini

GREG: It was so great to connect to the local dance community from that era, because you saw so many continuities, as well as feeling the distance of time. It's hard to understand how "sub-culture" is transmitted, because we hear about socialization as happening in homes/from parents/mainstream institutions. When was I socialized as a Philly dancer? Yet I feel so at home here with the mores and priorities and ideals....

JOHN: Can't say that it has.

WILLIAM: Since graduating UArts I have stayed relatively close to my connections established at the school, professionally doing most of my work with the professors I had there. I have been living in Philadelphia for six years now and have only made superficial connections with some of the wonderful "local" artists here. This project has affected my idea of local drastically, in that it has introduced me deeply to the local network of artists and my place within this community.

ALIE: I don't know, honestly. Someone wrote Movement Brigade's show up this week as "local" and I thought, yeah, we're local. I still feel like I am becoming "local." I guess to me that means work that comes from the energy of Philly and people living and making work here now.

Tell me what I'm missing....What you most want to talk about regarding your involvement in this process?

HEATHER: This was awesome...let's bring folks together again in these awesome, framed arrangements that might not otherwise happen.... Thanks for doing this.

WILLIAM: I just wanted to thank you and Terry for having this series. I thought it was great and I look forward for things to come.

THERESA: What I'd like to talk to most is how important that funding projects such as this are in our community. I find it upsetting that so much funding for the arts has been cut in our community. There is so much to learn and experience from dance and I feel sorry that those that make the decision as to how much funding the arts get (or don't get) don't appreciate dance enough to give organizations enough money to make performances like this possible.

ALIE: I don't know, it was very enjoyable. The dances didn't seem "old" to me. They seemed fresh. It seemed like to me this could have been work that was now. I loved Dan and Michael's work. The playfulness of it was so inspiring to me. I guess the whole show made me think about dancing—what's too dancey? What isn't dancey? Do people like dances? Do they like anything? And also, I should note. This show made me feel like I was kind of part of the dance community in Philly, which has a very closed feeling to me usually. Meaning, it's small and a little insular and maybe hard to connect into at times. Somehow, through working on this show, I felt like I was not such an outsider all the time. And that was a very nice feeling.

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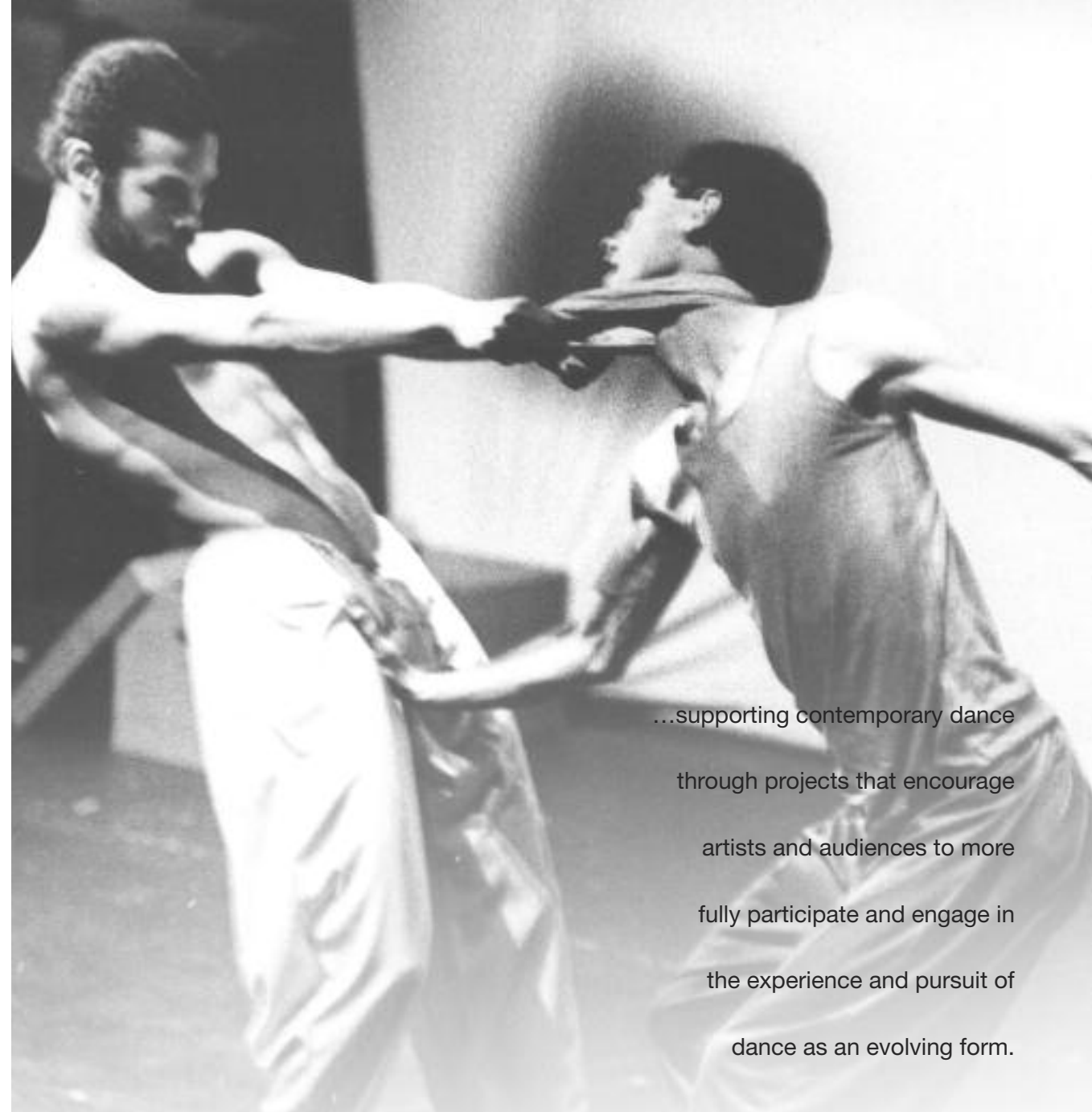
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Terry Fox, PDP Executive Director

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...supporting contemporary dance through projects that encourage artists and audiences to more fully participate and engage in the experience and pursuit of dance as an evolving form.

philadelphia dance projects

1427 Spruce Street / Suite 1F
Philadelphia PA 19102 USA

Ishmael Houston-Jones and Michael Biello, "What We're Made Of" (1980)
Photo: Thomas Moore

[right] "Snow Falling On Waves" (2010)
Photos: Brian Mengini

