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Posted on Tue, May. 31, 2005

Phila.'s percolating dance scene births New Festival, starting now

By Lisa Kraus
For The Inquirer

In the risky world of experimental dance-theater, you would expect the artists vying for funding and venues to be dog-eat-dog competitive. But in Philadelphia, true to the area's "brotherly love" moniker, it's just the opposite. Knowing there's strength in numbers, eight like-minded groups, already familiar to local audiences, are banding together to inaugurate the first annual New Festival, which begins today [Tuesday, May 31].

Why another dance-based festival in a city that has hosted the Philadelphia Fringe Festival each September since 1997 (it's now called the Live Arts/Philly Fringe) and DanceBoom! each January since 2002? By entertaining and educating with high-quality performances by local, national and international groups, these attractions have made live performance appealing to wider audiences. Perhaps that is why a third major festival, unusual for a city this size, has the potential to generate excitement and support.

"We began by speaking to our friends about the idea of a cooperative festival," says Melanie Stewart, director of her own dance theater, in a roundtable with several other participating artists. Stewart is producer and, along with performer and choreographer Paule Turner, curator of New Festival. The ultimate grouping of companies was, as Stewart says, "self-selected": Many had performed in each other's work. And all were

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Rehearsing a piece for Headlong Dance Theater, co-director David Brick (left) instructs dancers Olase Freeman and Heather Murphy.

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eager to show their art in "the best possible frame."

The New Festival's home is the Arts Bank, a 230-seat theater that exudes industrial chic. Its location at the junction of Broad and South Streets has meaning in itself. "South Street was the center of an experimental, edgy performance scene," says Headlong Dance Theater's David Brick. And Broad Street is the home of many of Philly's most respected cultural mainstays.

All the groups in New make "dance theater." Manfred Fischbeck of Group Motion Dance Company recalls the long European "Tanztheater" tradition, saying: "Dance theater is expressing through the body a vision, an image, a theme." Andrew Simonet of Headlong adds, "Unlike most traditional dance, we don't exclude what else the body can do: talking, singing or smiling."

These days, artists trained initially in dance often reach for a broader tool kit, using text, media and novel staging in addition to dance's formalized movement - an "anything goes" attitude forged by New York's Judson Church experimentalists in the '60s.

"Cutting edge," the term the artists use to describe the New Festival's offerings, refers to each group's working at the edge of its own exploratory frontier. The fresh challenge for Nicole Cousineau of Subcircle Dance Company is making an extended solo. In dialogue with four noted area artists, she's created *Somewhere Close to Now* with visuals and sound by Jorge Cousineau. This piece shares the bill with *Security* by Laura Petersen, which features zany videos made with surveillance cameras, "precision crawling," and Busby Berkeley-inspired dance formations.

Group Motion's program premieres *Screen*, which centers on virtual reality with characters and interactions that evoke chat rooms, video games and online dating. A giant scrim, used originally by Group Motion in 1967, will provide a projection surface. The repertory work *Strata* (2001) by Carol Brown, along with some new shorter dances, rounds out the show.

Turner engages the pain of being gay and African American in the full evening version of *Touched*, a work that Philly audiences previewed in DanceBoom! this year. Graphic sexual imagery and nudity figure in, and the work is born of a renegade ethos. Turner has been named one of "25 to Watch" by Dance Magazine.

For Headlong, "cutting edge" means returning to the stripped-down style with which the collective began. No fancy sets or overarching themes in this season's *Mixed Tape for a Bad Year*. Instead, several smaller pieces use an assortment of musical styles and narrative themes, including nostalgia for the lost values of hippie culture.

Philadelphia Dance Projects will team with Scribe Video Center to offer a dance/film/video workshop during the festival. And PDP's "Motion Pictures" screenings, in the New Festival lineup, will include a Shorts Blowout and a program of prizewinners from the 2005 Lincoln Center Dance on Camera Festival - among them Lloyd Newson's challenging *The Cost of Living*. Newson, the British director of the celebrated dance group DV8, is known for his rugged, visceral social commentaries.

True to the collaborative spirit of the festival, the two evenings of showcase performances by DanceHouse and Dance Theater Lab came out of a long-term, cooperative process where artists supported each other's development through showings and feedback. Each showcase evening features six individuals or groups, both emerging and established artists. Dance Theater Lab's styles range from experimental dance to masked theater to cabaret. And DanceHouse is where Stewart's own work will be on view.

Who will enjoy this work? "Everyone," says the group in chorus as discussion winds down. Simonet clarifies: "If you like to seek out strange movies and interesting music and live theater and strange Web sites, we're that. We're this very local, very personal, artist-driven stuff that isn't coming through on the mainstream channels."

Dance Theater**New Festival**

Through June 12 at the Arts Bank,
601 S. Broad St. Information: 215-
359-7775 or www.newfestival.net.

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