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ART

The Shock of the nEW



accentuate the cooperative: Alexandria Holmes and Sean Courtney rehearse for the multi-company nEW festival, while co-curators Paule Turner and Melanie Stewart look on.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Collaboration and - - gasp! -- branding sets a debut dance festival apart.

by Deni Kasrel

Have you seen the logo for the nEW Festival? wHY, you may ask, would they write the word "new" this way? wHY do something that has the potential to be distracting? wHAT's the point?

"The practical reason is it makes you stop and think," says dancer/choreographer Paule Turner, co-curator of nEW. "The word new can mean new and improved, or that it's a newly created festival, but we are trying to get people to read new as a title, as a pronoun. We are trying to do branding."

Hearing an artist talk about branding is also kind of, well, new. To a fair number of serious-minded creative souls, branding implies commercial product, not high art. In other words, it's selling out. But the artists behind nEW have seen the success of Annenberg Center's Dance Celebration, The Wilma Theater's DanceBoom!, as well as the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival and Philly Fringe. Each of those names connotes a particular concept and quality of performance, and nEW is looking to position itself in a similar vein. "We want people to know that it means a form of work that is interdisciplinary performance — it's about experimentation," says Turner. "And there's something about the logo that gives off the idea of experimentation."

The nEW festival, which comes to the Arts Bank for two weeks beginning May 31, features full-length programs by Paule Turner/court, Group Motion Dance Company, Headlong Dance Theater and Subcircle/Laura Peterson Choreography; two multi-bill showcases of emerging and independent performing artists; film screenings; and a dance/film workshop in conjunction with Philadelphia Dance Projects and Scribe Video Center, where filmmakers, dancers and choreographers can learn about different ways to capture bodies in motion. The headliners are likely well known to local dance fans. Melanie Stewart, nEW's producer and co-curator, says each has a distinct manner of investigating relationships between movement and other art forms, such as drama and digital technologies. According to Terry Fox, who helped curate the film component, even the flicks offer twists: "You can achieve certain things with film. You can explore different possibilities and repetitions, in ways that you can't do with live dance. You can examine gesture differently or look at it from a different angle."

Also new, to these folks at least, is the festival's format, which is based on a cooperative artist model. Stewart explains how it works: "Each company was asked to make a financial and human investment and we all have a say in how the work will be represented to the public. There are cooperative efforts for audience development in terms of combining resources and getting a bigger bang for our bucks."

For example, Headlong Dance Theater previewed pieces by some of nEW's acts at its First Friday open studio at Spirit Wind in May. Ten thousand brochures were printed with write-ups about all of nEW's productions. Each show opens with a video trailer that promotes the festival in general, as well as a company other than the one being presented at the time. Box office receipts are divided up 60/40, with the larger portion

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going to the individual company and the remainder split by the entire group. Artist fees help pay for the Arts Bank rental, while a \$49,500 grant from the William Penn Foundation financed the brochures, a publicist and advertising.

Planning for the festival was a collaborative process as well. Each group has its own way of creating art and conducting business, which led to lively exchanges over billing, marketing, and of course, the nEW logo. Personal preferences often took a back seat to group consensus.


Niki Cousineau, who with her husband, Jorge, leads the Subcircle company, says that the co-op meetings could be challenging. "In some respects the process to get to a final decision seems harder because there's more people to deal with," she says. "But I think the end result will feel fuller. Because you've gotten there with all these people really supporting everyone's work. It's not like you're out there on your own and once you do your show it's over."

Cousineau especially appreciates the fact that Stewart was so accommodating with regard to scheduling and providing a high level of technical support. She says that's rare in a festival setting, where artists are typically told where and when to show up and tech support is fairly minimal. Cousineau believes nEW has established a new paradigm: "There's this little micro-community formed that has a sense of ownership of a festival and that's different."

Cousineau is optimistic that nEW's co-op model will make an impression on viewers as well. "Hopefully the fact that all these people have been collaborating together and there really is this community that came together and made it happen will somehow come through in the work [I hope] that they get a feeling this was all artist-driven."

cOOL.

nEW Festival, May 31-June 12, \$8-\$15, (\$50 for dance/film workshop), The Arts Bank, 601 S. Broad St. See www.newfestival.net for a full schedule of events.

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