



WINTER 2025

# indance

DISCOURSE + DIALOGUE TO UNIFY, STRENGTHEN + AMPLIFY



P.14 Same Score



P.26 Gugulethu Ballet Project



P.50 Spirit of Sankofa



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Cover Photo: Yuko Monden Juma and audience member at AXIS Dance Company pre-show touch tour. Photo by Adriana Oyarzum

# WELCOME

by [MAURYA KERR](#), Guest Editor



The theme of **legacy** emerged as this issue coalesced—legacies of bodies, of resistance, brutality, culture, art. When I think of the legacies of bodies, I immediately think of all those disappeared because of the legacies of oppression. Who is missing from this room, this canon, this legacy, *this life*? Who gets (a) legacy?

As someone drawn to the dictionary to help me fathom the world, looking at legacy as 'money or property left to someone in a will' leads to the fact that Black folks in America have always been denied generational wealth building. The deadly 1921 Tulsa race riot is just one example of the tactics of white supremacy/violence used to guarantee the destruction of Black legacy—our very lives and economic prospects for future generations. Looking at legacy as 'the long-lasting impact of a person's life or particular events in the past,' one legacy of that race massacre is that in 2022, the typical white household's wealth was \$285,000, **compared to the typical Black household's \$44,900.** (An article in *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* put the 2018 value of property and assets destroyed in Tulsa at over \$200 million.)

From the etymology of *legacy* comes 'a body of persons sent on a mission.' The history of America is indeed a body of persons sent on a mission—to colonize, oppress, kill. Trump is in office again and the legacy of America marches on and on and on. As do the legacies of radical refusal—Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bayard Rustin, and Recy Taylor, to name just a few—who give us hope that something different, something freer, can exist.

In this issue we celebrate and confront, often simultaneously, legacy.

I hope you're all taking care of yourselves and each other. Resisting tyranny requires deep, intentional self-care and other-care, with mutual aid hopefully a steady practice as we continue aligning our finances with our values. To source from [@imperfectactivista](#), mutual aid is the foundation for collective strength. [AWARE-LA](#) has an [excellent guide](#) (slide sixteen) I have found helpful in determining a basic monthly redistribution budget. (And speaking of, have you and/or your business paid your annual [Shuumi Land Tax](#)?)

I hope that we see each other in community somewhere, sometime, soon.

And I hope you'll join me *outside* Zellerbach Hall February 22nd–23rd to protest Batsheva's performances in accordance with the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. To add your voice to the effort to convince Cal Performances to cancel Batsheva's engagement, [click here](#).

May we be legacy—a body of people on a mission for justice (and praxis-based) empathy.

Sending care.

Maurya

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Shareen DeRyan, photo by Afshin Odabae



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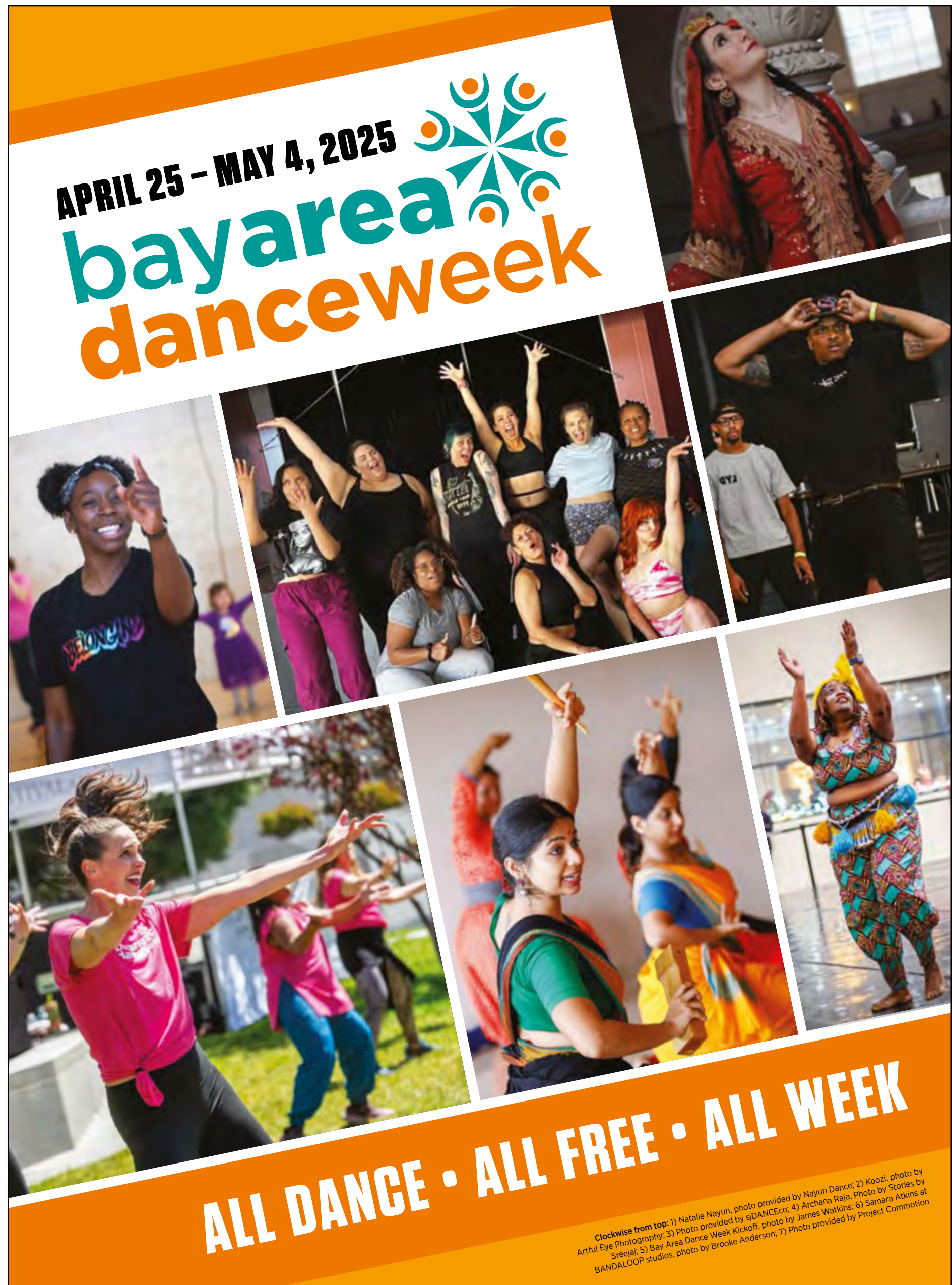
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Clockwise from top: 1) Natalie Nayun, photo provided by Nayun Dance; 2) Koozi, photo by Artful Eye Photography; 3) Photo provided by sDANCEco; 4) Archana Raja, photo by Stories by Sreejai; 5) Bay Area Dance Week Kickoff, photo by James Watkins; 6) Samara Atkins at BANDALOOP studios, photo by Brooke Anderson; 7) Photo provided by Project Commotion



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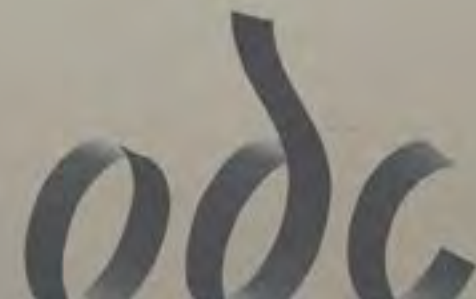
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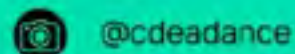
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CDEA is a non-profit professional organization serving emerging, practicing and master dance artists, teachers, and scholars through advocacy and professional development opportunities that advance dance as a performing art in diverse educational sectors and communities throughout California.



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Jesse Hewit at Z Space

# SAME SCORE

by JESSE HEWIT

**RECENTLY, MY FRIEND SIOBHAN (CRONIN)** took me up to this clearing at the top of Mt. Davidson, where we each found our way into a kind of chi/qi practice. I started slow. The chi took shape in my hands, and my stomach softened. It got broader, along with my breath, and my body started moving in order to track the quick evolutions of the chi. The chi started stretching out to the sky, coaxing me to open my guts and get spread out and lit up, and then it started taking on textures and colors, rapidly. All the surfaces of my body caught fire because they were moving slicing collapsing in order to meet the planes and curves and currents, everywhere. I was dancing.

PHOTO BY ROBBIE SWEENEY



In the fall of 2017, I was making a choreographic work at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. It would turn out to be my last for a while. I remember that I was in rehearsal one day, intently whirling around the YBCA forum, brain and muscles workingworkingworking. And then I stopped. Some *limit of my body*, previously sensed but averted, had finally elbowed its way in, all the way, past everything. This *limit* wasn't so much about my physical strength or mobility, but instead, something ecological and of the whole self. It put a new skin on me; one that I had been privately trying on and taking off as of late, but that was becoming too good a fit to only wear

on certain days of the week. I got still, and stood there in *my limited body*: me as subject, as symbol, as politic, as story, as citizen.

Up until that moment in the forum, I had worked for most of my life to make my thoughts and feelings into live art. I had shaped nearly every aspect of myself into someone – some *thing!*? – who was thrillingly and precisely convinced that my work knew what the world needed. And then, my tiny *body* standing inside that huge room, trying again to connect everything to everything, just stopped being so necessary. I had come to some kind of end. I tried to imagine myself

moving/elaborating/hypnotizing/lying/dazzling, anything to create a hook back into before. There was no hook. I wept. Finally. I stayed with myself.

It was also around that time that arts funding had finally begun shifting more explicitly in its priorities (thank god!). Our committed and strategic programming of underrepresented artists, our barrage of live and written discourse engaging the inequities of the field, and our bold and direct challenges to funders was all taking shape, and accordingly, many of the white male makers like me were staring down a different kind of horizon. As the good news rolled out, I knew that I wasn't going to try to contort myself or my work in order to outrun anything. Instead, I let myself feel the shudder of change, and then basked in the justice of the moment. It was strange and it was right, and it meant that something different was coming for all of us.

The next two+ years were foggy. I stopped trying to get my work funded, worked in arts advocacy and administration, danced a bit for/with my friend Sara (Shelton Mann), got divorced, and tried to make sense of how the arrival of a terrifying virus was somehow collaborating with the sociological dumpster fire of the internet to reprogram all our nervous systems forever. Also, I was still a dancer and a freak: I made swoopy and creature-ish choreographies in my live-work studio and wrote long unhinged monologues about the personalities of various shades of purple. I pinballed through days like I always had: sensitive and responsive to distance, proximity, shapes, color, and emotion, all stretched over the sacred geometry of the world around me. I was the same artist, but without an apparatus to prove it to anybody.

There was a day in 2020, during “lockdown,” that I was walking up Bernal Hill. I perceived myself to have very little life to stand in, aside from the guiding light of my twinkling “sensitivities.” I had no real home (I had moved out of the apartment that I shared with my ex-husband and was cat-sitting in exchange for an apartment in the Castro), no real job (my gig doing events and fundraising for CounterPulse came to an organic end), and I was still wandering through the residue of my shift away from making dance and art in a public way.

As I walked, I asked myself what I still had. The answer was quick. I had my practice. I had scores and desires and frameworks and rivers for *making something useful out of the experience of being with people*. I wondered about this thing that I had always been doing, and what form it could take. I wondered what it could mean to be quietly happy and helpful, to not peddle or sell or convince, but instead to just *serve*. I wondered about money and time and death and fear and art and grief and ease. I imagined ease.

I wondered what it could mean to be quietly happy and helpful, to not peddle or sell or convince, but instead to just *serve*.



Larry Arrington and Jesse Hewitt at YBCA

PHOTO BY ROBBIE SWENEN



ILLUSTRATION BY JESSE HEWITT



I am a dance artist and a therapist, and of course I still don't know how to explain myself to you any better than I did when I was trying to get you to Come. See. My. Fucking. Show.

I decided that day to pursue psychotherapy, and to orient my work toward supporting artists; people who were in the river too, on the rosters, on the edges, in the candidate pool, frayed in the fray. I applied to more graduate school, rearranged mostly everything in my day-to-day, engaged in "evidence-based research" in order to learn new ways of doing what I had already been doing, and generally walked right out the door and toward this new thing.

I am indeed a therapist now, and, yes, it can be confusing to not know how I will dance. The grief and longing are wild and extraordinary some days, but they are not boring, and I remain endlessly fascinated by this shifting life. Nearly seven years after the last public performance of my work, I still don't know what it means to be standing on the outside of a community and a lifestyle that I once couldn't even see because I was so obsessively inside of it, shaping it. This part remains bizarre, but I'm grateful for the perspective.

When I was in my most rigorous and lucrative art-making phase (about 2006-2017), I entered every project, every inquiry, every performance, with a fairly similar approach: go tenderly into a something, and look around. Listen. Feel the walls. What is already happening? What are the existing modes and languages present? Who is there and who is not? What is needed? How do you know? How might we curiously shepherd and craft some creative interventions? Of course, this is how I approach my clinical work.

The moment on top of Mt. Davidson with Siobhan makes me know that I'm okay, and that I will dance. My friend Jesse (Zaritt) and I do dancey drawings together once in a while, and we write things that are dances, that some might think are weird and troubling, but that make us feel alive. My partner gave me crayons for Christmas, and I used them to make a dance therapy

picture just this morning. The cadence and dynamic of my conversations over food with Sara still feel like we are in a studio together, carving away at each other, with love and hunger. I am a dance artist and a therapist, and of course I still don't know how to explain myself to you any better than I did when I was trying to get you to Come. See. My. Fucking. Show. In my work as a therapist, though, I don't need you to come see anything or do anything, and I'm glad for that, for now.

Recently, in a session, my client (an artist) was stuck in a language-based anxiety loop. His circumstances were untenable, and necessitated that he move his consciousness from his head down into his guts, or he was going to stay stuck. I asked him if he would be okay just getting up, walking around the room, and testing out the textures and densities of the surfaces. He did it. I watched him and tracked his pace and breathing. I moved my breath with his, and flexed my muscles when he pushed on things. When he sat back down, he still seemed a little trapped, but something was brimming. I asked him if we could sit in silence for three minutes. We did. Around one minute in, he wept. Finally. I stayed with him. We were dancing.

*A quick note to my people, my artists, my shades of purple, my adversaries, my ghostly ones, my failures, my friends: maybe we will always be in this matrix of abstraction and import, and maybe we deserve to feel okay if we want to. Maybe we sharpen our skills, soften our assessments, and put me out of work, because if there is anything that we know how to do, it is to heal. I'll follow your lead.*

*Love, Jesse*

**JESSE HEWIT** practices psychotherapy in San Francisco, and is faculty at the School of Social Work of San Francisco State University. He also has danced, does dance, and will dance. His creative and therapeutic work continues to be grounded in pursuits of connectivity, clarity, and unhooking.



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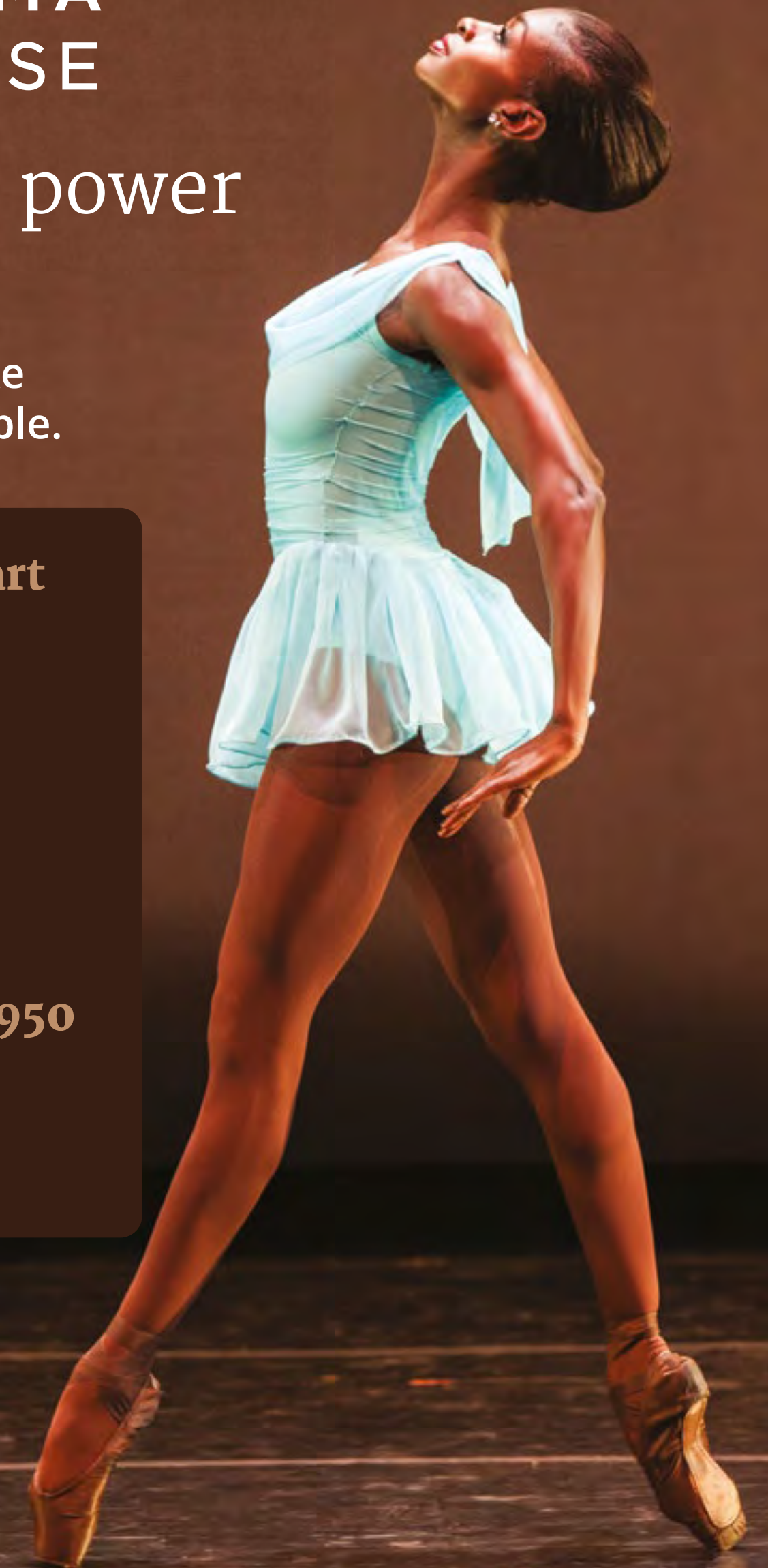
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# DANCING *with* SOLIDARITY

The Case for Boycotting Batsheva and Gaga **by DANCERS FOR PALESTINE**

**A**s organizers with Dancers for Palestine, we've spent the last year urging our field to embrace the power of art and culture to advance the cause of freedom, dignity, and self-determination for Palestine. We support a variety of tactics, including direct action, creative resistance, legislative advocacy, organized labor, and [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions](#) (BDS). Through our relationships with experienced Palestinian organizers, we have come to understand the critical importance of BDS and its cultural component, the [Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel](#) (PACBI). We therefore must address the complicity of Israel's most internationally dominant dance institutions, Batsheva Dance Company and the closely affiliated Gaga Movement, especially in light of Batsheva's upcoming world tour.

Initiated in 2005 by a broad coalition of Palestinian civil society groups and modeled after anti-Apartheid boycotts in South Africa, BDS has increasingly been embraced by human rights advocates worldwide, including a growing number of Israelis.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, despite its liberal reputation,

Batsheva has repeatedly refused to disavow its role as "cultural ambassador" for the Israeli state and commit to Palestinian liberation.<sup>2</sup>

We recognize that members of the dance field often feel conflicted about boycotting dance organizations. We hope that the following analysis can



Not Another Bomb Protest,  
NY, Aug 2024

<sup>1</sup> [Palestinians, Jews, citizens of Israel, join the Palestinian call for a BDS campaign against Israel](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Open letter to the Batsheva Dance Company, January 19, 2017](#)





Demonstration at the Joyce Theater, NY, May 2024

State-funded, international tours like Batsheva’s are also a part of this strategy, and state funding for internationally-facing art contractually requires artists to represent the state and its policies positively.<sup>7</sup> Notably, The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes Batsheva as “the best known global ambassador of Israeli culture.”<sup>8</sup>

This “artwashing” relies upon international audiences, particularly Americans, believing that a society that creates great art cannot also create immense violence—or at least that the former outweighs the latter. It also disturbingly implies that Palestinians and others in the region are less worthy of life and security because they don’t produce the same “great art” that Israel does. (Of course, this premise relies on ignorance of Arab and Middle Eastern art legacies.)

the impression of authoritarianism among international audiences. However, the visible presence of opposition, carefully controlled by the state to remain relatively toothless, creates the illusion of political freedom. Naharin explicitly endorses this vision, declaring Israel has robust protections of expression<sup>10</sup> and that there is “no such thing as censorship in Israel,”<sup>11</sup> (even as he is threatened with censorship himself, as discussed below). But such statements overlook numerous well-documented restrictions of expression that disproportionately target Palestinian citizens of Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Consider the substance of Batsheva’s “resistance” highlighted in the documentary *Mr. Gaga*. Participating in the 50 year celebration of Israel’s founding, Naharin refused to change the costuming of his piece to appease the sensibilities of religious conservatives, even after the government’s warning and fears of losing funding. Yet the very premise of this event—commemorating nation-building through the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians during the Nakba—was never addressed.

Most recently, Culture Minister Miki Zohar has made attempts to halt Batsheva’s government funding for having a Palestinian flag on stage in a dance featuring dozens of other flags. Headlines about this drama fuel impressions of Batsheva as a source of artistic resistance. In reality, the piece has no discernable message of solidarity. Batsheva’s official communication following the Minister’s threats emphasized that the flag appeared “in a broad artistic context,” dispelling any suspicions of alignment with the Palestinian cause.<sup>11</sup>

This instance demonstrates the tight ideological restriction that comes with a “cultural ambassador” status. If an incidental reference to Palestine is off-limits, the hope

## WHAT TO DO

Dancers and dance audiences of conscience should:

1. **Boycott Batsheva performances and auditions as well as Gaga classes and workshops.**
2. **Urge your local institutions to cut ties with Batsheva, Gaga, and other complicit institutions.**
  - **Contact Dancers for Palestine** ([dancersforpalestine@gmail.com](mailto:dancersforpalestine@gmail.com)) for help drafting outreach language.
3. **Protest performances near you on Batsheva’s upcoming tour.**
  - **Follow us for updates on protests** (Instagram: [@dancers\\_for\\_palestine](https://www.instagram.com/dancers_for_palestine))
  - If you’re planning a protest, **contact us** to amplify to our followers and to provide you with materials and messaging suggestions.
4. **Find alternative dance forms. We encourage you to seek other improvisational, kinetic, and somatic practices that can provide a similar experience without supporting a propaganda arm of a genocidal government.**

that government-contracted artists and institutions could be a serious source of internal resistance is clearly misguided.

### GAGA

While Batsheva tours have long been recognized as a BDS target for its government ties and cultural ambassador status, there has been less attention placed on Gaga Movement Ltd., the for-profit company dedicated to Ohad Naharin’s “movement language”Gaga.

Under BDS guidelines, Israeli companies can be considered boycottable if they do not publicly recognize the rights of the Palestinian people as enshrined in international law, including the end to occupation, the end to Apartheid discrimination, and the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Further, to be non-boycottable, they must end all complicity in whitewashing or justifying Israel’s violations of international law and Palestinian human rights. Because

of Gaga Movement’s close affiliation with Batsheva, it can be considered a co-creator of Batsheva’s international brand and a member of the same artwashing project.

The seductive appeal of Gaga’s aesthetics on the international contemporary dance world in the last<sup>15</sup> years cannot be overstated. Franchised Gaga classes for dancers and non-dancers are now offered in dance studios and universities in over 20 countries, as well as online. Various workshops, intensives, and luxury dance retreats are offered in Israel and internationally.

Especially for those trained in more rigid techniques, the sensation-based classes can feel like a taste of freedom, seeding fantasies of Israel as a progressive art hub. As the elastic movement quality and improvisational skills associated with Gaga have become an expectation for professional dancers and Batsheva a common “dream company,” Tel Aviv has become an idyllic dance intensive destination, with dancer-tourists disregarding the

help establish that engaging with Batsheva and Gaga—through buying tickets, attending classes, or auditioning—has political implications.

### STATE FUNDING AND BRAND ISRAEL

While Batsheva is most widely known today for the choreographic work of Ohad Naharin (Artistic Director from 1990-2018 and current House Choreographer), Batsheva’s relationship with cultural imperialism originated much earlier. The company formed 16 years after Israel’s founding and was originally directed by American modern dance icon Martha Graham, whose international presence was supported by the US State Department. From the very beginning, Israel and its proponents viewed dance as a necessary

component in establishing their cultural supremacy over Palestine,<sup>3</sup> much like the US’s vision of modern dance as a weapon in their worldwide campaign against communism.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Batsheva has become a useful tool in Israel’s 21st-century Brand Israel strategy, launched in 2005 to revitalize the nation’s image, especially with Americans. The campaign explicitly and publicly aims to move Israel’s role in the international public imagination from violence and conflict towards art, culture, youth, and modernity, both through direct government funding and by incentivizing private companies.<sup>5</sup>

The campaign invests heavily in arts and culture. Israel has long offered celebrities luxurious gifts and trips to win their public approval.<sup>6</sup>

### GESTURES OF “RESISTANCE”

Batsheva has been known to offer lukewarm opposition to Israeli leadership, satisfying an international dance sphere that is liberal-leaning but not politically critical. Within an Israeli society that is threatened by any mention of Palestine’s existence, vague references to Palestine in Batsheva dances<sup>9</sup> are often interpreted as sympathy. A September 2024 Instagram post, after nearly a year of genocide in Gaza, read “STOP THE WAR NOW. NO MORE BLOODSHED! We support hope, life, dignity and freedom for all.”

This limited opposition, to describe it generously, is enabled by the state because it ultimately serves to promote the image of Israel as a diverse liberal democracy. Political homogeneity and the absence of debate create

3 [Social Choreography 'A Dancing Body Offers Legitimacy to the State'](#)

4 [Dance as Propaganda](#)

5 [Brand Israel Brief History](#)

6 [Israel Offers 'swag bag' to Oscar nominees](#)

7 [Putting Out a Contract on Art](#)

8 [Culture: Dance](#)

9 [Your Curiosity Will Not be Satisfied](#)

PHOTO BY ASH MARINACCIO





Protest at 92NY, Oct 2024

guidelines of the BDS Call for Ethical Tourism/Pilgrimage.<sup>13</sup> For young dancers chasing their dreams, the formal separation of Batsheva and Gaga means little to nothing.

Many in the dance field are instinctively against boycotting any movement form. But the BDS boycott only targets official Gaga classes—which are financially connected to Gaga Movement Ltd.—not any aesthetic principles dancers might associate with the form. BDS addresses material ties, leaving artists to make more personalized choices about how to engage with movement traditions with problematic histories.

#### OHAD NAHARIN

**B**atsheva and Gaga are boycotable based on institutional complicity alone, regardless of the personal politics of any affiliated artist. However, because the public persona of Ohad Naharin is nearly synonymous with the Batsheva/Gaga “brand,” and because his vaguely progressive image has caused confusion

about institutional complicity, his public politics warrant their own response.

Naharin is critical of Netanyahu and the Israeli right wing.<sup>14</sup> Yet this does not make him an ally to Palestinian liberation. Naharin has expressed sympathy for Palestinian suffering but undermines Palestinian political agency when he repeatedly misrepresents the BDS movement. Naharin characterizes BDS protesters as misguided foreigners, detached from Palestine and reality, recently declaring that “when BDS people demonstrate, it doesn’t help the Palestinians, unfortunately, but it does add drama.”<sup>14</sup> He neglects to mention that BDS is Palestinian-led, based on the historical precedent of success in South Africa, and shaped by twenty years of strategic refinement.

One can understand why many American artists, working within their own problematic government and funding systems, sympathize with a choreographer who prioritizes funding over political conviction. But those who more easily relate to

one the most powerful choreographers in the world above the many Palestinian arts groups—working in much more challenging circumstances and still rejecting funding with political conditions<sup>15</sup>—should reconsider the limits of their empathy.

**DANCERS FOR PALESTINE (D4P)** is an autonomous group of dance workers who organize in solidarity with the global movement for Palestinian liberation. Formed during Israel’s genocidal attack on Gaza beginning in 2023, D4P seeks to both cohere and create a dance community which is vocal and active in its support of the Palestinian people. D4P is a local and international endeavor with a core organizing group in NYC and an ever expanding network of dancers and organizers working toward a dance field free from complicity in genocide, imperialism, white supremacy, and all systems of oppression. D4P’s work has included protest and direct action, political education events, art-based fundraising, and campaigns to move dance institutions into alignment with the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel and against repressive anti-boycott policies. To join the movement, email [dancersforpalestine@gmail.com](mailto:dancersforpalestine@gmail.com) and follow us on Instagram [@dancers\\_for\\_palestine](https://www.instagram.com/dancers_for_palestine)

PHOTO BY PROVIDED BY DANCERS FOR PALESTINE

<sup>13</sup> Do No Harm! Palestinian Call for Ethical Tourism/Pilgrimage

<sup>14</sup> On Stage and Off, Ohad Naharin Conveys a Powerful Message. [Amid Gaza War](https://www.amidgazawar.com/)

<sup>15</sup> Against Terrorism and Against Conditional Funding: Statement of the Palestinian National Campaign to Reject Conditional Funding

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dancersgroup 



# LESSONS FROM 20 YEARS of working to expand access to ballet

by KRISTINE ELLIOTT

**IN 2004, I ATTENDED A SCREENING** of the documentary *Gugulethu Ballet* created by Kristin Pichaske, a film student at Stanford University where I was teaching in the dance division. Little did I know this film would launch me on a mission to which I would dedicate the next 20 years of my life.

The film focused on former ballet dancer Philip Boyd, who had founded Dance for All, a ballet school providing dance training to disenfranchised children in the impoverished townships surrounding Cape Town. In 1991, during the apartheid regime, Boyd went into the townships to teach ballet because he recognized that there were no Black dancers on the stage in a country

with a majority of Black people. Boyd taught in an environment where racism, poverty, AIDS, violence, and shattered families defined the experience of most young people. Dance for All's work inspired me. Afterward, I wrote to Philip asking how I could help. Gugulethu became the first township I visited and taught in.

Under the racial segregation of apartheid, Black people were forcibly relocated from their homes to undeveloped land. Gugulethu, established in 1962, means "Our Pride" in Xhosa. Witnessing the spirit of people who were able to create a place to call their home out of nothing and call it "our pride" deeply impacted me. I began the work that a few years later I would call Gugulethu Ballet Project and formalize into a nonprofit organization.

In the years since, I've expanded our work, teaching and providing support to dancers and schools in many other townships: Zolani, Khayelitsha, Eersterivier, Ugie, and McGregor. Yet the 'Gugulethu' in our name remains, symbolic of all townships in South Africa and at the heart of our work: **building pride through dance.**

Those of us who love the art form of ballet recognize its positive impact on practitioners: young students and adults alike can benefit from ballet's lessons of personal discipline, respect for oneself and others, artistic expression, resilience, and focus. We also recognize where it falls short: schools, companies, and stages are not as racially diverse as the world around us, and dancers from racially minoritized backgrounds face the constant discrimination and inequality of structural racism.

Changing these dynamics requires action, a willingness to listen and learn, and an open heart. On the 20th anniversary of this crucial work, I'd like to share some lessons from my ongoing work to provide opportunity and broaden horizons in the dance world.



(Former) LEAP student  
Keelan Whitmore teaching at  
Zama School in Gugulethu



Kristine Elliott sharing  
a bow at Dancescape  
Zolani South Africa



Nathan Bartman  
teaching in Zolani  
at Dancescape

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY KRISTINE ELLIOTT



**Under the racial segregation of apartheid, Black people were forcibly relocated from their homes to undeveloped land. Gugulethu, established in 1962, means “Our Pride” in Xhosa.**

**1. Do your homework.**

My first visit to teach in South Africa came just a few years after the fall of apartheid. Many of the people I met had voted for the first time in the post-apartheid 1994 democratic elections. There was palpable optimism now that Nelson Mandela was leading the country.

To better understand the political, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts I would be teaching in, Stanford Dean Arnold Rampersad advised me on which books to read about the history of South Africa. A South African Stanford professor, Grant Parker, taught me a course about the country’s culture. My advisor, Claire Sheridan, the founder of the Liberal Education for Arts Professionals (LEAP) Program at St. Mary’s College, where I was completing my bachelor’s degree, worked closely

with me to articulate and define goals and desired learning outcomes.

Preparing this way—seeking to understand the history and politics of the environment in which I would be teaching ballet and defining what I hoped to accomplish—was critical for my journey.

**2. Build your team, and keep building it.**

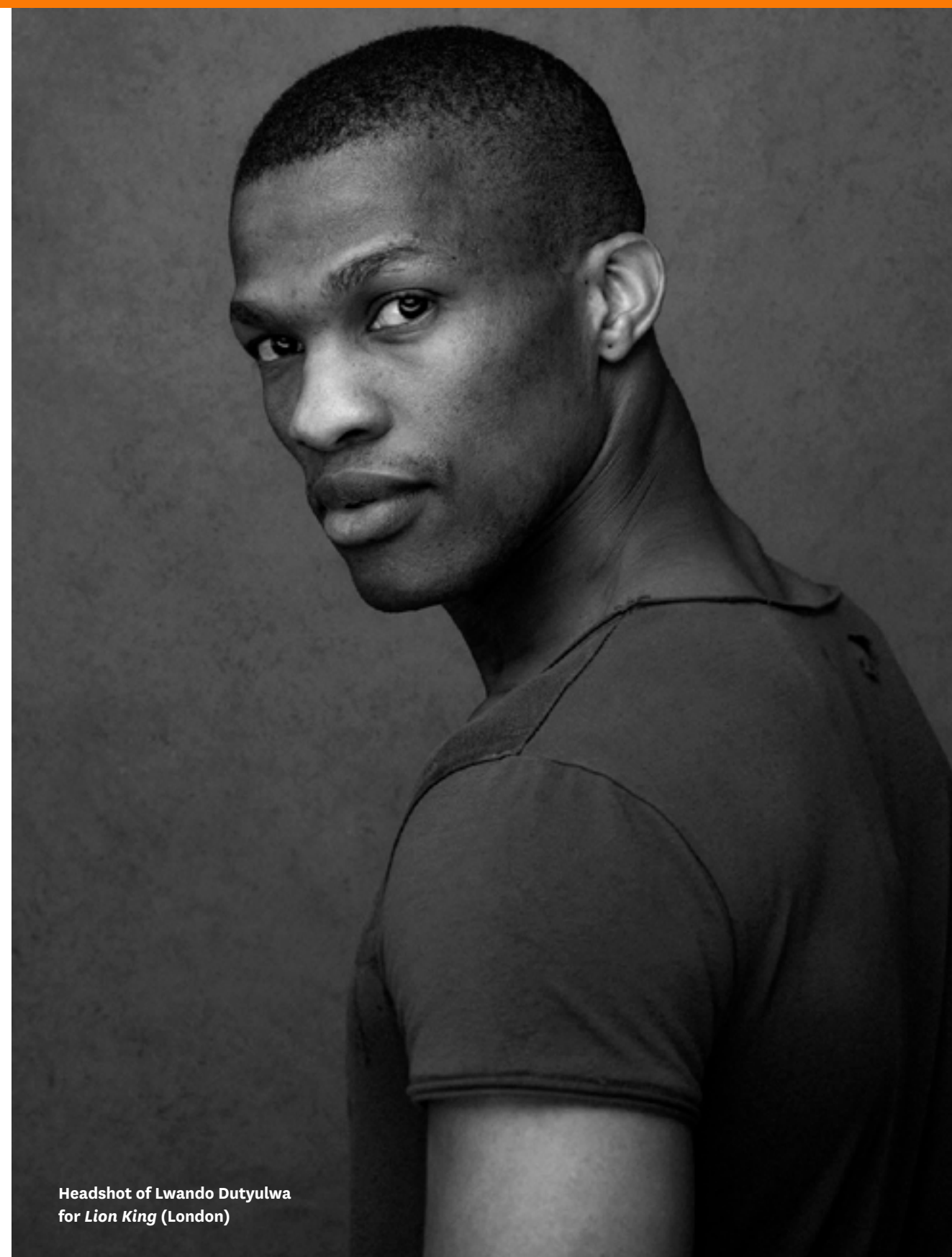
Gugulethu Ballet Project has had many different iterations, each shaped by the members of my community, dance or otherwise, who stepped up to make the work possible. The educational institutions I was involved in were crucial to the early years. My first trip to South Africa, I traveled alone, financed by a grant from Stanford University.

Shortly after my first trip, I worked with Claire to develop a course on



Young student of Mbulelo Ndabeni in Ugie, South Africa

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY KRISTINE ELLIOTT



Headshot of Lwando Dutyulwa for *Lion King* (London)

teaching dance in another culture. This enabled me to bring fellow LEAP students who were professional dancers with me on my next trip, some who brought choreography from world-famous choreographers like Jiří Kylián and Mark Morris, as well as classical variations and original choreography. What an experience for these young people who had never been exposed to such work, let alone the chance to embody it! For the next five years, the LEAP students who accompanied me to South Africa gifted the students with many different

perspectives and expertise. They were in turn gifted by the kids with their culture and open minds. In tandem, I identified many promising young dancers and believed the next step was to reveal the possibilities that their talent would provide them if only given the chance. I began working to organize opportunities to study dance in America. From my first trip, two students in particular, Mbulelo Ndabeni and Bathembu Myira, stood out as being ready for an overseas experience—personally mature and artistically strong. In short order, I began my

elegant begging (fundraising) which continues to this day. My former teacher Richard Gibson offered them a place in his summer course at San Francisco Academy of Ballet, and they lived at my home with my husband and my two teenage sons.

[Read an interview with Mbulelo Ndabeni [here](#).]

Since then, in 2006, we’ve brought dozens, from two to five at a time, of students over to study, always with a dance academy offering scholarships. Students have studied in training programs associated with American Ballet Theatre, Alvin Ailey, San Francisco Ballet, ODC Dance Commons, Kaatsbaan Academy, New Ballet in San Jose, Peridance, Manhattan Youth Ballet, Zohar School of Dance, Menlo Park Academy of Dance, and most recently Houston Ballet and Alonzo King LINES Ballet. The support and guidance offered by these programs and the individual teachers and administrators within them always result in a burst in growth in the young artists.

At the same time, former students became colleagues in the work, connecting me to new communities and expanding our partners in South Africa. As my collaboration with the LEAP program ended, Nathan Bartman, a multi-faceted dancer and musician who I first met as a teen dancer at Dance for All, became my partner for each trip, traveling with me to different townships to teach contemporary dance while I taught ballet. While Dance for All was in a primarily Black township, Nathan is from what is considered a ‘coloured background’—a multiracial ethnicity in South Africa whose members may have ancestry





Mbulelo Ndabeni

I met Misty Copeland, the first Black woman to become a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, while teaching American Ballet Theatre’s summer courses, and we become friends through our shared desire to increase the racial diversity of ballet dancers. I asked her if she could join us in an event to fundraise, and she generously agreed, traveling to San Francisco to do an event benefiting our organization—a conversation with Laurene Powell Jobs hosted by City Arts & Lectures. The proceeds from that event were crucial to enabling us to proceed with confidence in the work ahead.

Finding people who shared our mission and were willing to contribute their time, talent, energy, and money has been crucial at every stage of our growth.

**3. Be prepared to discover needs you didn’t anticipate.**

One of the biggest lessons these twenty years of experience has taught me is what it means to support young people from rural townships in South Africa. It’s not as simple as giving them a fishing pole and teaching them to fish; in other words, just teaching

them ballet with a level of training that may ultimately result in a job is not sufficient. There are so many disproportionate fields and deficits in these young artist’s lives. Some of these needs you might expect: tights, leotards, shoes. These were the things I thought to bring early on.

But the longer I worked with our partner schools, the more needs made themselves known: mirrors in the studios, replacing the splintered wood floor with a floor safe

for dancing, providing breakfast and snacks for the children who don’t have enough to eat at home. Safety concerns needed to be addressed as well—transportation could be dangerous and hijacking vehicles is common (one student had to jump out a bus window to flee a gunman).

Our support expanded to the amazing teachers doing the work year-round: schools needed support for their wages, a teacher needed a house to live in, and we were able to bring South African teachers to America to participate in teacher training programs. This past year, I worked to develop the Gugulethu Ballet Project Syllabus: a video compilation of ballet class exercises performed by young African-American women that together create a solid foundation of ballet technique. For teachers who don’t have a chance to travel and gain exposure to other styles of teaching and training, the videos can provide a codified lesson plan with progressive teaching methods modeled by women of color.

During the pandemic, we arranged Zoom classes so that students could continue to train from home. This was no easy feat, as access to internet in the townships is extremely limited, expensive, and challenging. And when we work with the students directly, whether on our visits or when they come to America, we see even more needs to fulfill: food stability, dental work, medical attention, help arranging travel, getting passports and visas, funds for audition fees, help taking audition photos and filming audition videos, writing resumes, even just digesting the day’s events when immersed in a new culture.

It is not enough to nurture just the dancer. We have to nourish the human and the community as well. And I have come to believe that dance (broadly) and ballet (specifically) cannot become important avenues of expression independently of their larger cultural context.

**[Ubuntu], an African philosophy that believes a person’s individual humanity is caught up in the humanity of the community to which he or she belongs—an individual can’t thrive unless the community thrives.**

There have been so many beautiful outcomes, too many to list here, both in and out of the dance world. But to share a few, former students have danced with *Lion King* (Hamburg and London tours), Matthew Bourne’s *Swan Lake*, Rambert Dance Company, Cape Town City Ballet, Pina Bausch’s recent *Rite of Spring*, Robert Moses’ KIN, New Ballet in San Jose, Cape Ballet Africa, and Ohio Contemporary Ballet. Some have graduated from college, founded their own dance companies and schools, become disc jockeys and choreographers, purchased homes and married and had children. And Chuma Mathiso, our most recent student to travel abroad for training, is currently a trainee with the Alonzo King LINES Ballet Training Program, completing his second semester.

**4. Becoming a part of something larger than yourself will change you.**

One year, Amy Seiwert, current director of Smuin Ballet, offered a ballet piece entitled *The Gift* to the young dance students in South Africa. Wanting to honor Amy’s choreography and stay true to her vision, I taught the piece as meticulously and accurately as possible, step for step and note for note, with no improvisation.

But then an interesting thing happened. When the beautiful South African dancers had completed their rehearsals and performed the piece before an audience, I witnessed that despite faithful adherence to the original choreography, something new had emerged. The young South African dancers had

somehow infused it with their own unique energy, culture, and history. With their bodies and movements, they had transformed the ballet into something new and fresh. They were expanding the art form, growing ballet, before my very own eyes.

Awed and a bit overwhelmed, I discussed with the South African teachers how this had happened. They smiled and replied simply, “Ubuntu.” They explained that *ubuntu* is often translated as “I am because we are.” It’s an African philosophy that believes a person’s individual humanity is caught up in the humanity of the community to which he or she belongs—an individual can’t thrive unless the community thrives. The dancers understood that their success with their performance depended on more than their individual efforts, but on making sure that everyone else succeeded as well. As a result, the whole became greater than the sum of its parts, and something new materialized. It’s a philosophy I try to keep within my own life, allowing the communities I join to transform me into something new.

[Gugulethu Ballet Project’s 20th Anniversary Gala, March 2nd](#)

**KRISTINE ELLIOTT**, born in Oakland, California, and raised in San Mateo, trained with renowned teacher Richard Gibson before joining the Stuttgart Ballet at 18. After five years, she joined American Ballet Theatre as a soloist under Lucia Chase and later Mikhail Baryshnikov. After a decade with ABT, she transitioned to teaching, becoming an ABT Certified Teacher. Her passion for sharing ballet’s transformative power led her to South Africa, where she began teaching young people in impoverished townships, inspiring the Gugulethu Ballet Project, now celebrating its 20th anniversary. Today, she imparts her love of dance and high professional standards to students of all ages.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY KRISTINE ELLIOTT

from Africa, Europe, and Asia, and who often speak Afrikaans as well as English—and brought me into his community in Eersterivier.

The consequences of apartheid policies still affect a social distance between Black and coloured people in South Africa, but we wanted to serve both communities and also find a way to get them to work together. Nathan’s guidance helped us to bridge the gap, engendering artistic collaborations and exchanges between the schools in

each community, such as shared performances, partnering classes, and bringing in the Zolani Youth Choir to perform live accompaniment.

The next phase of our work required seeking a fundraising partner who could bring more exposure and donors to our cause. As our offerings grew from annual teaching trips to South Africa and scholarships to study in the US to direct support for partner schools in South Africa, our fundraising needs had grown larger.



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## shuhada: *dancing the evidence of Palestine*

by LEILA AWADALLAH | FOREWARD BY MAURYA KERR

I first met and was in process with Leila over ten years ago when she was an undergrad at the University of Minnesota, where I was a visiting guest artist creating a work. She was full of a singular and irrefutable blazing vitality that has only illumined and entrenched in the last decade. While I've been aware of her presence in the world, we didn't see each other in person again until this last September when we were both in MN for the McKnight commissioned SOLO performances, she as a 2022 McKnight Dancer Fellow performing a solo by Beirut-based Lebanese Baladi dancer/choreographer Alexandre Paulkevitch, and I as a choreographer for 2023 Fellow Demetrius (ImagineJoy) McClendon. I was blown away by her solo, *Shuhada: a-live-streamed un-ceased Fire*. Blown away. Leila and the solo / Leila in the solo—brave as fuck, vulnerable, unflinching, stunning, devastating, imperative. Leila's work on the following pages truly lives as an alternatively embodied companion to her live performance. In my role as ODC Theater's 2024/25 Resident Curator, I am honored and humbled to bring Leila and *Shuhada* to ODC's late-summer State of Play Festival 2025. I hope to see you there.

**LEILA AWADALLAH** ليلى عوض الله (she/her) is a dancer, choreographer, and community collaborator based in Minneapolis, Mni Sota Makoce, and sometimes Beirut, Lebanon. Palestine roots her within an artistic compass revolving inside Arab American contexts, conjuring mixed Mediterranean ways and waves. In 2021, she founded Body Watani Dance, which she holds with her sister Noelle. Body Watani is a body-as-homeland research practice asking how dance emerges from ancestral intuition, cultural folk experimentation, land-based attunement, and SUMUD in service of PALESTINIAN ALIVENESS and cultural INTIFADA. She is a McKnight (2023), Jerome (2021), and Daring Dances (2019) fellow. Her artistic path was meaningfully impacted by her time working with Ananya Dance Theatre and Theater of the Women of the Camp (Beirut).





shuhada

شهداء

martyrs

shahid

شَهِيد

witness; to bear witness

The word *martyr* and *witness* are derived from the same sounds:

sh ش ha ه da د

in Arabic, a 3 letter/sound root system  
ties words together in meaning  
hinting to relation  
and relatives



alshahada

الشَّاهِدَة

testimony, evidence

mushahid

المشاهد

the spectator

martyrs bear witness  
to their own death  
spectators bear witness  
to give the testimony

BECOME THE EVIDENCE  
BECOME THE EVIDENCE

OF WHAT HAS  
OF WHAT HAS BEEN

HAPPENED  
SAID

TIMELINE: CREATIVE PROCESS

June 2023

In Northern Lebanon, I am with the choreographer Alexandre Paulikevitch in his ancestral home. The furniture is pushed aside. He reminds me, not all have the luxury of a dance studio, but we still must work. Nothing will stop us from our work.

a question: Palestine in America/intergenerational wounds/terrorist accusation landing on my 12 year old body ORIENTAL/ an early ORIENTATION away from/ *this Arab* identity/ 18 years later/ dig into the rubble (again) find the stories purposely forgotten (again)

We start with a fist.

then ... a terrain of gestures, shapes, a mercurial spill. but movement is not enough this time. Alexandre says, you must speak. My throat tightens.

October 8 2023

GENOCIDE BEGINS. I am in Beit Jala, Palestine with my family. I ~~am staying for the olive harvest~~. I am staying in the house. we are watching the news. we are watching the news. we are watching the news. MASSACRES. ALIVE-STREAMED. UNPROVOKED!?! UNPROVOKED!!!! "moz baladna!"

We feel the death of our people in Gaza, hear war planes fly overhead. Near to us. Me and little Yusef make a sleepover on the balcony. I want him to experience something magic – before I leave him ~~in my privileged passport escape~~. I want to watch the sky.

november... december... 2023  
numb

2024

begin collecting language, the ~~surreal, unreal~~ things people say  
all I know: performance must become evidence





**TIMELINE: EVIDENCING-IN-REALTIME / EVIDANCING / CATASTROPHE**

I never thought I'd saw, have confirmed, pictures of terrorists beheading babies  
*human shields human animals birthing snakes*  
 under the hospitals! under schools! DO YOU CONDEMN? DO YOU CONDEMN?

**The Only Democracy in the Middle East.**

**It has a right to defend itself. & AMERICA STANDS WITH YOU!**

DO YOU CONDEMN? DO YOU CONDEMN?

سوف نبقي هنا سوف نبقي هنا سوف نبقي هنا سوف نبقي هنا

if you can hear the bombs at least you know you're still alive  
 if you sleep in the same room at least you'll die together  
 if I must die, you must live. if I must die, you must live.  
*i met your words a few weeks before they murdered you, my relative Refaat Alareer*



من النهر إلى البحر من النهر إلى البحر إلى البحر FROMTHERIVER

the word genocide is provocative! your show is cancelled/postponed!? *my old ballet teacher is a facebook zionist!*  
 bothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsidesbothsi

I just want peace. I just want peace.  
 I just want PEACE!  
 I just want pieces!  
 I just want your bodies in pieces.  
 I just want your land in pieces.  
 Bodies in pieces. Land in pieces.  
 World peacieces. A world in pieces!



every **american flag** is a warning sign

*i met your words after leaving Palestine and returning to Turtle Island, my relative Damien Dineyazhi*

**BORN IN THE USA! IN THE USA! FROM SEA TO SHINING SEAAA! UNTIL DEATH.**

bidha nafas taweel. *your words, my relative Shireen Abu Akleh. they murdered you for gathering evidence.*

**YOU WERE PRESS. THEY WERE PRESS. PRESSED UNDER THE RUBBLE.**

روح الروح روح الروح روح الروح روح الروح روح الروح روح الروح

palestine exposed everyone.

**TIMELINE: PERFORMANCE OF SHUHADA ON 9/21/2024**

arrive at the theater  
 call Alexandre

**BALADI WARRIOR!**

*SPEAK FIERCELY, DANCE FULLY, NOTHING TO LOSE*

in the dressing room

light a candle for شهداء

stare in the mirror, tell self

you must hold this الشَّهَادَة

(again) you are not alone in holding this.

the dead, and the living are here too

back stage, awaiting the moment

to enter, to disrupt this room

disrupt passivity

demand المشاهد SPECTATORS! BEAR WITNESS!

what is dance during alive-streamed genocide?

what is dance during un-ceased fire?

there is no reason to perform, unless we disrupt

perform to disrupt

i leave the stage.

into the many arms of beloved relatives

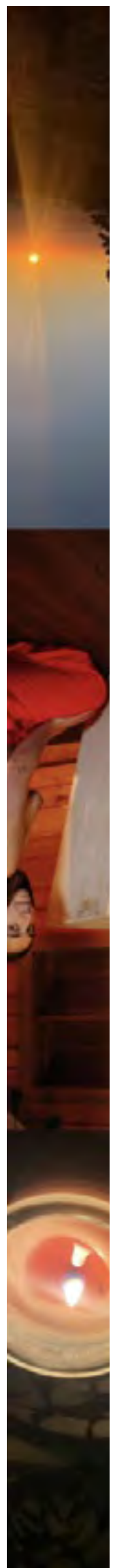
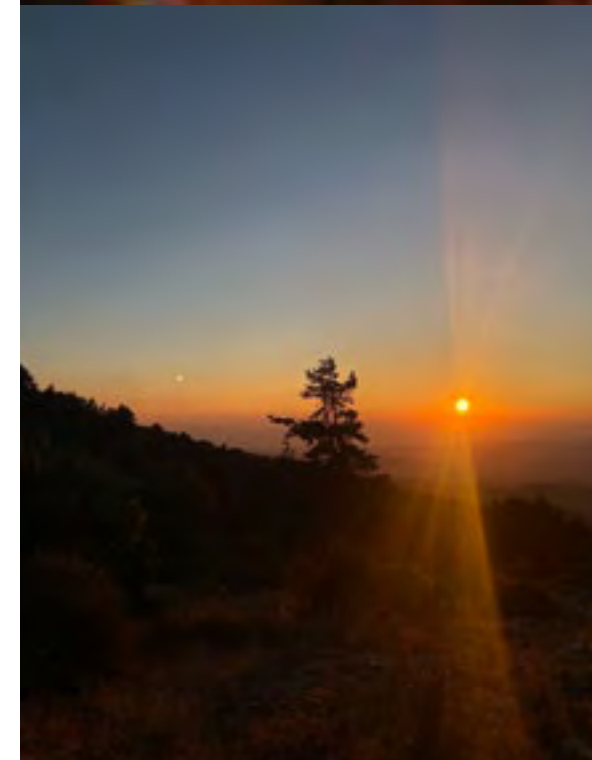
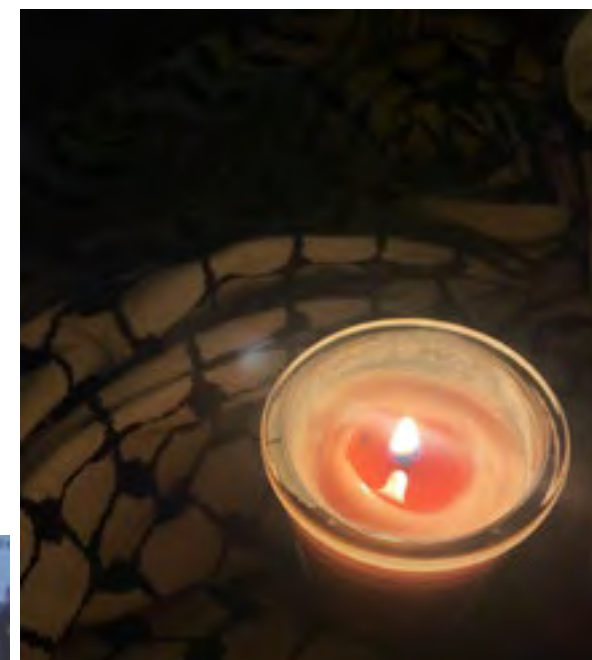
living و dead witnesses و martyrs

wonder if anything will be

ENOUGH!

الشَّهَادَة

TESTIMONY.





## BOOK REVIEW

# From Marin “Domestic Choreography” to West Coast Postmodern Dance

by MARLENA GITTLEMAN

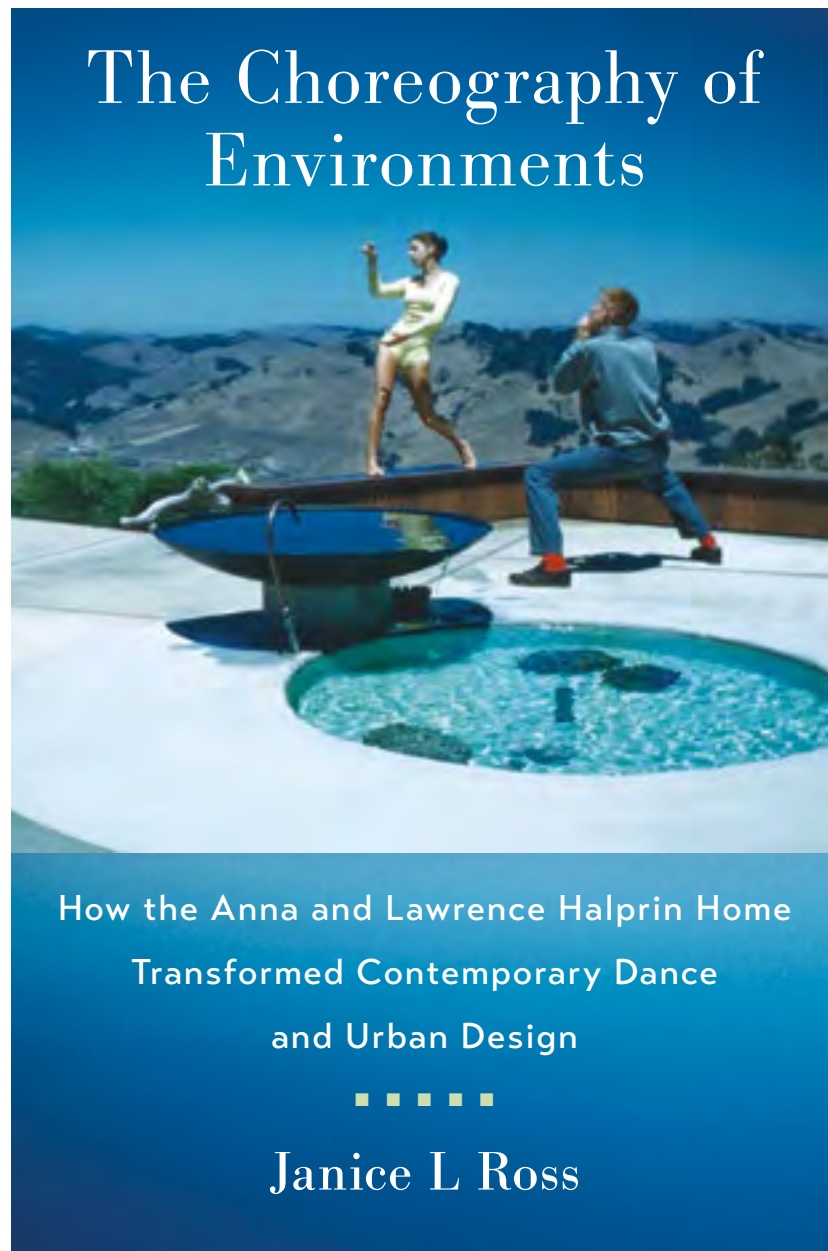


PHOTO BY LAWRENCE HALPRIN, LAWRENCE HALPRIN COLLECTION, THE ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, COURTESY OUP

Book Cover: Anna Halprin dancing for a photo shoot in Caygill Garden, CA, designed by Lawrence Halprin (1951)

**T**he *Choreography of Environments* tells the story of specific elements of a mid-century modern home commissioned in 1951 in Kentfield, California, by Anna and Lawrence Halprin. Janice Ross investigates how these specific elements—

stairs, the well-known backyard dance deck, chairs, and windows—in their spectacular everydayness, came to shape not only the bodily routines of the Halprins, but also how those bodily routines went on to shape each of their professional contributions. Ross situates each Halprin as a choreographer in their respective field: Anna in dance and Larry in landscape architecture and urban design. What their work shares across disciplines is an orchestration of movement and the encouragement of embodied, sensorial participation; their Marin home made this kinesthetically salient in both life and art. Ross details what she terms “domestic choreography,” showing, for example, how the rhythmic everyday movements of traversing floating stairs inside the house and redwood stairs in the backyard get incorporated into Larry’s work with waterfalls in *Portland Open Space Sequence* and Anna’s work with procession in *Parades and Changes* (both from 1965). Ross draws out resonances, backed by her own experiences of visiting the house, conversations with the Halprin family, rich archival materials (she has also written *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance*), and a bit of embodied imagination. In doing so, she follows the Halprins in modeling



The dance deck soon after completion in 1954

THE HALPRIN HOUSE, KENTFIELD, CA, LAWRENCE HALPRIN COLLECTION, THE ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

a receptivity to environment that invites readers to not only cognitively understand but also feel into the spaces she describes.

*The Choreography of Environments* also tells the story of a decades-long interdisciplinary collaboration between Anna and Larry. In doing so, the book focuses on the couple’s continual negotiation between private and public, interior and exterior, over the course of nearly 70 years of domestic and professional life on the foothills of Mount Tamalpais. The Halprins built the dance deck, in part, for a pragmatic reason: Anna could work on her art while still taking care of their two children, Daria and Rana. The resultant everyday rituals of dressing, eating, bathing, and play all made their way into her task-based workshops and performances. Ross delves into the strains and surprises that arose: one

*What their work shares across disciplines is an orchestration of movement and the encouragement of embodied, sensorial participation; their Marin home made this kinesthetically salient in both life and art.*



photo shows the Halprins and two colleagues holding a planning meeting in the family home, completely nude, the spillover of their co-led Experiments in Environment 1968 summer workshop. Ross weaves together such personal histories with key moments in dance and design history. She shows, for example, how the dance deck influenced other historic dance spaces, including New York's Judson Dance Theater and the Berkshires' Jacob's Pillow's outdoor stage. We learn, too, of JB Blunk's sculptural wooden chairs for the Halprin home as a domestic parallel to his mentor Isamu Noguchi's set pieces for Martha Graham's Greek myth dances in the 1940s and '50s. Throughout this wider history, the Halprins' creative processes involve trial and error and continual re-engagement with objects. Take Blunk's uncomfortable, uninviting chairs, intended to inspire bodily action rather than repose when they first entered the home in the 1950s. They initially spur Anna's decision to force audience participation by removing seating for a *Ten Myths* piece (1967-1968). Decades later, however, she yields towards accessibility and creates *Seniors Rocking* (2005), a markedly different participatory work danced in rocking chairs by local retirees.

Finally, *The Choreography of Environments* tells a history of the Bay Area, one filled with tensions between postwar suburban life, 1960s countercultural aspirations, and liberal blind spots. As a contemporary reader, the Kentfield house is astonishing—both in its remarkable design and in the sense that it was once attainable for some (in this case, white, Jewish) middle-class families in the Bay Area. While the book does not state how much the Marin property sold for in 2022, Ross notes that the family's second home at The Sea Ranch (a vacation development Larry helped design) sold for \$12 million in 2021—\$4 million above asking. In moments like these, limitations to public access and participatory art come to the fore: who gets to participate, under what conditions, and at what cost? Ross's mention of racial covenants and "policed exclusion" in Marin is a necessary and overdue acknowledgment of the privileged seclusion, in life and art, that the Halprins were able to attain and maintain. The book's attention to environments, themselves tied to land and its politics and peoples, also opens questions. Ross notes what was absent from a 1968 workshop at The Sea Ranch: talk of civil rights and Vietnam War protests, engagement with the broader history of native Pomo communities. What, too, of Coast Miwok communities in Marin? What of Palestinian communities around Jerusalem, where each Halprin made a work? What additional or alternative modes of land stewardship and embodied collective practice could have emerged, might emerge, or are already emerging?

Anna Halprin may be the most well-known West Coast contributor to the rise of postmodern dance, whose

*Finally, The Choreography of Environments tells a history of the Bay Area, one filled with tensions between post-war suburban life, 1960's countercultural aspirations, and liberal blind spots.*

workshops and approaches shaped local and visiting New York dancers (including Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown) alike. Ross makes the case that these decidedly Northern Californian contributions are inseparable from the environment of the Marin home, its designed elements, and their attendant routine choreographies. In contrast to the traditional dance studio, with its disciplining of boundaries and bodies, the dance deck, absent of mirrors and roof, immersed dancers in a natural (although still built) sensory space, one that encouraged them to not only notice their environment, but to partner with it. Beyond noting this material and embodied legacy, the book demonstrates the conscious preoccupations, unwitting processes, and deep collaborations that go into making work. Ross's critical framework reminds us that we can be dancing daily in our homes, our traversals of cities, and our interactions with loved ones and strangers. It feels like this is, in fact, Anna Halprin's greatest contribution: the perceptual shifts and sensitive presence her secluded Mount Tamalpais home afforded might have been most palpable for dancers and movers in that exceptional environment, but the practices can be applied, the choreographies experienced, across environments, too.

**MARLENA GITTLEMAN** (she/they) is a dancer, writer, and translator who recently completed a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

Janice Ross's *The Choreography of Environments: How the Anna and Lawrence Halprin Home Transformed Contemporary Dance and Urban Design* was published on January 22, 2025, by Oxford University Press.

Book Passage in Corte Madera will hold an author event in celebration of Ross and her new book, where she will be joined in-conversation with Daria Halprin.

Sun, Mar 30, 1pm



# Access Guide

to Presenting and Touring  
in the Performing Arts

by AXIS DANCE COMPANY

Yuko Monden Juma and audience  
member at AXIS Dance Company  
pre-show touch tour.  
Photo by Adriana Oyarzum.





**H**ow can we shift the way we think about accessibility in the arts, from merely accommodating differences to celebrating and integrating them into the very fabric of the creative process? At the heart of AXIS Dance Company's mission lies the powerful belief that dance is a vehicle for change. It has the capacity to challenge perceptions, ignite conversations, and ultimately redefine what is possible for disabled artists in the broader arts community. Through our performances and educational programs, AXIS extends this belief into the lives of others, creating a ripple effect that reaches far beyond the stage.

Since its founding in 1987, AXIS Dance Company has become a trailblazer in the world of inclusive dance, proving that the transformative power of movement knows no boundaries. Currently led by Artistic Director Nadia Adame and Managing Director Danae Rees, AXIS has grown into one of the nation's most celebrated ensembles, showcasing a dynamic mix

of disabled, non-disabled, d/Deaf, and neurodiverse professional performers. Based in the Bay Area, California, AXIS has not only been a force in redefining what dance can be but also in changing the very perception of disability within the arts.

One of the most recent contributions from AXIS is our [Access Guide to Presenting and Touring the Performing Arts](#), a groundbreaking resource designed to make performance spaces truly accessible to all. The idea for the guide emerged out of a simple but urgent need: to have performance spaces be accessible not only to our audiences but to the admin, tech, and artists themselves. We've often found that when we work with venues to address accessibility, we see positive changes in the short term. When our team collaborates with venue staff—administrators, artists, and technical teams—everyone gets involved and learns about how they can make the space more inclusive. But here's the problem: many venues only apply these changes when we're there performing. Once we leave, the lessons learned seem to fade. If we return to those

same venues after a few years, we often find ourselves repeating the same work to make the space accessible again. Our *Access Guide* is designed to break this cycle, ensuring that the work we've done has lasting impact.

This resource, available as a fully accessible website, is the result of years of collaboration with disabled artists, architects, presenters, researchers, and activists from across the country. It's not just about removing physical barriers; it's about rethinking what accessibility truly means in the performing arts. We want to spark a shift—toward a more inclusive, thoughtful understanding of access that goes beyond the basics and embraces the full spectrum of needs and experiences.

Rather than simply offering a checklist of accommodations, the *Access Guide* takes a comprehensive approach to accessibility, considering physical, emotional, cultural, and social elements that foster a truly inclusive environment. It's a roadmap for creating spaces where disabled artists can not only exist but thrive—an act that goes beyond accommodation into the realm of equity, representation, and belonging.

Based on this approach, the *Access Guide* is rooted in a set of principles that reflect the values that AXIS holds dear:

**1. ACCESSIBILITY IS ARTFUL:**

For many disabled artists, access features such as captions, ASL interpretation, or visual descriptions are not just additional elements—they are integral parts of the creative process, woven into the fabric of the work itself. Accessibility can and should be part of the artistic vision.

**2. ACCESSIBILITY IS COMMUNITY CARE:** True accessibility isn't just about meeting

PHOTO BY ROBERT SUGIJAN



AXIS Choreo-Lab Fellow DJ Robinson, who is blind, shares a tactile map of a dance studio with dancer Zara Anwar

continually advocate for change. And once changes are made, they require ongoing attention and care.

**9. ACCESSIBILITY IS EVOLVING:** Just as art evolves, so too does accessibility. New innovations, technologies, and strategies are constantly emerging, and staying up to date requires an ongoing, dynamic approach to ensuring access.

At AXIS, accessibility is not an afterthought. It is woven into the fabric of our mission, our work, and our community. The creation of the *Access Guide* represents a critical move toward ensuring that disabled artists are empowered to lead and innovate. As we continue to collaborate with artists, venues, and educational institutions, AXIS is paving the way for a future where dance and

performing arts are accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all.

In a world that often overlooks the talents of disabled individuals, AXIS Dance Company remains a powerful force in showing that true inclusivity benefits everyone—and that artistic excellence is at its best when it embraces the diversity of all bodies and experiences.

—For more information about the *Access Guide*, visit <https://accessguide.axisdance.org/>

For over 37 years, **AXIS DANCE COMPANY** has pushed the boundaries of movement, creating performances that challenge stereotypes of disability. Touring to over 100 cities worldwide, including the US, UK, Israel, Palestine, and Russia, AXIS has earned nine Isadora Duncan Dance Awards.

In addition to its performances, AXIS is dedicated to accessible dance education, offering programs for both disabled and non-disabled individuals. The company believes in building pathways for people to discover dance as a tool for self-expression, collaboration, and personal empowerment.

The collaborative ethos of AXIS is reflected in its partnerships with internationally renowned choreographers, including Bill T. Jones, Amy Seiwert, Arthur Pita, Victoria Marks, Robin Dekkers, Asun Noales, and Jennifer Archibald. Each piece they create is a testament to the innovation that occurs when diverse bodies, backgrounds, and experiences come together to share a story. [axisdance.org](https://axisdance.org)

basic needs; it's about mutual care and support. Disabled people have often been the ones leading efforts to care for each other, and that spirit of community mutual aid is at the heart of creating access that is genuinely meaningful.

**3. ACCESSIBILITY IS DEAF-CENTRIC:**

Good access design must center Deaf artists and their communities. Information and resources need to be delivered in ways that meet the linguistic and cultural needs of Deaf people, ensuring they are not left out of the conversation.

**4. ACCESSIBILITY IS SAFETY:** Ensuring the safety of disabled artists—especially in emergency situations—is a cornerstone of inclusive arts practices. Disabled artists are not inherently more fragile, but safety protocols must be robust, thorough, and reflective of the unique needs of disabled individuals.

**5. ACCESSIBILITY IS RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING:** Authentic accessibility comes from building real relationships.

PHOTO BY ROBERT SUGIJAN

Understanding the individual preferences of disabled artists and respecting the nuances of their communication styles—often influenced by concepts like *Crip time*—is essential to creating accessible spaces.

**6. ACCESSIBILITY IS BELONGING:** The feeling that you are expected—that your presence is not only allowed but celebrated—is the hallmark of a well-designed accessible experience. Inclusivity requires consistent practice, responsibility, and a long-term commitment to creating spaces where everyone belongs.

**7. ACCESSIBILITY IS ENGAGING:** Accessibility must be integrated at every stage of a project—during the planning, the performance, and beyond. When access is thoughtfully designed, it enhances the experience for everyone, leaving lasting impressions on both the artists and the audience.

**8. ACCESSIBILITY IS ACTION:** Accessibility is not something that happens automatically. It requires active champions of inclusivity—those willing to break old habits, challenge norms, and

JanpiStar leads a salsa class with Summer Intensive participants





# improvising with ghosts past/present/future

## the remaking, reshaping, recentering of FRESH/ROT

by CLARISSA RIVERA DYAS AND AINSLEY E. THARP

*How do we define legacy and carry what was built, cultivated, nurtured, and grown through death and generations?*

We take what we can carry in the ways we know how.

So, we are,  
did, and do.

FRESH FESTIVAL began in 2010 in the care of Kathleen Hermesdorf, Albert Mathias, and Ernesto Sopprani. For 10 years Kathleen was the director, curator, teacher, performer, and producer of FRESH FESTIVAL. In 2020, Kathleen was diagnosed with brain cancer and died about 8 months later. Here is [Kathleen's archive](#) with so many beautiful memories, and letters from the past.



Kathleen during FAKE Company performance (2020)

In the aftermath of Kathleen's passing, Abby Crain, Clarissa Rivera Dyas, gizeh muñiz vengel, Chibueze Crouch, and ainsley tharp took on FRESH, which we renamed after KH FRESH after Kathleen. Kathleen didn't really leave us a road map for how to make all this happen. She did leave us with around \$20,000 in the bank, a whole festival fan base 10 years in the making, and memories of what we loved most about FRESH from different angles of participation.

We replicated what we thought FRESH was and allowed ourselves and the festival to shift and adapt.

Changes are inevitable

and we learned from what already existed.

[DOING]

Doing the damn thing taught us what needed to be done, and moving from there as a place of momentum.

*How does form influence practice?*

Embedded in the bodies that carry the legacy of KH FRESH are the forms/formlessness of experimental improv.

Legacy became less about replicating the choreography of what the festival was and more about an improv score with FRESH's past while tumbling towards the possibilities of what is just around the corner (THE FUTURE).

So yeah,,,,,  
we're experimenting,  
improvising,  
fucking it up,  
failing,  
listening, collaborating  
and being in community  
because that is our practice. It's what we know, it's how we move, and it is our way of carrying on the FRESH legacy.

~~~~~ making space for more space ~~~~~

*Who is in the room? Who is the community?*

(great fucking question.)

The choreography of what this festival is will inevitably change and transform based on who is in the room. And a part of the legacy of FRESH we are acknowledging is the whiteness of past leadership of the festival.

We are shifting, recentering, and adapting.  
(making space)

In inheriting, it was a clear call and ask of this moment to reposition and address the overall whiteness of the festival. Having a majority BIPOC and queer production/curation team, the only access point for us to engage with the festival was to center BIPOC and queer artists by inviting folks like Maurya Kerr, Rama Hamesh Hall, En Ningún Lugar, mayfield brooks, Tommy DeFranz, and others to teach and perform in the festival.

*How do we build bridges?*

*How do we cultivate a rich and diverse container that feels honest?*

*How does recentering leadership create space for BIPOC and queer artist participation and cultivation?*

Something we come back to again and again is the economic realities and precarity of our audience and community. Financial accessibility is a core pillar, principle, and practice guiding the structure of the festival. All of our classes and events are no one turned away for lack of funds (NOTA-FLOF), which many participants took advantage of in previous iterations. We offer audio description and ASL for our performances, and there have been other offerings for other dance styles besides experimental dance and improvisation, such as House and Butoh.



KH FRESH queer ecologies jam (2024)

*What is happening right NOW?*

We are laying to rest and giving FRESH new life through this upcoming festival ROT.

## Definition of ROT: the process of decay.

*There is so much movement in the decay, there is transformation in the compost, there is new life and new beginnings after ROT.*





ROT is the name of this moment. Through ROT 2025 and a communal conversation, there will be a new name coming circa 2026 for What. is. Next. And honestly who the fuck knows?! Maybe we keep the name if backed by popular demand.

????*What. is. Next.*????

ROT/FRESH/ROT/FRESH/ROT/FRESH/ROT/FRESH

We want to emphasize what has been at the heart of this festival these past few years and amplify what we loooove about it. It's a microcosm of events across experimental dance, interdisciplinary art, and academic spaces. It is a community that appears and dissolves. It is a community that co-learns, co-creates, and trains together. It is an incubator for collaboration; a shock to the system that re-energizes and holds space to collectively build possibilities that become more possibilities—

practicepracticepracticepracticepracticepracticepractice

—[a site of experimentation, study, risk-taking, mishaps, ]

all while centering anti-racist, proto-feminist, (light?) anarchist politics as participants and organizers. It is quick, dirty, and creates an environment that allows us to generate better questions, moremoremore questions, and questions that don't have answers.

Just a *tiny few (moremoremore)* of the largesse of questions to ourselves—

How is this a community care practice and what are the limitations around this type of work?

How does legacy get passed down through the body / embodiment?

How do scarcity and abundance and sustainability collide?

and to you—

How are you interested in / what do you need to support being together?

Who are your / our communal dancestors?

What do you want to see?

Are we willing to not know? YES

We are willing to not know.

ROT/FRESH/ROT/FRESH/ROT/FRESH/ROT/FRESH

Well I guess this is kind of an abrupt end to this chapter, to this article, to what was once FRESH, but also here we are writhing in the ROT, digging through the compost, improvising with ghosts, and giving thanks to those who came before us and those that will come after us.



KH FRESH performance (2024)

PHOTO BY ROBBIE SWENBY

This article has been co-written by Clarissa Rivera Dyas and ainsley e. tharp, the two primary caretakers of ROT 2025.

**CLARISSA RIVERA DYAS** is a Bay Area, Ohlone land, based dancer, choreographer, and arts producer. Their artistic practice flows from the truthfulness of improvisation, is rooted in her communities, and centered around movement as a spiritual practice and a conduit of change. They've performed with Flyaway Productions, Zaccho Dance Theatre, OYSTERKNIFE, GRAVITY, and many others. Clarissa is a co-conspirator of *RUPTURE* and collaborates with Sara Shelton Mann and Embodiment Project. They've presented in the Black Choreographers' Festival, Dresher Ensemble Artist Residency, Queering Dance Festival's FROLIC! and KH FRESH Festival. She was awarded Dance Magazine's "25 to Watch" in 2024 and is on the Queering Dance Festival Steering Committee.

**ainsley e. tharp's** work is experimental, feminine but not very ladylike, fixated on failure as protest, and informed by improvisation as play, impermanence as study, and mess making as necessity. She is a queer white interdisciplinary artist and witch working in between and with fringe subcultures rooted in the Bay Area. Her work is inspired by antiracism, proto feminism, and anarchist principles and practices. ainsley's artistic background is in the field of experimental dance, visual art, video art, and projection design. She works towards creating and organizing low-income accessible art access spaces in the Bay Area.

ROT 2025—February 16-22

<https://www.freshfestival.org/2025-calendar>

# GRAVITY ACCESS SERVICES

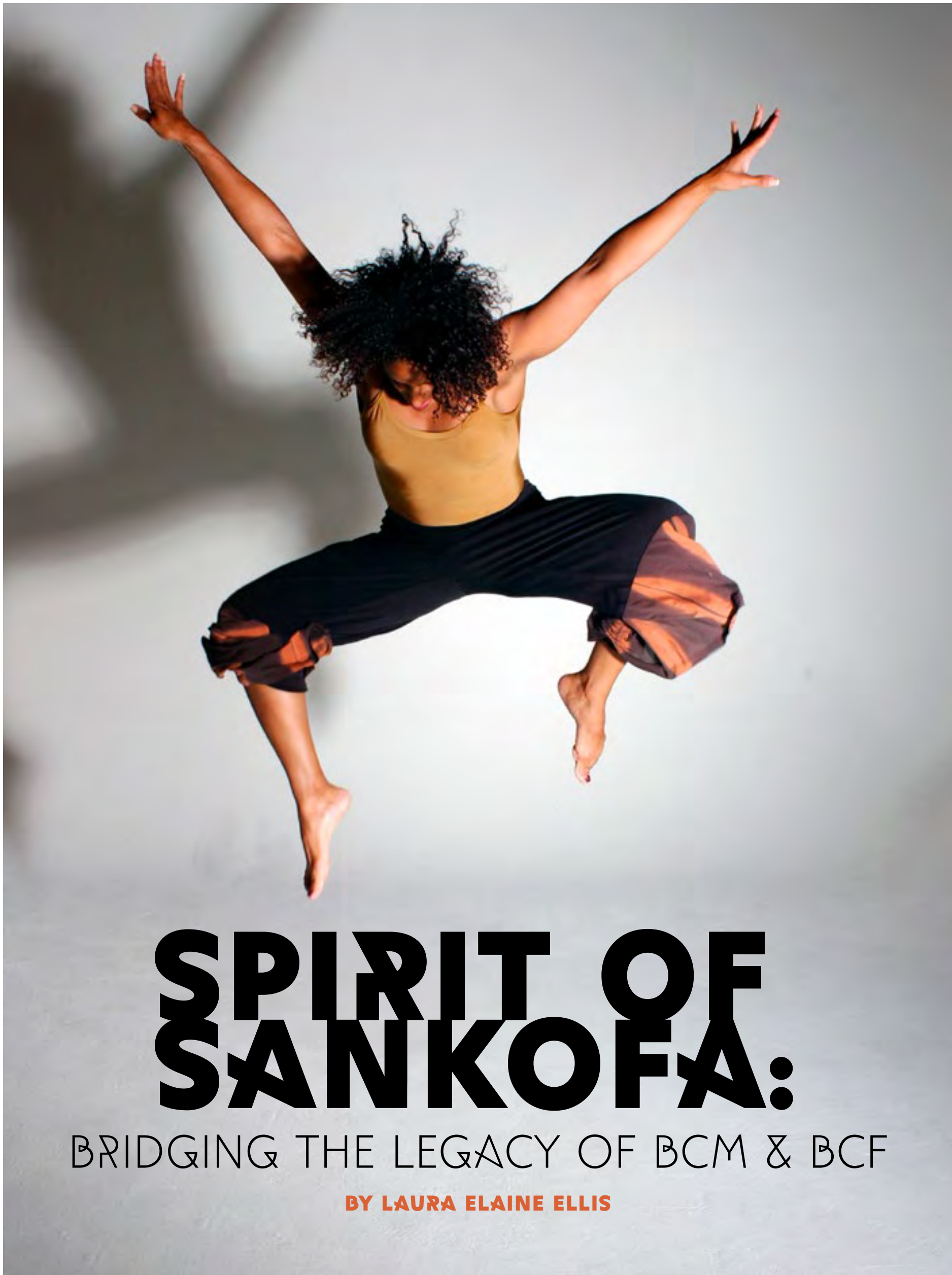
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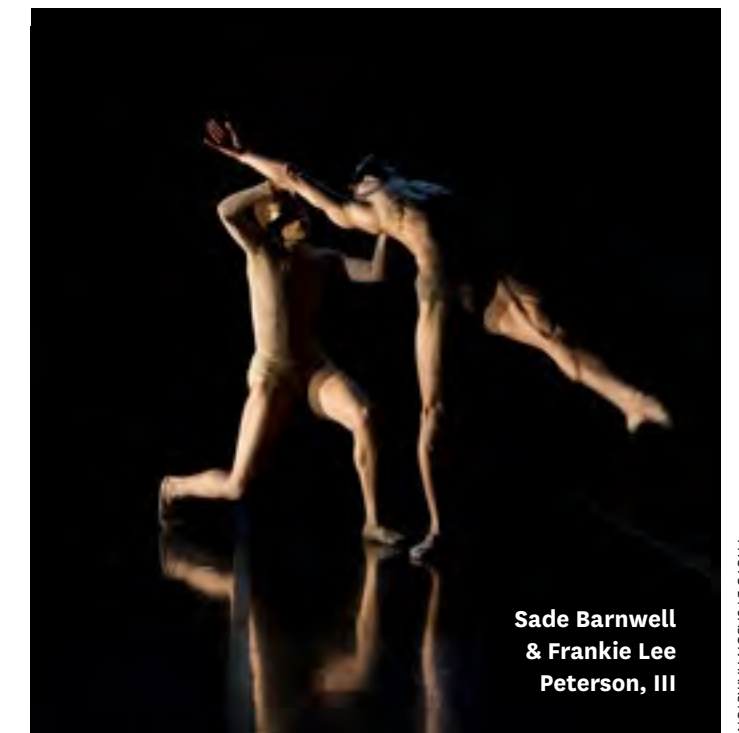
# SPIRIT OF SANKOFA:

BRIDGING THE LEGACY OF BCM & BCF

BY LAURA ELAINE ELLIS

PHOTO BY ANDY NOGGS, PICTURED: LAURA ELAINE ELLIS

## I HOLD THE MEMORY OF BCM DEAR,



Sade Barnwell & Frankie Lee Peterson, III

PHOTO BY JASON HARSTON

not just because of the excitement and verve of community rallying around the festival that particular year, cheering on the eclectic array of works performed, and not just because I was one of the emerging choreographers who debuted on that stage, but because it was a time we thought of as a singular moment—the one time that BCM programmed only Bay Area choreographers for this renowned festival. I remember the synergy that was conjured, as well as what was catalyzed in that weekend of BCM. It was a pivotal happening that would reveal the need for all of us Black choreographers to create a coalition, keeping us connected and supporting each other going forward.

As important and galvanizing as this moment was for all of us, I've come to realize that this memory reveals much more than a moment or weekend of BCM. That moment happened because of what inspired its founding producer, Dr. Halifu Osumare. In her book *Dancing in Blackness: A Memoir*, she writes:

*“Looking back, one run-out performance project was a turning point in my career: Dance Black America (1983). This was the first time that I had been part of a Black dance program that convened dance with humanities in a thorough way, and this fascinated me. It planted an internal seed that would eventually allow me to start my own comprehensive black dance initiative by the end of the decade.”*



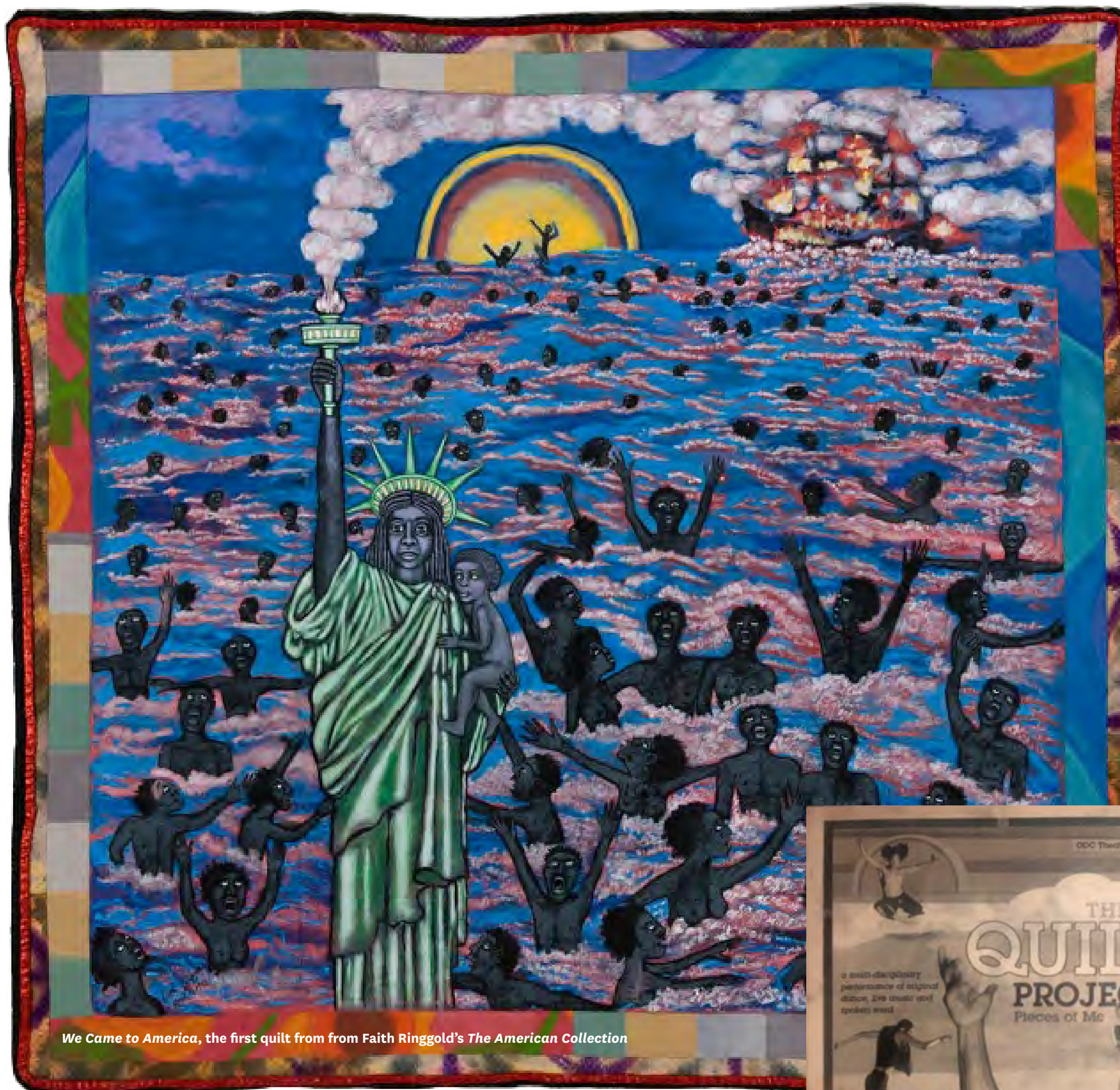
(Learn more about [Black Dance America](#).)

BCM was Dr. Osumare's Black dance initiative, debuting in 1989. In her memoir, she also wrote about her vision for this initiative:

*"I wanted BCM to focus on dance-makers and their individual artistic statements rather than on the conundrum of "black dance" itself. One decade away from the new millennium, I felt it was time to make a national statement about the state of contemporary black choreographers..."*

After those powerful last performances of BCM, many of us participating choreographers felt compelled to keep Dr. Osumare's vision moving forward. So, in 1995, a group of us, including Blanche Brown, Joanna Haigood, Robert Moses, Kevin Ware, Aisha Jenkins, and me, as well as Bay Area arts administrators Jennifer Ross and Angela Johnson, held a series of round tables discussing next steps—there was a continuum at work, a Black dance legacy, defining a need for us to shape our own future.

We formed the African & African American Performing Arts Coalition (AAPAC). In 1996, I incorporated AAPAC as a fiscally sponsored non-profit and began presenting several concerts that year and through 2003. In 2002, I was artistic director and collaborator on a cornerstone project awarded the Creative Work Fund and produced by ODC Theater in response to Faith Ringgold's story quilt *We Came to America*. The work featured four choreographers: Moses, Ellis, Jenkins, and Robert Henry Johnson (1968 – 2022); a host of dynamic performers including Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Silfredo La O Vigo, and Nora Chi-paumire; and an 11-piece music ensemble conducted by musician/composer Wayne Wallace. The Smithsonian partnered with us, and we were able to display Ringgold's iconic quilt in the lobby of ODC Theater. We rode the momentum of that successful project, and in



*We Came to America, the first quilt from Faith Ringgold's The American Collection*

**"I WANTED BCM TO FOCUS ON DANCEMAKERS AND THEIR INDIVIDUAL ARTISTIC STATEMENTS RATHER THAN ON THE CONUNDRUM OF "BLACK DANCE" ITSELF. ONE DECADE AWAY FROM THE NEW MILLENNIUM, I FELT IT WAS TIME TO MAKE A NATIONAL STATEMENT ABOUT THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK CHOREOGRAPHERS ..."**

— DR. HALIFU OSUMARE



2003, I began to plan, with Kendra Kimbrough Barnes, the Black Choreographers Festival: Here & Now (BCF).

Kendra and I asked ourselves: what could be done to support the needs and visibility of Black choreographers? In the early 2000s, what remained true about this Black dance legacy was that our choreographic voices were still not prevalent in the dance venues and programs around the Bay Area. We knew we needed to provide African American artists with safe and nurturing creative spaces to shape their choreographic narratives and expressions, the freedom to succeed or even fail at creative attempts at new works, and a space to try and try again. We wanted to formalize a project model that was sustainable, responsive, and accessible for artists and audiences to come together and celebrate African American art and culture.

We saw Dr. Osumare's BCM as a model for a Black dance festival that we could use as a framework for our vision. With her blessing and the support of Rob Baillis, director of ODC Theater at that time, Kendra and I would ambitiously do what had not been done before: create a consortium model of presenting and host a Black dance festival on both sides of the bridge, Eastbay and SF.

In 2005, Black Choreographers Festival: Here & Now (BCF) had its debut, curated with an intentional blend of the past and present, including iconic works of choreographers that were part of the BCM programming: Donald McKayle (1930–2018), Haigood, and RH Johnson, as well as emerging choreographers Latanya d. Tigner, Malia Conner, and Rashad Pridgen (1978–2024). Multi-faceted artist Bamuthi also MC'd and performed.

(Read [Dance Magazine's review](#) of BCF's opening night performance at SF's Theater Artaud.)



Here we are, 2025. When asked to reflect on what this 20th anniversary means to her, Kendra shared, "This anniversary is not just a celebration of the past; it is a call to action for the future. There is still much to be explored, celebrated, and shared. The next 20 years will be about continuing to uplift the next generation, expanding our reach, and pushing the boundaries of what is possible in the intersection of art, culture, and activism."

Kendra and I have witnessed so many of the choreographers who performed in BCM and BCF go on to have a national and international presence and make significant contributions to the dance world at large. We will ride the continuum of this Black dance legacy through the 21st century, seeing what can be transformed, broadened, and handed up in the years to come.

**laura elaine ellis**, co-founder and director of the African & African American Performing Arts Coalition, co-presents the Black Choreographers Festival: Here & Now (BCF) with Kendra Kimbrough Barnes, founder and director of K\*Star\*Productions. BCF is an all-community event made possible by the generous support and involvement of many folks committed to its success and service.

**Black Choreographers Festival: Here & Now – 20th Anniversary Season**  
Feb 7–June 21, [bcfhereandnow.com](http://bcfhereandnow.com)





Shareen DeRyan

PHOTO BY ARSHIN OUBAEE

In many fitness and wellness spaces, the cost of a class can be double what you might pay for a dance class...

**W**hen we co-founded Bodies of Empowerment (BOE) in 2021, we were driven by a shared belief—dance should be a resource available to everyone, not just those with the financial means to access it. In the wake of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that dance needed a space where people could feel empowered, and where their bodies could find expression without financial barriers. In response, we founded Bodies of Empowerment, a program that offers adults of all ages a one-of-a-kind selection of dance classes led by highly trained instructors at no cost. Now, BOE has grown into a thriving program that has impacted over 600 individuals and continues to support dancers and instructors of all backgrounds.

#### THE BEGINNING: A RESPONSE TO NEED

Our journey began in response to a significant gap we observed in the dance community. Both of us spent years scraping by to pay for dance classes while earning minimal wages to teach them. The pandemic only deepened these challenges, with many studios closing their doors or raising rates to stay afloat. We realized that for dance to truly embody empowerment, it must be accessible to everyone. Our classes aim to bring people together—dancers and non-dancers alike, those with disposable income and those with less—creating a space where everyone feels included and valued.

Shareen's passion for BOE's free classes stems from her own struggles with the cost of dance training. Starting at a young age, she faced financial hardships in affording tuition. To offset costs, she took on janitorial duties in exchange for class access, a dynamic that often left her feeling unworthy or embarrassed. This tension extended to her family, with frequent conflicts over unpaid tuition, and persisted throughout much of her training. These financial barriers not only created stress but also highlighted how the high costs of dance training exclude many communities, particularly those historically marginalized.

For Kristin, the imbalance between time spent preparing and teaching classes and the income earned was stark. Some studios offered pay structures as low as \$5 per student with no base rate, making earnings contingent on self-promotion and popularity. While a few studios implemented base pay or 50/50 splits, these models

# THE REAL COST OF FREE DANCE CLASSES WITH BODIES OF EMPOWERMENT

By Kristin Damrow &  
Shareen DeRyan



often lacked growth potential, perpetuating a cycle of financial instability for teachers.

With the help of our friend and colleague Styles Alexander, who was instrumental in shaping the early vision of the program—initially imagined as a platform for festivals and youth programs—we officially launched Bodies of Empowerment in 2021 as a free dance class initiative.

### FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY THROUGH DIVERSE STYLES

One of the things that makes Bodies of Empowerment unique is its commitment to showcasing diverse dance styles, thereby fostering inclusivity by challenging the dominant racist focus on Eurocentric dance forms. We offer instructors from various dance communities opportunities to teach styles such as Umfundalai, hip-hop, vogue, intergenerational dance, drag theater, and more—creating a broad spectrum of experiences within a single program. This not only reflects the diversity of dance in the Bay Area, but also allows participants to engage with movements and traditions they may not have had access to otherwise. Classes are offered at different levels from Beginning to Advanced, and oftentimes classes are “All Levels.” Our hope is to create a space where people can try a new style of dance without expectations or judgment. Our all-level classes welcome everyone from professional dancers to complete beginners, fostering an environment where learning with each other, being present in your body, and sharing the experience of discovery are what matter most.

### EMPOWERING TEACHERS AND BUILDING SUSTAINABLE SUPPORT NETWORKS

Our approach also empowers our guest teachers by involving them in marketing decisions, contract drafting, and editing. This ensures that our teachers have autonomy in shaping a welcoming space for their communities and helps create an environment where they feel supported.



Kristin Damrow

Many of our teachers work across the Bay Area and beyond, extending the reach of BOE by connecting participants to their other non-BOE classes. This network amplifies their impact and creates sustainable support systems for those needing ongoing dance classes or community resources. As a result, Bodies of Empowerment fosters long-term engagement in the dance world and contributes to the growth of strong, supportive networks for dancers in the Bay Area.

### THE REAL COST OF FREE CLASSES

A diverse, inclusive dance scene enriches our culture, fostering creativity and collaboration that transcends socioeconomic and cultural

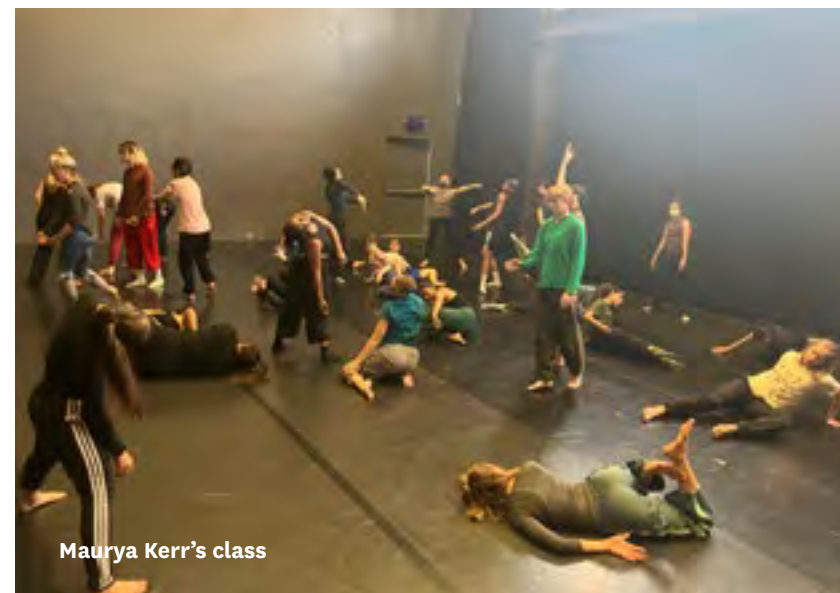
divides. The dance world has long been criticized for its exclusivity, where access to classes and opportunities is often limited by one’s financial status. Bodies of Empowerment seeks to dismantle these barriers by offering dance classes at no cost.

Offering free classes is a beautiful thing, but it’s not without its financial challenges. For each Bodies of Empowerment class, we spend almost \$500 per class: \$175 to pay our instructors, \$100 for space rental and insurance, and \$200 in administrative costs (even with donating some of our own time). That adds up quickly, especially when the goal is to keep these classes free for participants. While we do accept donations,

PHOTO BY KRISTIN DAMROW & COMPANY



Momo Akrami's class



Maurya Kerr's class

PHOTOS BY BOE

we intentionally don’t push for them, knowing that for many of our participants, having the ability to dance without financial strings attached is absolutely crucial. Dance should never be out of reach because of a person’s income level—that’s something we hold at the core of our mission.

“Free” does come with some complexity. While we are committed to offering free access to dance, we also believe in the value of dance classes themselves. In many fitness and wellness spaces, the cost of a class can be double what you might pay for a dance class, despite the fact that dance requires just as much (if not more) skill, expertise, and physical effort. By paying our instructors fairly, we aim

to raise the standard for how dance educators are compensated and, in doing so, elevate the value of dance classes themselves.

### THE ROLE OF FUNDING AND LOOKING AHEAD

For the past three years, Bodies of Empowerment has been sustained in part

by portions of Kristin Damrow & Company’s (BOE’s parent company) California Arts Council General Operating Grant. However, as those funds are now nearly exhausted and unable to fully meet the growing needs of our community, we find ourselves seeking new support to continue this vital work.

As our program continues to grow, we are committed to expanding our impact, reaching even more participants, and creating a lasting legacy of inclusivity and empowerment in the dance world. But we cannot do this alone. We are actively seeking additional funding and partnerships to ensure that Bodies of Empowerment remains a sustainable and accessible resource for all.

We are so grateful to all the participants, teachers, and community members who have supported us on this journey. Without their passion, dedication, and energy, Bodies of Empowerment would not be what it is today. Together, we’ve proven that when dance is made available to all, it has the power to change lives.

**Come take class for free! Visit us at [boe.dance](https://boe.dance) for all of our classes and ways to support!**

**SHAREEN DERYAN** received her initial training at Ballet Arts Academy in Spokane, WA, continuing at LINES Ballet in San Francisco. As a freelance dancer she has danced for companies like Kristin Damrow & Company and Kinetech Arts, performing also with Fullstop Dance, Mud Water Theatre, Bellwether Dance, ZiruDance and Rawdance. Currently Shareen is in her seventh year of dancing for Jennifer Perfilio Movement Works. Alongside co-directing BOE, she also owns a Reiki and sound healing practice.

**KRISTIN DAMROW** is a San Francisco-based contemporary choreographer, director, and educator. She founded Kristin Damrow & Company (KDC) in 2013, earning award nominations for her choreography and visual design. KDC has since expanded to programs like BOE and the artist commissioning Merde Project. Her work blends design theory, movement, scenic elements, and sound, creating immersive experiences. She has taught in the Bay Area for 15 years and nationally at leading institutions.



# SPEND A LITTLE, GAIN A LOT

## Making time for injury prevention

BY IAN MCMAHAN

**I**njuries can seem inevitable, and to some extent they are. Dance long enough and something will sprain, tweak, or ache. Research on injuries suggests that dancers can average as many as seven injuries in a year. That's a lot. Now that same research study, published in 2012 in the *Journal of Sports Physical Therapy*, found that many of those injuries resolved in a few days. Those are the tweaks, not the tears, sprains, or breaks.

Other than completely beating the odds and avoiding injury, that means the key is to keep small injuries from turning into big ones, the ones that take months to rehab and derail a season or a year. Injuries aren't just for the professionals; they can happen at all levels of dance and in every age range so, whether you spend all day or a few hours a week dancing, it's important to lower the odds of injury.

Dance injury prevention is crucial for maintaining long-term health and performance for dancers of all levels across multiple techniques and forms. Given the physical demands of dance, which involve a great deal of repetition, intense mobility, and complex movement, dancers

are at risk of various injuries. The most common dance injuries are to the lower body and back, including ankle sprains, tendon problems, stress fractures, and hip injuries. Fatigue, muscle weakness, and excessive joint mobility can add to the repetitive nature of dance and lead to overuse injury.

Dancers, like other athletes, demand a lot from their bodies—long hours of dance class, rehearsals, and performances. With that, to keep injuries at bay, dancers need a high level of cardiovascular fitness, strength, coordination, agility, speed, and movement control. Sometimes though, despite training and performing like serious athletes, dancers may not venture outside the studio to train those other aspects of fitness like other athletes.

If you want some evidence, just head down to the soccer field. There's extensive evidence across field and court sports, especially in soccer, that the risk of injury can be reduced. In sports that involve jumping, sprinting, and quick direction changes, injury prevention programs can reduce the risk of serious injuries by over 50 percent. Though dance movements and injuries are different, involving overuse injuries in equal amounts as acute, many of the same injury prevention principles still apply.

Though social media would have us simplify injury prevention and performance—or the opposite, making every strength training exercise into something from the circus—into one exercise or a single training principle, don't believe it. Here's the thing, you can get stronger with a variety of exercises, in or out of the gym. It's equally how you do the exercise—and how and where you feel it—as which exercise you pick.

Here are the important principles: to reduce or prevent dance injuries, training needs to include a solid warm-up, lower body and core strengthening, stability, balance, and control. Increases in muscle strength and function need to be complemented with good movement technique.

Borrowing again from research into soccer injury prevention, much of the “right” technique involves performing the strength training and jumping/plyometric movements with attention to the torso, knee, and hip position. Specifically, keeping the torso upright and stacked on top of the lower body, preventing the knee from collapsing inward, and bending the knee when landing a jump. All of those small details are why it's also helpful to start a program under the guidance of a physical therapist or sports medicine professional.

Research on injury prevention programs for dance suggests that they can be very effective in reducing the risk of injury, with even a modest dedication of time. In a group of professional ballet dancers [one such program](#), reduced the rate of injury by 82 percent. These reductions were seen in dancers in as little as 4 weeks of following the program for 30 minutes, 3 times a week.

But here's the problem. Despite the strong evidence that injury prevention programs in a myriad of sports are highly effective in reducing the rate of injury, many athletes, dancers, instructors, and coaches don't follow them. Why? Maybe because injury prevention programs are not nearly as exciting as practicing the sport or activity itself. Most of us would rather dedicate our time to the actual ‘doing’—to dance, perform, practice, or compete—rather than the comparatively boring task of strengthening.

Wait, don't walk out of the weightroom just yet. Injury prevention programs need to be rebranded *as performance programs* because they actually do more than just prevent sprains and strains—they improve performance as well. That's right, they help you jump higher, turn faster, and move more dynamically. Sounds better, right?

The importance of a dance-specific training program for improvement of key physical variables was especially evident in [a 2021 study](#), during which researchers implemented a 5-week program. At the end of the study, researchers found improvements in function, balance, hop distance/stability, and upper extremity stability. What's more, dancers felt better and stronger after the 5-week program.

However, while these programs work, you have to stick with them to maintain the improvements. In the above

study, many of the physical gains had disappeared just four months after the program ended. To maintain the benefits—improved performance and decreased injury risk—strength and movement training workouts need to become a regular part of your schedule, even if it means taking a little from the studio to give to the gym. And, if you prefer to keep it simple, that gym can be your living room or garage. Another option might be the best—learning exercise technique, muscle isolation, and movement skills from a physical therapist.

Just like in other sports and activities, the dance injury prevention and performance program doesn't have to mimic dance to be effective. That's right, to get improvements in dance, exercises don't need to be in dance positions. For example, if you're a ballet dancer, it's ok to parallel squat, in fact, working muscles in a different fashion may be part of maximizing the effectiveness of non-dance training.

So, the primary emphasis should be on achieving gains in muscle strength, balance, coordination, agility, and muscular power. The more functional training—jumping and side-to-side motions—can adhere more closely to dance-specific movement. Meaning that jumps and dynamic movement (side to side movement, change of direction, and turning, among others) can be more specific to the form or art—just use the landing technique I mentioned earlier: stacking the torso, bending the knee when landing, and avoiding collapsing the knee inward.

The foundation of your program should be lower body and core strengthening and should include bridges, planks, squats, single-leg deadlifts, and plyometric/jump training. Of course, it's also important to not just do the exercise, but to do it with correct mechanics and an eye towards symmetry and exact muscle recruitment. This last detail basically means that if you're doing an exercise to strengthen the quads, you should truly feel the burn and fatigue in the quads, by no means a given. (If you are looking for a comprehensive and thorough analysis on how dancers should approach a squat, check out Lisa Giannone's article, “To Squat or Not to Squat,” [here](#).)

Dance injury prevention works, it just takes, well, a little extra work. Sure, spending a little extra time in the gym might not be as fun as dancing. But it beats spending a lot of time rehabbing and recovering from a serious injury and missing out on what you love to do—dance.

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