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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: left, Mita Khrichencko; right, Katrina D'autrement

What No Other Dance Studio in Philly Is Doing: a Conversation with Urban Movement Arts

by Maddie Hopfield

[Urban Movement Arts](#) is a dance studio located in Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia. This September its adult program, which offers a variety of contemporary urban and folk dance classes, will have its one year anniversary. The space is also home to a kids' dance program called [Philly Movemakers](#), a new artist-in-residency program, Vince Johnson's performance group [Philly Kerplop](#), and several upcoming [Fringe Festival shows](#). It also serves as a rentable studio and practice space for the larger community. As a frequent class-taker and UMA enthusiast, I decided to sit down with Vince Johnson (founding director) and Lily Kind* (associate director) on behalf of thINKingDANCE to talk about the studio's growing presence in the Philly dance scene.

Maddie Hopfield: Coming up on the one-year anniversary, what has been happening so far at UMA? What are your future goals for the program?

Vince Johnson: First, we're providing cultural enrichment and physical education for young people and a place for them to apply their talents. Hip hop is a contemporary social art form and it's something that is global and very accessible, but it doesn't have many venues that are dedicated to education and cultivating deeper understandings of the form, or opening it up to people who aren't coming from hip hop communities.

Beyond that, it's about providing a welcoming, humble space for people who want to get into their bodies, dance, and discover new things about themselves. I find that a lot of spaces are on two ends of a spectrum: they're either completely disconnected from some sort of lineage and randomly shuffling around, or they're just very bougie and strict and over the top, and they're not the most welcoming places.

The third component that I find exists at UMA is that it's a rec center for practicing hip hop dancers. There are a lot of b-boys and hip hop choreographers here frequently to just throw down.

The last component is trying to have some arm and investment in the artistic community in Philadelphia, and creating a bridge that doesn't always exist between people who are working in different ways.

So, there are four arms to what exists here. How do we get better at just doing those things and reaching more people, really supporting young talent that's emerging in Philadelphia? Philly is a city with a lot of potential, but it's also a very much blue collar (and increasingly white collar) city that's about basic entertainment and artistic experiences. It's not New York, so talent doesn't really have any reason to generate here, or any reason to stay. So, it's about trying to feed that aspect of the city.

MH: Same questions for Lily.

Lily Kind: So, there's Movemakers, which is the kids' program, and in it there's a depth of understanding of what's being taught that I think is super exciting, given that these kids are going to grow up to be adults. I wish I had had that when I was a kid.

Now that Vince isn't teaching every single class, the studio is employing teachers, some with a lot of experience and some who are learning to be teachers. It's creating opportunity for young artists in that way as well.

Just having dance classes that are accessible and with lots of integrity is really exciting—something that's welcoming and inviting for people of all ages and abilities without compromising what hip hop is.

VJ: One of the things that I do take pride in is the diversity that exists here: socio-economic diversity, racial diversity . . . I'm excited every time I come into the studio and see a modern dancer practicing in one studio, a hip hop class by someone who's rented the space, kids from across Philly and Jersey dancing in another room, and a Lindy Hop class in another. These people start interacting with one another; I think that's one of the more powerful aspects of what goes on here. Where there are walls in a lot of other artistic or educational institutions, I think it's really significant that we, just because of the nature of who we are, break those down.

MH: Right, that was going to be my next question: how do you do that? How do you create that environment?

LK: If you're going to use this space, if it's right for you, you're gonna be okay if someone has to walk through the studio or if there's music bleeding from next door. You have to be just excited enough about the collective energy that you're willing to not have everything exactly some kind of way. Our work as artists is interdisciplinary. It's not just a theoretical idea; that attracts similar people who want to be part of it.

VJ: I think it's actually really good for people who come into this space who aren't necessarily coming directly from hip hop. Hip hop is about sharing and exposure, and spectacle to some extent. With other styles there's a process that requires a certain level of privacy, but that's not how hip hop is. We can use a little bit of that in the performance community: a little bit more rawness.

Hip hop dancers don't *need* anything like this—that's really important to state. The hip hop community is going to be strong in Philly no matter what.

But in the ballet/jazz/competition dance school, hip hop is the extracurricular. I receive a lot of validation in terms of seeing this school grow and seeing that hip hop *will* attract, support, and cultivate champions and people who *are* primary, who are building in the style.

LK: When you pay to buy a social dance education, the history has always been, “Oh, the thing as it is is too intense, let's water it down and then people will like it.” But actually, without us even having to proselytize, people are already coming and saying, “I want locking” or “I want more dancehall” or whatever it is. We see that the thing as it exists, taught by the person from within the hip hop tradition, *is* interesting, *is* accessible; that people are really hungry for that.

VJ: It's about finding the right teachers who are humble and open enough to share their language and their knowledge. Once you have that physical language, then you can be comfortable going into communities and interacting with people who are much more fluent and pronounced in how they speak in it.

It's better to do that in a situation where you're provided information in a way that is authentic and has integrity, and is mindful of both the core of the hip hop community and everyone else who is welcome within that core. I'll say this, and I'll say it confidently: nurturing and building folk up to be a part of this community *and* creating networks so that the community itself receives those individuals, is something no one else is doing in Philly.

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