

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Meet the Writers: Debbie Shapiro

Finish this sentence "Good writing..."

...stays with you beyond the initial read, seduces you to return to it more than once, to share it with others, and to quote it in your writing. Some writing is so good it dismisses rules of punctuation and grammar while it sweeps you off your feet.

What are you most excited to cover through TD?

I'm just excited to practice this writing form. I've only worked on grants and press releases for a small number of artists, so writing for TD is freeing. I'm excited to see where this freedom leads, as each assignment takes me into unknown territory, and exposes me to something I wouldn't have otherwise seen or contemplated. I'm constantly on the look-out now for that moment Edwin Denby described as "being made drunk for a second by seeing something happen" and then getting the chance to "express lucidly what I saw when I was drunk." (thanks, Elizabeth Zimmer & Mindy Aloff)

Which part is challenging, scary, difficult?

It's scary to learn how biased my reactions to viewing dance can be. The difficult challenge is to be fair and to do justice to each artist I write about. If they're making/presenting work in this city, then they deserve space on this site, but not all of it inspires me equally. Though I doubt I'll become less opinionated, I'm practicing finding something honest, useful, and generous to say with each assignment.

How/when did you learn to type?

I have no memory of not being able to type! But if I had to guess it was probably around 1988. George Bush Sr. was president, Dirty Dancing (featuring Philly's own Karen Getz!) was still the rage, and my second grade class had something like 2 hours of Computers twice a week. I recall playing the Oregon Trail on an Apple II, and panicking when my "bison" would get sick.

What is the TD project really about, in your experience?

It's about shining a light on how rich Philly is in dance, through dialogue. Sitting around the table with the TD writers, I feel grateful we can express our ideas without fear, or the notion that a divergent point of view is bad. There's so much here, and the field is growing all the time. Much of it's affordable or even free. I hope this site raises awareness about that on a national level, and attracts new audiences and artists to the community. My personal agenda is to challenge myself with a new writing practice and to find my voice within the chorus.

What is your "desert-island" publication/

15 years ago, I would have said Dance Magazine. Today I'm more broadly interested in how different lifestyles and industries intersect. I really like [Good.is](#), an ideas-based publication. I'm impressed by the print magazine, which subtly opposes the noisy notion that we're all so image-driven today. It presents lots of topics, digging deep into truly interesting, relevant stuff. I like that the layout is a New Yorker-style text-to-image ratio (generous word limits) rather than that of, say, New York Magazine. I find it good reading practice, and am getting fed stories that I'm not finding anywhere else about culture, cities, the environment, etc.

How has TD affected your other dance-related work?

It helps to reinforce why I chose this path. Through TD I have found a supportive network of dance professionals whom I trust, and who share my level of commitment to our work, which never ends. It's energizing to represent my perspective of the dance world through administration while bouncing writing off of scholars, artists, and seasoned critics. In TD, I'm proud to share my Headlong knowledge, and in Headlong, I'm proud to share lessons learned from TD.

What would your parents say about your work in the arts?

I think they're proud and impressed that I make a living doing this. I'm sure they're also pleased that all those years investing in my dance classes, rehearsals, and arts camp turned into something long-lasting.

By Debbie Shapiro

March 28, 2012