

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Marcia De La Garza

Dancers Confer

By: Lynn Matluck Brooks

For nearly a full week, 200 dancers of many a sort converged on Vancouver, British Columbia, for two conferences held at the Scotiabank Dance Centre. Opening on Monday, July 29, the [World Dance Alliance-Americas](#) (WDA) presented panels, workshops, classes, papers, discussions, and performances. On Thursday afternoon, August 1, the [Dance Critics Association](#) (DCA) landed on the scene, adding an edge of critical commentary to the playful and varied WDA sessions already in progress while also fielding panels of its own.

“Playful” isn’t a word typically associated with academic conferences, but [WDA](#) isn’t the usual academic association. It’s got its professors and graduate student members, but it also has dancers, writers, presenters, choreographers, teachers, and administrators in its ranks. WDA currently has two lively “centers”—the Americas center (North, Central, and South America) and [12 participants](#) Asia Pacific center (Asia, Australia, and New Zealand). The now-moribund Europe center may yet revive, because the next “Global Summit”—bringing together all of these centers—will be held in [Angers, France, in July of 2014](#).

The first session celebrated WDA’s twentieth year, bringing together all but one of the past and current presidents of the Americas center. Mary Jane Warner, incoming president (now retired from the Dance Department at York University), introduced the founding president, Genevieve Oswald (Curator Emerita of the Dance Collection at the New York Public Library), who described the vision and goals that inspired the establishment of WDA in 1993. Its mission then can be summarized by the statement published on the current WDA-A website: “to serve as a primary voice for dance and dancers throughout the world, and to encourage the exchange of ideas and the awareness of dance in all its many forms.” Ruth Abrahams, who followed Oswald as WDA-Americas president (now Executive Director of the Gomez Historic Site in New York), described her work in strengthening the organization’s reach and structure. Grant Strate (former dancer and choreographer with the National Ballet of Canada/NBC) spoke of his pleasure in the ongoing successes of WDA, while Jin-Wen Yu, outgoing president (and professor of dance at University of Wisconsin-Madison), discussed recent WDA-A initiatives. Also present on this panel of reminiscence, historical evaluation, and consideration of the future were Vanessa Harwood, a

founding WDA member and former NBC ballerina, and myself, like Harbold a founding member and also a former compiler of the WDA calendar. This panel highlighted WDA's focus on the broad network of dance: its connections to politics, the economy, healthcare, and education, and its embrace of artists, scholars, professionals, and students in all dance genres.

Other presentations in the course of the week included discussions of dance and identity, the role of "urban dance" (hip-hop, street dance) in academe, dance preservation and outreach, and dance in connection with ever-changing technologies. Studio classes moved from capoeira to improvisation, from alignment to breath, from musicality to self-generated rhythms, from jazz to fusion forms. Every evening was occasion for a concert of 5 or 6 works by a range of choreographers and performers, some professionals, some students, some dance teachers, some community dancers. While the quality of works varied, each evening held a gem or two. The opening program on Tuesday featured *Core*, a powerfully controlled, utterly articulate solo by Ruth Levin (currently an MFA student at York University) that looked to the gravitation and centered weight of the earth as a motivator of dance movement. In Wednesday's show, Melissa Rolnick presented *Paradox*, a solo in which Heather Klopchin's long reaches and clear focus drew me into her movements. Both artists currently reside and teach in Minnesota. Chicago's Seldoms Dance Company presented an excerpt of *Monument* on the Thursday-night show; the dancers' specific use of contact moved from self-touch to brushing one another's skins, and finally to leaning, pushing, and carrying one another through an apparently frightening and dangerous terrain. The highlight of the last show I saw, on Friday, was Bageshree Vaze's kathak solo, *Tarana*, a tour de force of foot rhythms, spins, hand gestures, and inviting expressions.

I also organized and participated in a WDA panel, "Promoting Public Engagement with Dance's History and Thought," which included my discussion of thINKing Dance (TD); also on that panel were three public service and outreach organizations—Toronto's [Dance Collection Danse](#) (presented by Amy Bowring), the [Dance Heritage Coalition](#) (presented by Imogen Smith), and the [Dance Collection of the New York Public Library](#) (presented by Genevieve Oswald). For DCA, I moderated and helped organize the panel "The Proof is in the Process," which discussed current trends in presenting that include dance writers and public access to works-in-progress showings. Panelists were Victoria Farr-Brown, who writes the e-whims blog for [Whim-Wham Dance Co.](#) of Seattle, Zoe Scofield of [ZoeJuniper](#) Company of Seattle, and [Annie Wilson](#), independent Philadelphia artist and TD writer. [Rebecca Weber](#), Director of Somanaut Dance and also a TD writer, presented on the subject of "Somatic Memory, Audience Engagement, and New Ways of Viewing Dance," and also led one of 3 "Choreography Labs" that rehearsed conference participants throughout the week in preparation for a Sunday show.

With a full schedule of panels, presentations, workshops, classes, and concerts, bringing together dance folks from around the globe, across specialties, and in two organizations (WDA and DCA), this gathering was rich, colorful, generous, and surprisingly relaxed and accommodating. No early morning sessions, plenty of time in the evenings for chatting with old and new acquaintances, and even opportunity to catch a glimpse of Vancouver's parks and shorelines, cafes and cool restaurants. It was a *very full* week.

[2013 WDA-Americas Conference and Dance Critics Association Conference, July 29 to August 4, 2013, Vancouver, B.C., Canada](#)

By Lynn Matluck Brooks
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