

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jacques-Jean Tiziou

Dancing to Make a Difference (on the Schuylkill)

by Whitney Weinstein

"I am more interested in creating art that brings people into connection with this river and rivers around the nation, around the world, than doing any other kind of art." Alie Vidich

Vidich, creator of *INVISIBLE RIVER*, doesn't think small, which was increasingly apparent during my interview with her after the work's June preview. This year's iteration of her Schuylkill-centered spectacle featured 65 boats moving together carrying audience members, six performances staged in a two-and-a-half mile loop, live music by Michael Wall and Jon Yerby played from a boat, an aerial dance performance from the Strawberry Mansion Bridge, floating sculpture, and performers dancing in canoes, paddle boards on the river, onshore and on Peter's Island.

"My real vision is to see the river full of people experiencing it in different ways, to make it visible with people and activity so they can understand the river and work to advocate for and improve its health."

A Gradual Evolution

Vidich's love of the outdoors, swimming and boating has inspired site specific, outdoor works since her college days. The Schuylkill has been her focus since *CONSTANTS* (2010-11), performed initially for 115 audience members, and centered on "the river and its hidden histories." Narration, poetry, song and dance played equal roles in conveying stories about the Lene Lenape, early settlers and runaway enslaved people. Quietly gliding canoes led audience members along the river.

Last year's initial version of *INVISIBLE RIVER*, with breathtaking scenes of dancers suspended from the Strawberry Mansion Bridge, drew hundreds of viewers to the riverbanks and loads of media attention. But getting it to happen, with the complex permitting processes required, was an uphill climb. With more understanding of how to cooperate effectively with the police and government, Vidich rejoiced that this year's events have been smoother because "our budget is bigger. We've paid more money for everything:

permits, Marine police, EMT, traffic unit.”

The Watershed Protection program of the William Penn Foundation and Schuylkill Banks, along with individual donors, have helped this project come to life. The fundraising “never ends. [S]ometimes it’s flowing heavily like the river and other times the water level is quite low.” The majority of funding has come not because of its being an arts project, but because of its relationship to the river.

Art with an Impact

At the event, audiences heard narration about the river’s environmental history from the Fairmount Water Works Interpretive Center and the Philadelphia Water Department. Furthering awareness and empowering others’ concern is key to the project.

Vidich explained, “Our main problem in Philly is storm water management. During every major rainstorm, the sewer system overflows and dumps into the Schuylkill. The Philadelphia Water Department’s ‘Green City, Clean Waters’ program is working to educate the public about ways to manage storm water at home and in businesses. I want more people to look at the Schuylkill as a resource, a community gathering space, a watershed.” For Vidich, that means creating understanding and respect all the way from her neighbor’s home to the administration at Fairmount Park. Her ultimate vision? “Free-for-all boating” and swimming in the water.

Experiencing *INVISIBLE RIVER*

thINKingDANCE writer Ellen Chenoweth shared some impressions of the event itself: “I was struck by Alie’s mission of encouraging Philadelphians to re-imagine their relationship to the Schuylkill River.

There was a mix of boats: dragon boats, canoes, kayaks, a music boat. It felt unusual and amazing to be part of an art flotilla. I was in a dragon boat with 14 other people, and the only other people who had ever been on the river before were the experienced dragon boaters. We were on the Schuylkill rather than the Mississippi, but somehow I still felt like Huck Finn, with a heady sense of playfulness and adventures ahead. (Maybe this happens any time you’re on a boat?).”

As with last year’s event, the aerial dance was striking. Chenoweth wrote: “There was a moment in the very middle of the performance that will stay with me. We had gone to the furthest point along the river that we would reach before turning back. Our dragon boat hovered between the two banks, not moving at all. Everyone watched as Alie and Amy Lynne Barr (a second dancer) were suspended from the Strawberry Mansion Bridge, and it felt like a perfect way to have people experience exactly one moment, to be perfectly suspended in the present. There was a great sense of peacefulness as the dancers, the river, and the boats were all still.

Later, as the performance was coming to a close and the boats were lining up to unload their passengers at the dock, a gorgeous harvest moon poked up from the horizon, just to the left of our view of the Philadelphia skyline. It felt as if the timing was divinely ordained to have all of us stop in our tracks and appreciate the moon over the river.”

A Vision for the River

“At the end of the performance, Alie gave a short speech about the river, and the goals of the project,” Chenoweth wrote. “She put forward a vision of the river as a community gathering place. It was persuasive because we had all just been on the river together, enacting that vision, and that sense of community in a new setting felt like the most powerful part of the evening.”

Following the June preview, Vidich said that her vision will take time to fully mature, explaining that “anything under ten years old is really just a baby. To bring true awareness to the river and create real stewardship we need more time, resources and manpower.”

“I think I could probably do this for the rest of my life,” Vidich said. Planning meetings for future renditions of the project are expected to

reconvene in August. Vidich is already swimming ahead to map out “another *INVISIBLE RIVER* that’s even bigger with more choreographers and boats.... The journey will get longer with more free events at different places and more will happen during the day.”

INVISIBLE RIVER, created by Alie Vidich, Schuylkill River, Fairmount Park, July 12-13. <http://www.invisibleriver.org/>

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