

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Bill Hebert

Marley and the City: BalletX Inherits Dance/UP's Portable Dance Floor

by Gregory King

Panel by panel, a space is formed

Locked into place by the hands of experts

This portable convenience offers endless possibilities

A prized possession that smiles at the thought of your buoyant physique

It absorbs the history of each site it meets

Sprung and waterproofed, it tells many stories

First you, now me

Them, now us

Sitting alongside its edges, many can be seen eating

It's been four years...but who's counting.

A sprung floor to a dancer is like shock absorbers to a bus driver or helmet and kneepads to a skateboarder. Having done site-specific performances, I know all too well that jumping on concrete is sometimes hard to avoid. Today, dance performances take place in all kinds of locations, from museums and galleries to grassy terrains, woody platforms and tar-filled paths. Unforgiving surfaces sometimes take the place of sprung floors even in lavish theaters.

But still we dance.

Lacking financial resources, artists and companies rarely indulge in the luxury of renting portable floors. So when Dance/USA Philadelphia initiated the Portable Dance Floor program as a means of providing affordable flooring so that dance could literally be taken to the people, the dance gods smiled on the city.

Unfortunately, the recent [folding of Dance/UP](#) left the future of their successful and invaluable programs in a state of uncertainty. With transitional funding from the William Penn Foundation, some of these programs were transferred to other arts organizations. Last week, one such program, The Portable Dance Floor, found a new proprietor: BalletX.

I recently sat down in the lobby of the Wilma Theater on Broad Street with BalletX's Artistic Director Christine Cox, and watched her beam with excitement as she discussed the legacy that has been handed her. A former dancer with Pennsylvania Ballet, Cox spoke candidly of dance as a healer, a connector, and a safe place, saying, "Dance does something that no other art form can do. Being a mother of two, and running a dance company, I have very little time to think about me, so seeing dance allows me the time to laugh, cry, mourn the passing of my mother and hold the hand of my father. If I can be a part of something that can give *that* to someone, then what a joy!"

Cox believes in the transformative power of the arts and disclosed that the company's ownership of the 35' x 37 ½' rectangular portable dance floor furthers BalletX's mission to make dance accessible to all audiences, in every part of the city: "Over the years, Philadelphia has been generous to BalletX, and this generosity has allowed us to build an infrastructure with a smart, resourceful team. Getting this opportunity to keep the future of dance alive by bringing dance to unexpected spaces in the city will expand the dialogue on dance and build new audiences."

When asked why she thinks BalletX was given the important task of housing the dance floor, Cox replied, "I don't know why but I am extremely honored and grateful. I do believe that Dance/UP saw BalletX's commitment to dance and the community, and believed in that commitment. I would like to try to add to what Lois Welk and Dance/UP have created by continuing to build conversations with different communities around this beautiful city."

The success of BalletX's free public performances at The Porch at 30th Street Station, which utilized the floor, epitomizes the need for this valued undertaking. "When the floor is used in performances outside the proscenium stage, the audience gets to witness dance up close," said Cox. Further, she suggested that, up close, the viewer experiences and appreciates the assiduousness of the art form: "Seeing the workings of the dancing body reconfigures the audience's gaze, transforming their understanding of movement from ill-perceived ease to fathomable intricacy." She smiled, recalling an audience member telling her that she loved being close to the dancers because seeing their muscles work and watching them breathe made her feel as if she were a part of the dance. Cox divulged that the floor will be used in BalletX's upcoming benefit performance at Top of the Tower on April 16.

BalletX will continue to rent out the floor at affordable prices to individual artists, non-profit organizations, and commercial entities for the purposes of events and performances. Cox clarified that Dance/UP has created a "bible" for how the floor should be stored, rented, and used. She noted that a two-hour debriefing with representatives from Dance/UP had already occurred, and further guidance will allow for a smooth transition. Two former Dance/UP employees, Bryant Lee and Edward (Eddie) Smallwood, will work with BalletX in the capacity of crew to administer the handling, delivering, and setting up of the floor. BalletX's website will soon include rental information and booking rates.

As we got up to leave, Cox proclaimed, "The fact that we get to continue carrying this torch magnifies the power of an art form that needs no words to be able to move people."

By Gregory King

March 27, 2015