

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Stephanie DeFeo

A Family Circus

by Carolyn Merritt

This spring marks Roger Lee Dance Company's seventh season in Philadelphia—and last weekend's concert, [Circus](#), their 14th program at the Performance Garage. A testament to the city's dance climate, where many small companies eke out their spot of sunlight year after year despite scarce funding, it also speaks to the [Performance Garage's role in Philly's dance ecosystem](#), as home to a wide array of dance genres and projects of varied size and stature through class and performance-space rentals. Selected by *The Inquirer* as one of their ["7 days of things to do,"](#) *Circus* came across my desk as I searched for family-friendly weekend fun. The promise of wildlife—*The Inquirer* touted a show "complete with ... a zebra," among other things—sealed the deal for me and my five-year-old. The evening as a whole recalled the recital concerts of my youth, events that brought together family and friends from different walks of life, where we created community by sharing art.

From ten feet up, a stilt-walker greets us in the lobby of the Performance Garage. The oversized white mesh bow atop her head and skirt draped over her colorful pants remind me of carnival. She grooves and chats us up as we take our seats, and I hear her mention Brazil. She releases clear balloons, filled with pastel-colored discs, into the crowd, one at a time, until there are five floating among the bleachers, and challenges us to keep them afloat. A fun way to pass the time, we tap the balloons and occasionally bump or collide with one another, the task like a low-stakes ice breaker that never advances to the next step. The seats are nearly filled, and the crowd is among the most mixed—in terms of age and race—I've seen at a dance performance of this size (capacity 110) in Philly.

A glance at the program alerts me that the zebra is actually dancer Jasmine Newsome. This is a deep blow, to me and to my son. But for him, the feeling passes as feelings do at that age. His dad gets a kick out of my credulity.

Decked out in a red sequin coat and gold top hat, Roger Lee as the Ringmaster welcomes us, briefly nodding to Philadanco and the Costume Gallery as supporters, before the lights descend and a big-top scene appears on the backdrop. Four core performers open

and close *Circus*, and each brings their own technical specialization: Lee's background is in hip hop, Newsome's is in jazz, and the two "Magicians" are rooted in lyrical dance (Myles Mungo) and ballet (Emily Rawlins). Together they create a pleasing blend that often takes me back in time, comforts me like a well-worn blanket. There are layouts, preparations to turn, isolations, splits to the floor. Lee builds on this old-school jazz vibe with Afro-diasporic and contemporary hip-hop moves, [petit jetés](#) from double pirouettes, [fouetté turns](#), and more.

The quartet is joined by 4 "Acrobats" and singer Kevin Thomas. Damaayah Stevens leaves mouths agape as she flips upright from a [pincha mayurasana](#), spins through the air in cartwheels, curves her body from belly to toes into a giant letter C that dips over her supine head and sternum in a [chest stand](#). Xpress Yourself Dance Ensemble, a high school-aged trio (only choreographer Ashley N. Hackney is named in the program) in black mock-turtleneck uni-shorts with back cutouts similarly dazzle. They execute one-armed cartwheels as a single three-bodied unit, two with a hand to another's shoulder; amble in backbends; rise with ease from a [180-degree penché](#) to a [Y-stand](#).

Among the core, Newsome stands out as the Zebra, exuding the equid in a striped unitard, her painted black-to-gray-to-white Dutch braid a genius mimic of the animal's mohawk. Smooth and seamless, stretching every movement beyond its endpoint, she breathes new life into sometimes old territory. With only four years of dance study, Mungo shows promise with his long limbs and clean lines, if a bit of overzealousness in the form of swimming arms. Lee is a consummate showman, his body a register of our energy and attention as he shifts from lost-in-the-movement to lightbulb each time he catches our eyes. The concluding image, in which Lee and Rawlins trade places as jilted music-box twirlers, not quite connecting with the other as partner, is among the most artful and satisfying of the evening.

The dancers give their all, and they clearly enjoy themselves. They smile a lot, infectiously. The evening is family friendly. My son raves over the zebra and "the tigers" (as he calls the XPress Yourself Dancers), and swoons when he realizes Thomas is singing "Circle of Life" from *The Lion King* (lovely save for a minor mic glitch that left us straining to hear his voice for the intro). Though the show begins at his bedtime, he rallies with the help of circus-themed intermission snacks, including popcorn, Cracker Jacks, cotton candy, and Animal Crackers. Formatted with modern-day attention spans in mind, each of the two acts is just twenty minutes long. In the post-performance talkback, Lee notes his upbringing in entertainment and the need for a reprieve from our current political and social climate, when asked about the theme and format of the show.

An alum of CAPA, Lee and his company are evidence that the city's (all too) small investment in the arts does bear fruit. If they do not share footing with Lee's mentors at Philadanco, the company have carved out an existence and an audience all the same. I sat among their peers, family, friends, and students, and I felt the crowd beam with pride. A more robust funding landscape would help to ensure the continuity and arguably enhance the professionalism of such projects, as well as amplify the community-building potential of arts programming to more and varied constituencies.

Circus, Roger Lee Dance, Performance Garage, March 15-16.

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