

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Performance Garage Responds to its Critics

by The Board of the Performance Garage

thINKingDANCE has received the following letter to the editor from the Board of the Performance Garage, whose members are Victor Keen, President, Jeanne Ruddy, Anna Adams-Sarthou, Tania Attanasio, Millie Lane Berg, Kenyatta Donnelly, Sharon Guess, Susan Fazio, Toni Kelinek, Tanya Shields, Honorable Leo W. Tucker, and Dr. Robert Wallner, responding to the article [“Staff Tackle Culture and Policy at the Performance Garage”](#) that tD published on Oct. 7th.

Dear Dance Community,

Last week, thINKingDANCE posted a story called “Staff Tackle Culture and Policy at the Performance Garage.” It paints a false and negative picture of the Performance Garage’s handling of a letter of ten demands sent by employees. To set the record straight, we, the Performance Garage Board, are providing below in this letter information that we provided to the writer, but which she chose to omit from her story. Also, at the end of this letter, we include, verbatim, the letter the Board sent to the employees who made demands.

To begin with, the Board responded completely, promptly, and fairly to the employees’ demands. The employees sent their demand letter on August 10, directing the Board to respond within two weeks. The demands are not small and required significant time – much more than two weeks – to evaluate. Within the two weeks, however, we did respond in writing that our inquiry was underway and we would provide a full response when ready. The employees then proceeded to reach out several more times, imposing new deadlines, and went so far as to call individual members of the Board. The Board responded again in writing with a reminder that we were already conducting an inquiry into their demands and offered to keep an open line of communication with them, asking that they write to a designated representative of the Board with any additional comments and feedback. Again, instead of waiting for us to conclude our promised inquiry and provide a proper response, the employees went public with the matter, falsely claiming that we had been unwilling to engage with them, by bringing it to thINKingDANCE, creating a Change.org petition, and posting to social media. Overlooking these actions which appeared designed to undermine a meaningful dialogue, we sent them a comprehensive written response (the letter below) once our inquiry was complete. We did this all in a matter of weeks from when the employees first sent their letter. Thus, to criticize the Board for not engaging with the employees is to ignore the truth.

Further, the writer unfairly implies that the Board is uninterested in addressing challenges regarding racial diversity. The fact that the Board, which is quite racially diverse, did not agree with the solutions offered by the employees does not mean that the Board is not fully engaged in finding solutions. It only means that the Board is looking for better strategies than what the employees suggest.

Finally, regarding the thINKingDANCE writer's discussion of the allegations against the Board's president and Playpenn, we feel it was highly inappropriate that she decided to repeat what has only been a series of unsubstantiated allegations made, as far as we know, on social media. It does not appear she investigated the matter at all before writing about it, instead only copying and pasting select comments from social media, begging the question of journalistic integrity. Based on our own inquiry of the matter, we do not believe Victor has been treated fairly, nor do we believe that unsubstantiated allegations should lead to an assumption of guilt. We support him, and disagree both with the writer's attempted conflation of the Playpenn matter and the Performance Garage and with the employees' claim to "stand in solidarity" on a matter in which they have absolutely no involvement, nor any basic understanding of the facts. By their own account, these employees do not claim to be victims of any level of inappropriate behavior by anyone at the Performance Garage. In its 20-year history, there has never been an incident or allegations of sexual misconduct, racial injustice or mistreatment of staff here.

In summary, the article was full of false and unfair statements and implications. We hope thINKingDANCE's discerning readers will reject it.

Sincerely,

The Board of the Performance Garage

Performance Garage Board Letter Responding to Employee Demand Letter

September 29, 2020

Dear All,

We again note receipt of your letter dated August 10, 2020.

We recognize your acknowledgement of all that Victor and Jeanne have done to create both the Jeanne Ruddy Dance Company and the Performance Garage. It has been a 20-year investment of over \$2 million of their personal finances, and it has taken two decades of Jeanne's life. Needless to say, the Performance Garage, a space beloved by the dance community, would not exist if not for Jeanne and Victor – it was their vision and it has been developed by them based on that vision.

Before responding to the enumerated list of your August 10th letter, we must express our deep disappointment in how this entire process has been handled by the initiators of the letter, particularly the fact that the initiators went public with your concerns and promoted completely false claims related to our communications on the matter.

You have stated in several public forums – on social media, to a member of the media and on a Change.org petition you created – that this Board has been unresponsive to you about these matters. That is completely false. We responded within the arbitrary two-week deadline you imposed in your original letter and stated that we would look into each item presented. That response was sent on August 21st.

Because you reached out to the Board in this manner, it became incumbent on the Board to undertake an inquiry into each item, a process that takes time – one that took longer than two weeks. You then reached out several other times, imposing new arbitrary deadlines and went so far as to call individual members of the Board. This took place on August 28th and September 1st, respectively. That is not appropriate behavior, particularly when you have already been told that an inquiry into the matters about which you are concerned is already in place. However, we followed up again in writing on September 3rd to again let you know that we were looking into each of your demands and offered you an opportunity to provide additional feedback and designated the person you should contact. Then, instead of waiting for us to conclude our inquiry and comprehensively respond to your demands, you went public with the entire matter, sharing the personal email addresses of board members with a member of the media, creating a petition, and posting to

social media that we are not willing to engage with you – again, completely untrue as you have received several communications from us since August 10, and we have been very clear that we were looking into the items raised in your letter.

To make matters worse, during the course of this inquiry, we understand that you or your colleagues may have reached out to other theater and dance organizations attempting to coerce them to sign your Change.org petition and then threatened to publicly criticize them if they didn't acquiesce. That is completely counter to your purported goal to lift and support the local dance community and improve the Performance Garage.

All of this has been extremely disruptive to the process. Your actions do not suggest legitimate support for the well-being of the Performance Garage. The Board has reluctantly concluded that we cannot trust that you are acting in good faith regarding the stability and success of the Performance Garage. This is deeply disappointing.

Having said that, the numbered paragraphs below correspond with the items in your letter and are our respective responses.

1. The Performance Garage has fully considered the available facts regarding the allegations against Victor, and the Board finds no reason to remove him. It is clear to us that the writers of your letter have made no independent inquiry, including speaking to Victor, prior to making a judgment and publicizing it widely on social media. The allegations against Victor concern events that allegedly occurred four or five years ago, and at no point, until July 9, 2020, was Victor made aware of anyone's discomfort with any of his interactions. The only communication Victor ever received from Playpenn was positive feedback and gratitude, including invitations to private events up to July 2020. The allegations came to Victor's attention when they were raised on social media in July during a much broader discussion of alleged racial inequality and inclusion problems at Playpenn. Without ever speaking to Victor about any of this, Playpenn returned his contributions and publicly denounced him before hiring an outside law firm to investigate. Victor volunteered to be interviewed by the law firm and fully answered each question. During the interview, the lawyers did not bring to Victor's attention a specific example of accusations and did not identify any conduct that would merit censure or removal from a Board.

Victor has publicly apologized to the extent he ever made anyone at Playpenn feel uncomfortable. That was never his intention.

Over the course of his professional career, as well as his significant involvement in and support of the cultural life of Philadelphia, no one has brought up any issues regarding Victor's conduct.

The Board continues to have confidence in Victor and looks forward to his continued leadership.

2. As the initiators of this letter to the Performance Garage know, the Board has been engaged in conversations about Performance Garage leadership succession over the last couple years. At this point, the Board believes that Jeanne's leadership and vision continue to be essential to the successful execution of our mission. Jeanne is the founder of the organization. The programs offered by the Performance Garage have been envisioned, created and implemented by Jeanne, supported by her staff, in close collaboration with the Board. These programs have evolved from a dream, to convert an 1865 abandoned auto body garage, to what it is today, a beautiful dance center. She did that by working twelve-hour days, seven days a week, for 20 years, utilizing her talent, energy and generous spirit. We believe in Jeanne's experience, expertise, professionalism and high standards and need to be certain that those strengths and vision will continue in order for the Performance Garage's continued growth and success. It is her organization from which to step down. At the appropriate time, we expect the Board will embark on a national search, comprised of board members and peers of Jeanne's field and caliber, to find the next Executive Director of the Performance Garage.

3. Regarding the suggestion of adding a dancer to the board, we note that Jeanne is a former Principal Dancer of the Martha Graham Company (as well as many other credits), and there are four board members who've had serious dance training and are former dancers themselves. It is unfortunate the writers of your letter did not take the time to look into those facts before making this demand. The Board takes seriously the responsibility of board development and must make sure that it is comprised of professionals that can best support and provide governance to the Performance Garage. We are open to an additional dancer to our board, bearing in mind that

there is a philanthropic commitment made by every board member to the Performance Garage.

4-9. The Board views these as matters regarding the internal, day-to-day management of the Performance Garage and not items on which the Board would ordinarily be engaged unless there is a significant financial component requiring approval. We understand that most of these matters have been raised with Jeanne and have already been addressed. As Executive Director it is her position to decide whether or not to implement employee suggestions, and we support her decisions. All of this is made clear in the Performance Garage Employee Manual, with which we expect each staff person to be familiar as they perform their duties for the Performance Garage.

Additionally, we would like to remind you that when it comes to issues such as messaging, verbiage, photos, etc. used in any public (or internal)-facing materials, we expect that any staff member who has such suggestions to make them known to the Executive Director, per the above. It is well within the role of Performance Garage staff, particularly communications staff, to handle this type of work, and they are expected to make such recommendations to their supervisor.

10. We appreciate your desire for us to have sexual-harassment and racial bias training. Since its inception, the Performance Garage has been a safe, inclusive space, open to all with a love for dance. We are deeply invested in governing the Performance Garage with full awareness and sensitivity to both issues. We do not agree that the Performance Garage has been complicit in creating a negative culture; however, we will look further into this matter and will implement training and other changes where they are needed.

We would like to close this response by again stating the unfortunate tone, tenor and approach in how you've communicated your complaints to the leadership of this organization. Despite what is clearly laid out in the employee handbook and our series of communications with you since your August 10 letter, these demands demonstrate a lack of understanding of the current makeup of the Performance Garage, its operations, history, and, notably, its policies.

As you are surely aware, this is a crippling time for the performing arts. The Performance Garage is struggling to survive, and your actions will have serious negative consequences. This inquiry has halted positive energy for the organization and instead inflicted harm on the stability of the Performance Garage.

Your handling of this matter, from August 10 to now, does not demonstrate any good faith interest in or real care about the Performance Garage. Nevertheless, we proceeded with an inquiry into your concerns and we will continue to work on the Performance Garage, per the responses above. Although we see no need for further communication on this matter, any further communications from you must be handled in accordance with the directives in Anna Adams-Sarthou's email to you of September 3, 2020.

Sincerely,

The Board of the Performance Garage

A Brief Response From the Editors

Concerning the allegations against Victor Keen: thINKingDANCE printed Keen's public response and apology (published originally by WHY? in full, whereby he did not deny the veracity of the claims, and included Ruddy's response to the allegations. While this Letter to the Editors asserts the article was "full of false" statements, it does not cite nor rebut any beyond those concerning Keen. tD has historically provided analysis and interpretation of dance-related events and is not an exclusive conveyor of news; this article fulfills these aims

By Guest Writer
October 23, 2020