

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo Courtesy of Chip Clofine

Louise Gillette, In Memoriam

by Kristen Shahverdian

"She taught me how to fly and climb and bounce and soar."

-Joe Cicala, dancer in Trapezius Aerial Dance Company

Louise Gillette—Philadelphia dancer and choreographer, founder of Trapezius Aerial Dance Company, wife, sister, daughter, friend, and most determined person I have ever met—died on December 18, 2021, of brain tumor complications. She was 54 years old.

After one of her performances, critic Deni Kasrel wrote in the [City Paper](#), "Gillette's ability to explore and push the limits of human physicality while crafting new movements in the process—both surprising and compelling—is invigorating."

Her friend, Jonathan Stein shared with me:

I've never seen the human spirit so transcend adversity and fate as I have in the last two and a half decades of being a close friend of Louise. Just as we stood in enjoyment and appreciation of Louise's defiance of gravity in her aerial dance artistry, we also were, and remain, in constant admiration of her defiant commitment to life.

To say that Louise Gillette had a profound influence on my life is not an exaggeration. I met her at Temple University in the early 2000s. I was a young MFA student with chronic ankle pain. I had heard about a little studio, room 225, tucked in the back of Pearson Hall. The campus space was filled with Pilates equipment, but only accessible once a week on Fridays, when Louise would teach Pilates Mat and private sessions for dancers.

She taught a demanding mat class, while also demonstrating her deep understanding of the body's mechanisms. I knew I would need surgery to address my ankle pain. The first exercises Louise taught me used a TheraBand to strengthen them, and within a few weeks, the pain was gone. I never needed surgery.

Regardless of the dramatic shift, she had already hooked me with her knowledge and passion for Pilates. For Louise, Pilates was more than a series of exercises; it was a pathway to healthy, functional movement. She was a tireless advocate for her own health and a teacher with laser focus attention; she was generous, demanding, curious, full of ideas, and ready to pivot at any time.

An artist learns to fly

Before it was her profession, Louise was a dancer, musician, singer, choreographer, and composer. She was born in Chicago on July 1, 1967 to parents Nedra and Peter Gillette and grew up with her sisters, Ann and Becky, in Larchmont, New York. By middle school, she played the piano, cello, flute, and guitar, and was an assistant dance teacher at the Steffi Nossen School of Dance. She earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology and dance ethnology from Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Gillette started her graduate studies in the dance program at the University of Colorado in Boulder. There Louise went to a performance by The Frequent Flyers and was so captivated by the aerial work that she began her aerial training independently of graduate school.

After realizing that the University of Colorado was not the right fit, Louise moved to Philadelphia to complete her MFA in dance at Temple University, where she met Janet Pilla Marini, who reminisced:

I think I'm one of the first people she trained on trapeze. I knew she meant business when she said we would train at 7 a.m. in Conwell Dance Theater! I quickly learned that dedication, commitment, and passion for what she did, whatever it was, was her hallmark.

Gillette formed Trapezium Aerial Dance Company in 1995. The group performed often at Conwell Dance Theater, as well as other venues throughout Philadelphia and beyond. In 1999, she became a resident choreographer at The Yard, an acclaimed dance residency on Martha's Vineyard.

Dancer Christine Taylor wrote:

I remember when the company was in residence at The Yard. She named the piece that we created there "Saying Goodbye." I think looking back perhaps she was processing her own thoughts about her impending death. It was a VERY emotional rehearsal period; she was exhausted and sleeping in-between rehearsals, but still, the schedule was pretty brutal.

Louise's intensity was remembered by many, and so was her friendship. Another dancer, Joe Cicala said:

I won't lie, a lot of it was painful and exhausting but those times when I was flying through the air, spinning on a harness, and bouncing on a bungee cord were so filled with love and laughter and friendship. We took many walks with Bunny [her dog] and had many lunches and conversations. She never gave up, she fought to the very end. I just know she's in heaven flying on that trapeze.

Waffle houses and crash helmets

In 2001, Gillette was awarded the first Rocky Award for lifetime achievement by the Philadelphia dance community. Over the next two decades, she continued to dance, teach, learn, perform, and live with her brain tumor. She later choreographed shows in Sydney, Australia and sold out performances at the 2002 Philadelphia Fringe Festival at Penn's Landing. She became a yoga instructor and a licensed massage therapist.

In 2015 she married Chip Clofine. One of my favorite pictures captures Chip and Louise with their guitars, Louise in a tie dyed t-shirt, smiling broadly as they play together on the street on a sunny day.

Louise had a strong humorous streak. Her apartment at 2nd and Market Street doubled as a studio and performance space. Christine Taylor remembered Philadelphia Fringe Festival showings in her loft, where she put helmets and goggles by some chairs in what she called “the crash zone.” Stephen Welsh told me of his harness malfunctioning at a performance in Camden, New Jersey. (Luckily no one was harmed.) Louise, after commenting that his guardian angel was clearly watching over him, took the idea to morph his solo into a comic version of the original piece.

Louise’s humor extended to her writing. Louise, Bunny, and my now wife and I drove cross country together. Years later, Louise forwarded me an entry in her journal from that trip:

Well, we did it! Kristen & Lisa and I left Philly at 6 a.m. Monday morning and arrived in Phoenix at 9 a.m. Thursday...we discovered which states had the most billboards about sex. We saw the “world’s largest rocking chair” and “the world’s largest cross.” We counted 21 Waffle Houses in 3 days figuring that it would mean eating waffles every 2 hours from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. 3 days in a row. We sang hours of old rock tunes and watched the lightning flash across the desert. It was a blast.

“The choreography I create is based on human experience, anything that drifts into your daily life,” Gillette said in a 2002 article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. “Some of the scenes are poignant, others funny. And some will want to make you fly.”

An irrepressible spirit

In 1999, a year after her brain tumor was discovered, a group of Philly artists held a benefit concert for her at Painted Bride Art Center. [City Paper](#) listed the line-up for this event as “rich in talent and history.” It included artists such as Headlong Dance Theater, Kent De Spain, Leslie Dworkin, Roko Kawai, Lionel Popkin, Patricia Graham, Leah Stein, Fusion II, and Mathew Neenan.

Additionally, it states, dancers from Trapezium performed “their goofy, gymnastic *Backyard Circus*—a piece whose irrepressible spirit is not only shared by Gillette herself, but, it seems, by her many, many friends.”

One of the dancers, Ilse Pfeifer, composed a poem for that event. In remembrance, I share it with you, for Louise:

Flying Together

healing

with a fresh breath

think salty tears

to cleanse

a new smile at the site of you

way up high on the trapeze

ah...the audience whispers

as they catch you in splendor

balancing, a new frontier

By Kristen Shahverdian

January 30, 2022