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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Ian Foster

Philadelphia's Thriving Showcase Series Scene

by Amelia Longo

Whether in theaters, yoga studios, or rehearsal spaces, I love being enraptured in the unfolding of new work. For the Philadelphia dance community, producing this work is a challenge in the absence of a dedicated dance theater. To help offset this effort, artists are making use of shared presenting opportunities. Showcase series provide a platform for bold new performances that might otherwise go unseen, as well as interesting ways to engage audiences. From Broad Street to Kensington, South Philly to West, mixed bills of work in various stages of development have been popping up across Philadelphia in recent years. The occasional free beer or spaghetti dinner may have gotten people like me in the door, but there are several reasons both artists and audiences keep coming back.

While Susan Hess's Choreographers Project and Group Motion's [Spiel Uhr](#) both began in the 1980s, most current showcase series have only gotten their start in the past five years. In 2007, Charles Tyson, Jr., was looking for ways to bring new faces into the University City Arts League. He also missed the incubator role that the Bald Mermaids' GLUE Performance Series had played in the 1990s and early 2000s. So he started the ETC. Performance Series (as in "dance, theater, music, etc."). When audiences grew too large and Tyson left UCAL, he partnered with Terri Shockley to move it to the Community Education Center on Lancaster Avenue.

Similarly, in 2008, Nicole Bindler was looking for a way for artists to show developing work, and Studio 34 on Baltimore Avenue was looking for a way to connect with the arts in their new yoga space. The StudioSeries at Studio 34 was the result, and Bindler ended up curating a series of experimental work with artists from as far away as Baltimore, DC, and Boston.

Craig Peterson, Director of the Live Arts' LAB & Philly Fringe, is quick to emphasize the need audiences have for showcase series. An educated audience becomes an invested audience. Through the Live Arts Brewery's [Scratch Night](#), Peterson hopes to engage and sustain audiences by educating them about artists' processes. "They don't have to like all the experimental work they see, but . . . once they understand a variety of techniques for watching work, they will come to learn that not all contemporary work is of the 'I don't get it' variety." Audiences are often personally connected to one of the performers or a part of the artist community in some way, but as Tyson

notes, if the performances in a particular evening are varied enough, there's a "cross-pollination" that wouldn't otherwise happen.

And keeping the program diverse is a fairly common goal for showcase series. Tyson works to make sure ETC line-ups are "eclectic," and Kelly Turner and Brie Hines of Hybridge Arts emphasize the juxtaposition of multidisciplinary work as a key goal of their [Last Mondays](#). Some series do note a certain focus, such as dance (PARD's [Mixed Grille](#)) or experimental work (StudioSeries at Studio 34, fidget's Grab Bag) or even highlighting the work of company members (Spiel Uhr), but still emphasize variety within their framework.

Aside from simply opening up works in progress to audiences, showcase series also tend to offer access to artists in different ways than traditional performances. Whether hosted in formal performance spaces or more casual settings, most series work to promote an atmosphere both relaxed and conversational. Some create dedicated space for discussion or questions, some simply encourage post-show mingling among artists and audiences. Scratch Night and Grab Bag both offer drinks to promote a social environment, and audiences at Last Mondays share pasta around dinner tables, practically necessitating conversation. The StudioSeries made guests get up and move during a show by presenting performances in multiple rooms within Studio 34.

Showcase series in Philadelphia are thriving. And the more they thrive, the more opportunities there are for emerging artists to develop new work, to forge relationships with other artists, and to connect with audiences. In turn, audiences become interested in the process, the people, and the end product. And that's the kind of investment that is creating space for new work in Philadelphia.

Current Showcase Series in Philadelphia include the following:

[ETC Performance Series](#)

[fidget Grab Bag](#)

[Group Motion's Spiel Uhr](#)

[Hybridge Arts Collective Last Mondays](#)

[InHale Performance Series at Chi Movement Arts Center](#)

[Koresh Artist Showcase](#)

[Live Arts Scratch Night](#)

[Mascher Fresh Juice](#)

[Miller Rothlein Open Studio](#)

[PARD Mixed Grille](#)

[Studio 34 Second Saturday Series](#)

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