

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kiana Williams

A River Runs Down 52nd

by Ella-Gabriel Mason

On a sunny, mild Earth Day, I enter Freedom Greens and Garden at 52nd and Pine St in West Philadelphia to find a flock of performers swathed in bright colors. This exuberant assembly, draped in elaborate outfits – layers of tulle and netting, bouquets of cloth flowers sprouting from hands and hair, skeletal wings made from tubing or wire, a tutu of plastic water bottles – weaves a rainbow of brightly painted sticks and ribbon through the mesh of garden supports and chain link fences. Tchin, a member of the Narragansett Nation, welcomes us to *Lenape Sippu: Call Her By Her Name*. He begins the performance with an invocation, honoring the people who have tended this land, the non-human animals, the earth itself. His hands dance in front of him, fingers rooting down as he brings our attention to the trees. He ends by playing a melody on a wooden flute. The soft trilling mixes with the [doppler effect](#) of cars passing down 52nd.

Then the performance moves. The audience is encouraged to grab our own painted sticks to “feel connected,” though I’m not sure to what exactly. Some use their sticks to keep the beat. *Maybe keeping time is the connection?* Two drummers begin a gentle rhythm and we are off. The rainbow of performers takes the lead, walking with a slight bounce in the knees, soft pulses in the ribcage.

The route to the [Painted Bride](#) is mostly a straight shot up 52nd. An earlier iteration of this project took place at Cherry St. Pier and was inspired in particular by the Delaware river, known by the Lenape as Lenape Sippu. As I watch the dancers find a moment of suspension, draping and swirling around a bus shelter, I am dizzied by the polarities between the ensemble that moves like a river – eddying, seeking/making grooves in the land – and the sidewalk itself – aggressively straight lines broken only by what is already broken: torn up cement and shattered glass.

As the slow procession begins to feel not simply slow, but long, I hear the snap of snare drums. [Positive Movement Drumline](#) heads toward us down the opposite side of 52nd St. Accompanied by a performer wearing a full Elmo mascot costume, the drumline crosses

52nd and both processions merge in the intersection on Spruce Street.

I am reminded of witnessing the meeting of a calm creek and a rushing river. The green of the creek water was distinct at first in the larger body and then became subsumed by the darker tone of the river a few yards on. This dance party across Spruce rhymes with this memory. The slow, reflective tone of our beginning procession melding with the electric enthusiasm of the drum line. Together, we all continue up 52nd.

The combination of drums, dancing, bright colors, and bubbles floating in the wind proves seductive. We pick up more people as we continue. Two young women walk in front of me, bobbing to the beat and fervently banging two painted sticks together in time. I hear one say “I don’t know where we’re going but I’m just gonna keep following.”

We pass young men who have a pull up bar in the middle of 52nd Street; their calisthenics feel like part of the performance. A woman pops out of a hair braiding salon and takes a minute to wind her hips to the music. A little girl shyly takes a mallet offered by one of the African drummers and hits the head of the drum. The dancing and the costumes and the sticks and the bubbles set a tone of permission and play. The drums call everyone, “come check this out!”

The procession ends with a line dance led by Positive Movement in front of the Painted Bride, where the expansive store-front windows have been filled with a collage of quilts, by native artist Emma White Thunder, words in Lenape, and images from Propelled Animals working process.

The audience is invited into the Painted Bride where dance proceeds in more formal parameters: seating on three sides of a dance floor. Two guitarists seated below a projection of shifting images (water lapping rocks, a forest, starlight) pick out intricate melodies. The dancers line up along one side of the dance floor. They move as a wave across the floor, one person extending a little further and then retreating, little licks of water. As the dance develops a few performers take solo moments.

Sena Atsugah and Chloe Marie particularly catch my eye. In close proximity to the audience, Atsugah holds a rapid tremble in her lower body while her arms move in soft snaking spirals. Marie, a tumbleweed of sequins and tulle, unfurls through arabesque attitudes as she twists, falls, and recovers.

The performance ends with everyone invited up to join another line dance. The audience takes up the invitation exuberantly. Sitting on the side with my notebook I bask, watching this moment of community. A dynamic event with many pieces, *Lenape Sippu: Call Her By Her Name*, was notable for sparking active engagement by the audience. The permeability of the boundary between viewer and participant during the procession created a welcoming entry point with individuals and couples joining like small tributaries to the collective river.

[*Lenape Sippu: Call Her By Her Name*](#), Propelled Animals, The Painted Bride, April 20

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