

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Courtesy of Movement Theatre International

B.F.F. (Before the Fringe Festival: A Moving History)

by Walter Bilderback

Before the Philadelphia Fringe, there was Movement Theatre International (MTI). MTI was created by Michael Pedretti, and his book, *The Inside Story of Movement Theatre International's Mime and Clown Festivals* (2023), attempts to be an institutional history and personal memoir. MTI grew out of Michael Pedretti's love for mime and clown at a time when these forms were gaining renewed vigor in the 1970s. He brought it to Philadelphia in 1984 after several years producing at rural Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia.

There's value for artists and arts administrators in this history, and Pedretti ambitiously writes both a personal memoir and an academic overview of MTI simultaneously. Lacking a strong editorial hand, however, the result sprawls more than 700 pages, including dozens of photos, eight appendices, footnotes, and bibliography. The format was both engaging and frustrating.

MTI's Festivals differed from today's Fringe in many ways. Each Festival had an overarching theme and all presentations were curated by Pedretti. They were much more compact, from a high of twelve days in 1986 to a low of five days near the end, and most artists performed only once or twice. Vigorous workshops and scholarly components were part of the offerings. For Pedretti, building bridges between artists and art forms and inspiring early career artists was as important as overall audience attendance; the number of early career artists attending a Festival is mentioned as a key metric of success. Unlike today's Fringe, which spans [many neighborhoods](#), most of MTI's presentations were in West Philadelphia, creating a more intense festival feel.

During its time in Philadelphia, MTI produced six summer Festivals and five International Showcase Series in the winter, presenting a broad range of movement theatre (a catchall term encompassing mime, clown, dance, and puppetry). Some artists of note included Blue Man Group before they became a cottage industry, and [Jacques LeCoq](#), a theorist of clown work with immense international influence. Local artists were presented, including [Terry Beck](#) and [Rennie Harris](#) (who credits MTI with jumpstarting his career). An event of major significance for movement theater was a five-day tribute to [Etienne Decroux](#), LeCoq's counterpart in corporeal mime.

One longtime local creator who attended MTI performances as a young man compared it to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival for its variety and depth: "MTI shows tended to be a revelatory experience for my crowd. It was authentically new work (to us.)" He credits the experience with helping to inspire "a new city of creator performers [to find] the impulse to do the work that began to be . . . a Philadelphia Performing Scene," which flowered later in the decade with the creation of the Fringe.

While this flourishing is still evident in Philadelphia, including companies and artists such as [Pig Iron Theatre](#), Lightning Rod Special, and Lee Minora, as well as multiple [circus](#) offerings in this year's Fringe, it is less clear whether many younger performers were directly influenced by MTI, or aware that it helped develop an audience for their artform in Philly.

The work MIT presented had a significant impact here, but the real drama, in Pedretti's telling, took place offstage. Fundraising was a constant struggle. In order to create a permanent home for MTI's work and a rental space for dance performances between festivals, MTI signed a contract to convert the sanctuary space of the Tabernacle United Church on West Chestnut to a performing space. After signing a contract with Tabernacle Church and beginning the conversion, Pedretti discovered he needed to renegotiate with the Philadelphia Presbytery. This renegotiation took five months, delaying completion and eating up time Pedretti would normally have been for scouting artists. This set up a cascading series of crises that resulted in a death spiral for the organization.

The next Festival, by Pedretti's account, was poorly organized and attended. Then came a shift in local funding priorities to Center City with the creation of the "Avenue of the Arts," including the now-demised [Arts Bank](#) as a competing dance space. Later came a bitter, public conflict with the Pew and William Penn Foundations, which led to withdrawal of grant money awarded and the decision to end MTI. The scars of this fight for Pedretti are evident in these chapters. I find myself wondering if this thirty year old fight with the city's leading funders may also be a reason many people I reached out to for comment asked not to be quoted on the record.

There are many engaging sections of the book, especially the funding struggles, whether one accepts Pedretti's side or not, and his loving descriptions of performances (strong points for me are the chapter on 1991's International Clown-Theatre Conference and his account of the 1992 Tribute to Etienne Decroux). As someone deeply influenced by many of these artists in my youth and tangentially involved with some as a student, spectator, or professionally and socially, I was reminded of the impact it had on me. The challenge for me is that it's easy for me to imagine either a more engaging personal memoir or deeper history, but without a stronger editorial hand, the line between "Michael Pedretti" and "MTI" blurs. Pedretti acknowledges he started writing this book after MTI's demise in 1994, nearly thirty years before it was finally published, and many pages feel like day-to-day journal entries that were not revised (or cut) before publication.

If you're interested in movement theatre, Philadelphia theater history, or an inside look at producing performance in the non-profit world, there is valuable material here. Just be prepared for occasional struggles in digging it out.

[The Inside Story of Movement Theatre International's Mime and Clown Festivals](#). by Michael Pedretti, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023.

Home Page Image Description: *A black and white still of a scene from Daniel Stein's Inclined to Agree, 1986. A muscular Stein lunges his bent left leg upstage, bending his torso to his left, wearing dress slacks, movement shoes and shirtless. He is stepping on two bunches of taught chords that run diagonally from his right ankle up to the rafters where more chords of varying lengths hang with weights attached. An empty door frame hangs from chords just upstage of Stein, it tilts towards him on a steep incline.*

Article Page Image Description: *A still from Magic Dances of Zaire, 1990. Three dancers in traditional dress of feathers, rattan, and intricate jewelry form a swaying diagonal, their weight on their left leg, their focus upward, smiling, and warm. The male dancer in the middle of the line wears an ankle bracelet used for percussion and a hand-held feather baton; the women dancers in front and behind him have white spots on their lower legs arranged in rows. They are accompanied upstage by percussion and a string reed instrument played by musicians who gaze out to the audience.*

By Walter Bilderback

August 31, 2025