

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: LBrowningphotography/Lindsay Browning

Small Award, Big Heart

By Anna Drozdowski

I'm starting this piece about the Rocky Awards, thinking densely about the word "community" after re-reading the continued correspondence about the New York Dance and Performance Awards, more affectionately "[The Bessies](#)." And really you should read it too, as a primer about the ways in which the art world operates in different parts of the globe, and as an interesting dialogue about nomenclature and how (in a field that is often silent) words can still hurt.

Start with last month's [New York Times piece](#) by Gia Kourlas. Imagine your friends, who live in Brooklyn and who spend too much on rent so that they can get to their free Monday showing at Judson, trying to figure out if what they're doing is "not technically dance" or on the "performance end of the spectrum." Ugh. Now pop on over to the Performance Club to read [Claudia La Rocco's take](#) on the debacle and the subsequent conversation that has come from it. It reads, similar to any written debate, like a gentle cat fight—something that TD is no stranger to—as we're also concerned with bringing people together (in virtual and physical space) to talk about issues in the field.

Up to speed? Great. Why have I been insisting on a current events lesson? Essentially because that whole thing--the hurt feelings, the sub committees, the way in which it is news to some and nonsense to others--reminds me of two things: 1. That it matters. A lot. That any kind of recognition, in a field that is chronically underpaid and socially undervalued, really means something. There are stakes when you care about something, especially so when someone else is deciding. 2. Despite the silos that emerge in the field and the various circles we swing in, Philly is different. There is a general sense of collegiality that has something to do (I think) with bootstraps and Balboa.

The Rocky Awards were born a decade ago, shortly after Headlong got their Bessie for [St*r W*rs and Other Stories](#) and were feeling a

little squeamish about the formality of it all--the panel of experts, the nominators, the people they beat out etc. And so, in the days where anything was possible at the Fringe Festival, they hunkered down with Nick Stuccio in a house in South Philly and came up with an alternative local award structure. "We also wanted the ceremony to be free (unlike the Barrymores, which is prohibitively expensive) and a community celebration, not a top-down fancy thing. Lots of short performances and hosted by someone fun," said Amy Smith.

Andrew Simonet, writing for the Dance Insider at the turn of the century, introduced them this way: "Named for our patron saint, the Rockies will be whisper-down-the-lane. Instead of a competition ("Best Choreography," "Best Dancer"), the awards will be given out by ten individuals to anyone and anything from the last year they want to honor: a dance, a dancer, a company, a lighting designer, a music composer. Then this year's ten winners will give out the awards next year. So the question is not 'Who's the Best?' The question is 'What do you personally think is excellent?' Awards without losers. A big community bash with cocktails. I can't wait."

Lest you think I'm trying to paint an idyllic Philly picture in contrast to that Big Bad Apple, it isn't exactly all kumbayah in awards land. The Rockys are peer-to-peer and low budget and certainly an in-crowd affair bolstered by their placement as part of the Live Arts Festival. They suffer a bit when nominators demonstrate they haven't seen a lot of performance in the past year to really find a gem and, instead, pass along their Rocky to a friend or someone they feel indebted to. The event often is held in a theatre inadequate to contain the masses or awe with technical wizardry. But they're fun, and free, and a rare moment to cross paths with all parts of the community at the start of the season.

You'll show up and might be surprised by a lap dance from Wawa or by Nichole snapping her trophy in half ("Oh, I guess I get two!" she quipped without missing a beat in her acceptance speech in 2010.) Jeb will wander into Baum's to find a dance belt for his hostess costume, and Juma might fall off the stage again. There is a delightfully underrehearsed, improvisatory air of anything-might-happen, both in terms of awardees and presentations. It's a family affair, we're on a first name basis.

The 2012 hosts are Christina Zani and her ladyfriend, Ms. [Martha Graham Cracker](#) (Dito van Reigersberg), a duo sure to improve on the already auspicious MC history. Christina and Ms. Cracker have alluded to highlights including choreography spanning the pop ages, fierce flamenco, homo-aerobics, flashmobs, fancy costumes and the mysterious "ginger crossing" which I think we'll need to see to understand. I'm complicit, too, having wrangled a bunch of technicians and musicians without much stage-experience but willing to dance to the deserving applause they otherwise miss out on. Would the performance gnomes in New York sign up to perform for their drunken peers at my behest? (Call me, Joe Levasseur, I've got a duet just waiting for you and Philip Sandstrom.)

Both the Bessies and the Rockys now have producing partners in their respective [Dance/USA](#) branches. Does this relationship have something to do with the pervasive desire to put a box around "dance" to the exclusion of "performance" that NY wonders about? Maybe. Maybe that's a bit conspiratorial. In this gritty city, where cross-pollination is part and parcel of the home-grown time-based art offerings, we're sometimes surprised to see something that is "just dance" or "really pure." I wish I had a better sense of exactly who is in favor of further etching that bright line; certainly, categories help us orient ourselves but they just as often create limitations.

But defending Dance (capital D) is clearly a topic for another day: the Rockys are designed to simply celebrate exemplary performance. Zani reports that this year's Awards will attempt to answer three burning questions: Who is Rocky, really? If I get rolfed, will my tongue work immediately after? What happens when Martha Graham and Yvonne Rainer walk into a bar/barre?

So, Brooklynites, take that Bolt Bus to the [sixth borough](#). We'll show you a good time, sans committee and mostly free from consternation, along with plenty of heartfelt speeches from people who call Philadelphia home on purpose. And who knows, Martha might let you run up the steps at the Art Museum just like Balboa, our underdog icon.

[Rocky Awards](#), presented by [Dance/UP](#). Monday September 10th @ 7pm. Underground Arts (12th

& Callowhill).

***9.13.12 Correction: While the destruction can be credited to Canuso, the 2011 broken Rocky (and quote in question) belongs to Gabrielle Revlock.*

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September 10, 2012