

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jean Grosser

An Offering? I Want More!

By Julie B. Johnson

On Friday, October 26, I sat behind [Philip Grosser](#) at the opening of his “final performance,” *An Offering*, at the Conwell Dance Theater at Temple University. Phil is retiring this year from his faculty position in the Dance Department at Temple’s [Boyer College of Music and Dance](#). I had heard a lot of buzz about this concert. Sensing the admiration and respect for Phil in this community, I thought this might be an important event to witness. As a newcomer to Philadelphia, I was not that familiar with him, but I was quickly able to recognize his distinctly deep voice in the hallways at Temple, where I am now a first-year Ph.D. student, and I often wondered what fierce forces were at work behind Phil’s seemingly calm demeanor and kind smile. I read only recently about his accomplished career, the severe hemorrhagic stroke he suffered in 2008, and his triumphant recovery. Because of all this, I was really curious. How does a performance encapsulate or celebrate the end of such a chapter?

Phil has been a prominent figure at Temple for twenty-seven years, teaching on the dance faculty, advising undergraduate and graduate students (and whoever else knocked on his office door), and creating new works for Conwell’s stage and beyond. Prior to arriving at Temple, he performed and choreographed his way through New York, North Carolina, Europe, and many places in between. I spoke with a few of Phil’s colleagues, friends and students, all of them eager to share their “Phil Experience”. They spoke of Phil’s generosity with his time and attention, his sometimes cutting yet always endearing candor, his musical marksmanship, and his masterful choreography. Their stories helped me understand the fierceness behind his smile.

Megan Mizanty, Temple MFA student and dancer in *An Offering*, beamed during a recent interview as she shared her take on the rehearsal process: “It was welcoming, but at the same time it was rigorous. He pushed us in ways that were so beneficial to our performance abilities. He’d say, ‘okay, you have the movement, but now you need to deepen it. You need to give it some context, give it impetus, make more choices.’” Phil encouraged the performers to push beyond the movement, beyond complacency or comfort.

Megan and fellow performer Jae Hoon Lim described Phil as a man who has compassion for the people he works with. They both expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be involved in this latest project, and the desire to continue working with him even after he leaves Temple in the spring.

An Offering included new choreography as well as works created earlier in Phil's career. Seven dancers appeared in solos, duets, and a trio, set to music by artists representing a wide range of genres: Antony and the Johnsons, Béla Bartók, Joan La Barbera, Henry Purcell, Robert Schumann, and Rufus Wainwright. Megan explained, "Each time I performed [in *An Offering*], I felt something new. It's like a good movie; every time you watch it something better comes out of it. Working with Phil changes your outlook on making and performing work. It just gives you a lot of rich tools to work with for the future. I'm so grateful I got that from him." She went on to describe how under Phil's direction, she gained a sense of agency as a performer - embracing independence and sharpening her creative decision-making skills. Phil's retirement means that his students will no longer have easy access to his advice and guidance, and this may explain why so many flocked to the theater to witness this final performance. They came to honor the work he has done, what he has given to them, and the connection he and they share. Sitting behind him in the theater on opening night, I got a close-up view of this connection.

As the lights went out in the theater, signaling the start of the concert, Phil's friends reached across to give him an encouraging pat on the shoulder or a handshake. The air around us vibrated with anticipation: this would be something momentous. What appeared on stage lived up to these expectations—not because it was some grandiose production, but because it was just the opposite. Simple lighting choices and minimal costumes created the opportunity to focus on the movement. Megan, Jae Hoon, and their fellow cast members Crystal Albrecht, Jeanine Farr, Nathaniel Hancock, Scott McPheeters, and Tania Ramos-Oton, performed with sincerity, skill, and commitment. The choreography partnered so perfectly with the music. In the trio, *A World*, Megan, Crystal, and Jae Hoon contorted, convulsed, and writhed with physical intensity, evoking a somatic response from my own body. My muscles tensed and I squirmed in my seat in empathy for these beings who appeared to love, hate, and need each other all at once. I felt I was witnessing human nature --dark, flippanant, loving, desolate, and hopeful-- spill out from the dancers' bodies and onto the stage.

As Phil watched the performance, he too moved: he held his face in his hands, he leaned forward and back in his seat, he clapped the hardest and cheered the loudest. I found his "dance" as honest and touching as what happened on stage. After only forty-five minutes, the lights came up. My friends and I looked at each other and all said the same thing—"It's over? I want more!"

At that moment, I understood something. Retirement had absolutely nothing to do with this performance. We hadn't witnessed the end of a chapter, the end of anything. Perhaps the program's title, *An Offering*, suggests that this is just a small quantity of what Phil Grosser has in store. It is unclear what he will be doing after he leaves Temple, but I hope that whatever it is, he shares it with the rest of us, as he has always done. I want more!

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