

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Candice DeTore

Let's Just SHUT UP & DANCE Already!

By Kalila Kingsford Smith

All around my table sit empty chairs of friends gone, my life diminished by their absence. I sat and watched this man move and caress his partner, his empty chair, while Aretha sang of words not spoken soon enough. 'Why did I wait till you were gone to remember you?'
--The reaction of an audience member at the first Shut Up & Dance*

Drag queens, showgirls, non-conventional ballet, comedy, Fokine's *Dying Swan*—I always expect a mixed palate when I attend Shut Up & Dance, the annual benefit for [MANNA](#)** a non-profit serving meals to those suffering from HIV/AIDS and other life threatening diseases. Shut Up & Dance emerged in 1992 from a group of Pennsylvania Ballet dancers wishing to remember their colleagues that had died during the AIDS epidemic. Now twenty-one years old and ready to party, this year's benefit chose Las Vegas Showgirls as its theme.

This was not my first experience of Shut Up & Dance. As a child, I waited at home for my parents to bring me stories from this benefit performance that seemed so different from the ballet that I learned in the dance studio. My favorite was hearing that the audience had been made to stand up and dance a series of movements to the recognizably annoying sounds of a car alarm. I grew up craving the day when I would be old enough to attend the benefit that seemed to break from the tradition of ballet with flares of comedy and fun. Since then, I've attended Shut Up & Dance as often as I could, expecting to tell similar stories after the show.

Knowing that Shut Up & Dance was mostly a product of Pennsylvania Ballet dancers, I was surprised and pleased to see performers from Koresh Dance Company and Ballet X. Koresh presented a fun and friendly duet *Air On a String*; Ballet X brought *Remembering the Festival*, performed by a joyous group of seven that skipped, weaved, and clapped in a circle.

An audience favorite was Matthew Neenan and Christine Cox's *ENNUJ*. The evening's host Michaela Majoun primed the audience by telling us to "send the kids to the lobby because this next one's a little bit dirty!" Neenan and Brooke Moore sat on a bench, feet tapping

in boredom. Writhing to the floor, Moore crawled on her elbows, and with nothing better to do, shot her hips up in the air. The pair of dancers twisted in and out of raunchy sexual gestures oozing with parody. The audience loved it, erupting with laughter at the end as Neenan happily tapped his toes and Moore wiped the side of her mouth, still bored.

Jermel Johnson performed Meredith Rainey's *Fall In*. His movement was strong and powerful; he flew through the air as he leapt; his legs extended up past his ears. But his gaze was what caught my attention. He sharply turned his head from one diagonal to the next with the same precision as a bird. I was reminded of this at the end of the solo, his head resting over his knee, arms crossed at the wrist—was this an allusion to the dying swan?

Many of the other choreographers were corps members of Pennsylvania Ballet. These works were short, sweet, and en pointe, reminding me of Balanchine with hip isolations and off balance leans. The child in me wanted every piece in *Shut Up & Dance* to match my expectation of dancers testing traditional boundaries, so I was left less-than satisfied with the conventional male-female partnering and limited contact to the arms and waist.

Shut Up & Dance has seen twenty-one years gone by, generations passing through its midst. At the start, it was personal—they danced for their lost friends. I could see traces of these inspirations in the work of *Shut Up & Dance* alums Neenan, Cox, and Rainey. Though the HIV infection rate in today's Philadelphia is still high, the younger generation of dancers isn't necessarily affected by the devastating loss that motivated the earlier generations. Perhaps they are instead driven to create simply for the opportunity, the chance to blossom in their career in a new way. My question is this: does having a different motivation for creating work change its relevance to this MANNA benefit? Should a benefit like this produce dance works that point back to those initial feelings of loss or can it evolve into the product of new generations?

Fokine's *Dying Swan*: every year the benefit closes with this metaphor of a solo. This year, live musicians accompanied Gabriella Yudenich as she floated across the stage, her arms fluid and fluttering before she collapsed into a beautiful heap. It was homage to those who have gone before, those dancers who fell from grace into the clutches of disease. I left the space with shivers, as if the ghosts of those remembered walked beside me.

Shut Up & Dance, Dancers of Pennsylvania Ballet, Koresh Dance Company, Ballet X, The Forrest Theatre, March 23 2013.

*Quoted from: Smith, Kenwyn K. (2002) *MANNA In the Wilderness of AIDS*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press.

**Kalila Kingsford Smith's father is one of the founding members of MANNA and author of the book above, which features stories about the first *Shut Up & Dance* benefits.

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