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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Collisions in Time: Reflections on PIFA

By Kalila Kingsford Smith

Dear PIFA,

I fell in love with you in 2011, depleted from the drudgery of school life, needing a weekend of rejuvenation. With two days to spare in Philly, I hustled to see what the festival was all about. A commissioned opera at the Kimmel Center, an exhibition at the Art Museum, a light show that blasted colors on Broad Street's buildings, a musical circus suspended 100 feet in the air—the whole city bloomed with art and creation. Philly seemed new to me. With arts organizations working together to bring one idea to life, it felt like a utopian collaboration, all centered on the vibrant energy of Paris in the 1910s.

In 2011, the first Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts attracted nearly 200,000 attendees to the month-long festival, which culminated in a street fair that shut down The Avenue of The Arts for a day of interactive street performances. This year, PIFA returned to challenge Philadelphia artists to create work in response to the question, "If you had a time machine, where would you go?"

From March 28th-April 27th, venues all over Philadelphia hosted educational exhibitions, music, theater, dance, and visual art installations, encouraging innovation and cross-genre collaboration. Participating dance artists carried the audience through time to events including: The Big Bang (Philadanco), the birth of the first female gynecologist ([Pasión y Arte and Fresh Blood](#)), the African Church movement in the U.S. ([Germaine Ingram and Leah Stein](#)), the invention of Casual Fridays (Stone Depot Dance Lab), Woodstock (SHARP Dance Company), and even into the lives of audience members ([Tongue in Groove with RealLivePeople\(in\)Motion](#)). The Kimmel Center, PIFA's headquarters, also hosted daily free events like an interactive time machine, an original musical, and countless musicians, providing the Philadelphia community with open access to the arts.

Remembering my experience two years ago, I eagerly anticipated the festival, curious to know how this month of art would impact the city. But, in the weeks leading up to the festival, I began to notice that my peers in the Philly dance community did not match my excitement about PIFA. Some even expressed aversion to the festival and its so-called "spotlight" on Philadelphia artists. I began to

question my initial enchantment with PIFA. Why was it so impactful for me when other local artists looked on it with distaste? What were these artists responding to that I didn't quite understand? Desiring to have the same impactful experience that touched me two years ago, I tried to suppress this inkling of criticism.

Festival Artistic Director Jay Wahl described in the [Call For Artists](#) that PIFA's goal was to "shine a bright spotlight on the Philadelphia region's outstanding cultural institutions...[and to] include a wide range of events and participants, attracting diverse audiences of all ages." Walking through the [street fair](#), I could see the fulfillment of this goal, as I observed a wide range of people wandering through the crowd. I was delighted when beaming kids and adults stole the show at Philly Bloco's musical performance as they followed the steps of the band's rhythmic dancers. But as I continued down Broad Street, I became detached, no longer a participant but a judge comparing my experience to the one I had years back.

The time machine inside the Kimmel Center attracted a line out the door and around the corner on the day of the street fair. Rumored to cost around \$100,000, the large metal and canvas structure acted as a bridge to the lobby, funneling visitors "to personally experience time travel" through a tunnel of interactive projections. However, I was unsure of how to interact with the installation, so I ended up walking through without being transported anywhere. At the other end, kiosk computers took visitor information like email and birth date before allowing you to virtually "travel" to a certain date in time. Feeling ambushed by the solicitation, I bypassed this feature and walked away, perturbed by the underwhelming experience.

The festival also commissioned an original musical *A Flash of Time*, performed almost everyday twice a day using the time machine as scenery. Exaggerated physical comedy conveyed a broken time machine, uncontrollably spitting out singing and dancing revolutionary soldiers, Russian peasants, futuristic villains eager to destroy the world, cavemen and woolly mammoths. The dancing was fun—pas de bourrées and pirouettes mixed with some mambo and "the robot." The music was upbeat and catchy. The performance itself was well-executed—complete with puppets and props—but the randomness of the storyline left me confused and unimpressed.

I soon realized that my critical mind had taken over. I was not just a community member, engaging with a month of art. Instead I was a critic, a fellow artist questioning PIFA's goals and intentions. I happened upon City Paper's [Deconstructing PIFA](#). Focusing on the distribution of funds, the article revealed that in 2011 PIFA spent 40% of their 10 million dollar budget on marketing alone. PIFA's goal seemed centered on increasing cultural tourism rather than encouraging artistic innovation. The headliners were spectacles, featured to attract a large fan base to Philadelphia. Jolted both by the total cost of the festival and the amount spent on marketing, I began to wonder how much of the budget was actually spent to benefit local artists. Is PIFA's goal to support local artists, or is it to increase audience attraction to Philadelphia?

Recognizing that my experience only covers a fraction of the story, I got in touch with the artists to hear about theirs. Artists became involved in PIFA in a number of ways: some were approached personally to create work, others were officially commissioned, though many submitted their work through the Call For Artists, distributed by the [Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance](#). Of those accepted, most received the minimal support of marketing, while a few received financial and production support from the Kimmel Center.

Of the eleven total dance performances, five participating artists spoke with me. These five dance artists fell under each of the categories mentioned above, and their words reveal interesting differences in their encounters with the festival.

PIFA produced our show: the festival gave me a budget from which I was able to pay eleven performing artists, a technical director/lighting designer, a stage manager, and a costumer. I was also able to commission a visual artist to create a collage that we used as our principal marketing image and as the projected backdrop for the performance.

-- Germaine Ingram

Being able to say that our show was going to take place at the Kimmel Center definitely made a big difference, and I imagine that we probably received more audience members because of it. However, there were a lot of challenges and hidden costs

associated with producing our show there.

--Gina Hoch-Stall, RealLivePeople(in)Motion

The support we received from PIFA came in the form of marketing and PR assistance, a web page about our performance, and ticket sales through their site. We received no other financial support from them. Our vision could have been much more easily accomplished with a bit of help at least with rental costs.

--Ellie Goudie-Averill, Stone Depot Dance Lab

PIFA's marketing support was certainly substantial, including grand marketing and promotional tactics out of reach for most local dance companies. Stone Depot Dance Lab was featured in Philadelphia Weekly and in the Inquirer, "which doesn't usually happen, and I think that brought in several people who wouldn't usually come to our shows." Diane Sharp-Naschin (SHARP Dance Company) expressed gratitude at PIFA's "ability to promote the company in ways that our budget could never afford." SHARP was featured on a billboard, which helped push attendance at their sold out shows. When I saw these ads, I was excited to see Philadelphia's smaller dance companies in the spotlight, as promised by Wahl. But then again, I had already been exposed to PIFA, so I knew what to look for. Goudie-Averill expressed that she "found out from community members that much of the advertising was very hard to understand."

I bumped into a friend at the street fair, and I asked her if she knew anything about what was going on. "No, not at all. What is this for? We were just walking around and heard all this noise and decided to check it out!" When I told her about PIFA she said, "Oh that makes sense. That explains the giant robot riding a scooter." Seeing as the street fair attracted so many visitors, I had the thought that perhaps the festival would get even more attention if the performances continued beyond the street fair. Perhaps to boost attendance even more, the street fair should launch the festival rather than close it.

I was curious to know how artists' involvement in PIFA affected their creative process. Did the central theme prove inspiring or challenging for the dance artists involved?

Having a common theme made the music choices, costume choices and location of performance a little more challenging. In general, however, the creative process was the same for us.

--Sharp-Naschin

In the creative process, I'm all about going where the dance is taking me, and I didn't feel like I could do that here. I didn't feel like I could follow my usual artistic track because I had to fit my work within this theme...If I'm doing something because I'm really invested in it, I don't mind self-producing that show. If there is an idea that I want the world to see, I don't mind scrambling and doing a Kickstarter and writing grants and trying to figure out how to do that. But this wasn't that situation.

--Anonymous

PIFA gave me the opportunity to animate a motivation that grew out of another project.

--Ingram

Being a part of the festival challenged our process because it made us feel a bit like we were fulfilling an assignment and living up to expectations that the Kimmel had about what an acceptable project would look like. It seemed that they wanted something easily packaged and saleable. They wanted sound bytes and flashy dancing ... we ended up not worrying about that and making the dance we wanted to make.

--Goudie-Averill

I find this last statement interesting—that somehow the festival pressured the artists to create a certain kind of art, prescribed to fit the festival's aesthetics. However, it is unclear how the festival pressured artists to do so. Perhaps the theme encouraged a type of creative process that isn't natural for some of the artists involved—but what is the purpose of a theme-based festival if not to make dances that address that theme? Perhaps this "pressure" is a response to a feeling of rejection—of not being selected to receive financial support from the Kimmel Center—and subsequently they felt like they

had to make work that fit within an aesthetic. Perhaps if they were funded, they would have felt a sense of validation in their work, making the PIFA experience more worthwhile. It raises the question of what an artist will do, or sacrifice, in the race for funding.

For those artists produced by the Kimmel Center, the support clearly helped realize their creative visions.

I felt that the festival was a “well-wisher” for our production. Jay Wahl attended two of our three shows, and members of the marketing staff attended shows. They selected our production for video and still documentation—they didn’t do this for every production... But I felt that the festival staff wanted us to succeed for reasons beyond their investment as a producer. Ours was a risky project for them—it was new, improvisational, abstract, and a bit edgy.

--Ingram

Now, almost a month after PIFA’s second attempt, I am still wondering about its impact on the city. I have no doubt that PIFA’s efforts to shine a light on Philadelphia’s cultural activity were successful. With daily free events for an entire month, it is clear that audience engagement and accessibility is a major goal for the festival administrators. The artists all recognized this and agree with the ever-increasing need to bring art to the public. However, I can understand why some of my peers expressed distaste at the festival. With such a significant proportion of the budget devoted to marketing, artists clearly question how much their work is valued. Perhaps my colleagues’ wish to put their creative process first makes participating in PIFA a little less desirable. Two years ago, I loved the idea that all of Philly’s arts organizations were working on one artistic theme at the same time. Now, I am left on the fence about PIFA—I am unsure about its goals and intentions with regards to the local arts community. I hope, for the sake of participating artists, that PIFA’s intentions will be more clearly defined in future festivals.

Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts, A Kimmel Center Production, March 28-April 27.

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May 28, 2013