thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Lindsay Browning

Heard About Town: Tania Isaac

by Tania Isaac

Editor's Note: Philadelphia dance artists are not known so much for their language as for their ability to transcend it — but when they do speak publicly, they are worth listening to. Guest writer Tania Isaac Hyman, a Philadelphia dancer, choreographer, and assistant professor on the dance faculty at Drexel University, was invited to address the Jewish Reconstructionist congregation, Kol Tzedek ("voice of justice") at their recent Yom Kippur services in West Philadelphia. She spoke on the High Holy Day theme of nurturing and sustenance... important themes for artists and non-artists alike. This is a version of that talk.

Good morning everyone—

I'm Tania Isaac and I'm thankful for the opportunity to speak today. This moment is particularly poignant as it seems to be, for me, the end of an arc of recoveries and uncertainties and adjustments—a moment where it seems like the world (my world anyway) is taking a breath and slowly settling into its newest form. As I close out this phase, it seems like an appropriate moment to think about sustenance.

I'm a dancer, choreographer, partner, and mother—in no particular order—or perhaps in a constantly revolving order depending on who needs me or what I need most at a given moment. I'm also a friend and sister and daughter and so many other roles we all juggle as we try to seek fulfillment while maintaining our sanity and ideally supporting the people and ideas we value most.

Many of you know that I'm from St. Lucia—a small island in the Caribbean. At moments when I am most depleted, I miss home. I miss and crave being surrounded by brown skin as far as the eye can see (although I love you all very much). I miss the ocean and the visible curve of the sky above, I miss music and the style of conversation. I miss the effervescence and conflict of an enormous family,

going to a party and knowing, for certain—for an absolute fact—that in addition to brilliant conversation, at least 80% of the room will eventually be dancing… equally brilliantly. I miss metaphors that make physical visceral sense. Creole inflections.

I began to state, with certainty at first, that what sustains me is family, home and a sense of place. A sense of knowing and belonging. Being surrounded by people who understand and agree with my purpose and ideas—or at the very least seeking these people out. It is comforting and gives me ease.

But I'm also an artist. I'm an artist who loves unclear boundaries and unreasonable questions. I'm driven by a desire to make sense of everything. To make something. To make something different. Something meaningful. Something beautiful. Something unpredictable. Something better. *And where that happens is in the places that challenge me.* It happens when I run into ideas and people that I don't know and that I don't quite understand. When I am made to question what I believe I know and walk that line between my convictions and my blindness. It forces me to consider whose point of view I did NOT value today.

I'm curious as to why the world works the way it does and why we make such different choices. I remember that my choices are my own, formed from what I value most—and that if we all agreed to love and choose the same things best, how many OTHER important things would get lost. I'm reminded that there is so much that is important to say and to do and to consider, to save and preserve and rescue and champion, that it could not all possibly exist ONLY in the places I call home.

The things that comfort me—they give me enough breath to go out into the friction and uncertainty that sustain me. I am supported and fulfilled by everything I have not yet discovered and experienced. I am nurtured by an insatiable and deliberate curiosity about everything around me. I guard very jealously the capacity to be filled with wonder and awe at every available opportunity. And when I feel depleted—I try to eat well and take long walks near water, in the woods. I dance, listen to music, write bad poems, make dances. I play. I try to fall down and fall over and not take myself too seriously. Then, I fail miserably at all of it and eat gummy bears and chocolate, and play my tiny violin for a while.

Eventually I make dates with my friends and remember that everyone I know is balancing precariously on the same tightrope. And while we have differing skills and equipment, we're working hard to get across an ocean to something we can't quite see but that we know intrinsically is The Most Important Thing. We are crossing, together, this immense unknowable ocean, and I'm surrounded by people who don't want to take the slow boat. And there are a lot of us. All doing it differently. And it is good.

So what sustains me is the dizzying height at which we've strung this rope, inching forward, sometimes tumbling headfirst into sometimes freezing, sometimes soothing waters. The ones who sustain me are the people around me who I see working to find their own balance, who in turn feed my own desire to know and to see more. I'm comforted, deeply comforted, by everything that is familiar and that I believe to be good.

But what *continues* to sustain me is the burning curiosity I feel when I run into everything and everyone else. I wish you the good fortune in the coming year of finding yourself in unfamiliar places with people who are not yet friends, and to see what you find that you can bring back—to keep reshaping all the places you call home.

By Guest Writer
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