

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Ayodele Casel

Elisa Monte Passes the Baton to Tiffany Rea-Fisher

by Gregory King

John Lennon and Paul McCartney once sang, “Nowhere you can be that isn’t where you are meant to be.” Good or bad, this adage alludes to the absence of chance and encourages accountability for the choices we make.

Set to carry the torch as artistic director of the 35 year-old Elisa Monte Dance Company, pint-size (5-foot-1-inch) dance veteran Tiffany Rea-Fisher recollects the day the conversation about the possible title transfer took place.

In a phone interview, Rea-Fisher recalled, “I was going over numbers with Elisa, for grants for the arts in education program run by the company, and her tone on the phone was calm, almost distant.” I could hear the nostalgia in Rea-Fisher’s voice as she recollected Monte’s tranquil voice, “I think I want you to inherit the company. I don’t know when, but when I retire.” Speechless and befuddled at the time, Rea-Fisher remembered the conversation coming to a hesitant, unresolved end.

Three weeks later, the pair revisited their chat over lunch, where Rea-Fisher relied on her professionalism and humor to question what she felt was Monte’s premature proposal.

That was 2008.

Fast forward four years, the decision was brought to the board and a three-year transition document was put in place. Addressing issues as varied as the rights to works performed to staffing concerns, this document was a major transitional tool that prepared Rea-Fisher without overwhelming her.

In a meek confession, Rea-Fisher acknowledged not having heard of Monte before attending SUNY Purchase. The company was never on her radar, but a friend encouraged her to participate in a week-long workshop by Monte at Steps On Broadway in New York City.

Having recently returned to the U.S. from Cypress, Rea-Fisher decided to attend, but under one condition: if she hadn't attracted the attention of Monte after two days, she would not finish the week due to financial restrictions. At the end of day one, Monte called her by name and the magic of a partnership began to brew, unbeknownst to both.

At that point, the possibility of becoming artistic director was unfathomable to Rea-Fisher. Seeing the company perform at The Joyce? Yes! Auditioning for the company? Sure! Dancing for the company? Hopefully...

When asked about the company's lack of visibility on the national dance scene and the relevance of its current repertoire, Rea-Fisher responded, "For 25 of the 35 years in existence, we have worked in Europe, and I'm excited about the resurgence of the company on the domestic scene. I would encourage those who have missed or not heard of the company to check out what we're doing."

A woman of humor and insight, Rea-Fisher is an artist whose intellect has prepared her for such a position of power. She has held every position in the company since becoming a member at 21, rehearsed and staged many pieces for over 12 years, and passed on the essence of each work to new dancers. She understands the type of dancer who will fit well with the group, knows where the company has been and where they need to go, and she commands any room she enters.

But this excitement doesn't come without some anxiety. "The company is as old as I am and Elisa is trusting me with her life's work," Rea-Fisher confessed.

Both Rea-Fisher and Monte are passion players who are extremely determined and single-minded about making decisions. But there are also differences between the two that make for a compelling baton handoff. The fact that Monte is white and Rea-Fisher is African American isn't so much an eye-opener as it is a nod to the company's diversity mission. When asked about other differences, Rea-Fisher noted, "I am more direct and inclusive with my communication while Elisa tends to be more mysterious and maternal."

Through the feverish excitement in her smiling voice, Rea-Fisher explained that the torch will be passed during the 35th season at Aaron Davis Hall from March 2-5. As she prepares for Monte to hand her the baton, I asked if she ever saw this day coming. She calmly proclaimed, "I don't know if I saw it coming— but I am ready for it, and I'm excited about it."

35th Anniversary Gala, Elisa Monte Dance Company, March 2-5, Aaron Davis Hall, New York.

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