

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Gabrielle Revlock

Rocky XV

by Becca Weber

The Rocky Awards—or “Rockies” as they are affectionately known—is an annual award series by and for the Philadelphia dance community. A love letter to itself of sorts, the awards represent a sampling of the work being done in the community, offering up appreciation for fellow dancers, choreographers, and performing arts professionals in the city. Modeled after the Bessie Awards in New York City, the Rockies are now, in 2017, celebrating their 15th anniversary. The ceremony itself features short performances from a variety of choreographers and companies and humorous skits by the host(s). Previous winners bestow the honors to this year’s awardees, and the evening’s emcees present a “host award.” Annie Wilson and Christina Gesualdi, who have been hosting the awards ceremony since 2013, agreed to an interview about their experiences, relaying how they have kept the tradition alive (the Rockies were previously supported by the [now defunct Dance/UP](#)) and what to expect from this year’s ceremony. Below are some excerpts from that conversation.

On the history of the Rocky Awards:

Christina Gesualdi: History is both slippery and plural, so as I try to share bits and pieces of information on the Rockies of yesteryear, I still feel as if I’m missing a lot. I guess that is the fun of looking backwards.

In 2001, Fringe was a five-year-old toddler. The folks of Headlong—Amy Smith, David Brick, and Andrew Simonet—pushed forward the idea of having an award show for the dance community during the lively, all-in, go-hard whirlwind of the Fringe festival. Both Nick Stuccio and Scott Johnston had a large part in beginning the first ceremony; other integral folks in the early years include Meredith Magoon and Christine Cox.

So the Rockies began as a slapdash celebration, with the dance and movement community drinking together, celebrating, and laughing at itself. From there, it evolved with pushes from Scott Johnston, who runs the Late Night Cabaret—at that point it was in conjunction with Fringe. There are traditions [at the Rockies] of hosts who do silly bits, make costume changes, and keep the through line of the program going. It is a labor of love, because those hosts also inherit the responsibility of programming the show with brief performances or videos that are light and humorous but that also give some visibility to new and old, obvious and less obvious parts of the dance community at large.

Annie Wilson: [The Rocky Awards] were created as a response to the Bessies in NYC, with a decidedly pro-Philly, punk mission. The format has been pretty consistent since I've been going: whoever won a Rocky award last year passes it on to someone for a job they thought was remarkable. It had to be for a specific reason, usually a performance, and it couldn't be your friend or a close collaborator.

CG: The awards take care of themselves. There aren't categories and there definitely aren't judges. It evolved so that the criteria for choosing whom the award will get passed onto doesn't have to do with lifetime achievement or kinship within the field.

AW: Which is a model that I really love because it has more to do with the dance scene witnessing itself rather than bestowing honor onto remarkable individuals.

CG: We hosted our first Rocky Awards in Fringe 2013 at Underground Arts. Christina Zani and Dito Van Reisenberg were the previous hosts. So they passed the torch to us.

Our hosts on keeping the tradition alive:

AW: Dance/UP closed in 2015, but they left the Rockies a small amount of money to make the 2015 award show happen. The 2017 award show is happening through emails mostly. Fringe has agreed to house the show; Anna Drozdowski has done a lot of the administrative work to make sure it happens again; Christina has been visioning what a new, totally unfunded, Rockies would look like; and I have been supporting as needed! It's one of my favorite Philly dance traditions, and I want to see it continue.

On some memorable awards moments from the past:

CG: The theme of the 2013 awards was summer and babies... summer because Fringe has a way of extending the summer fun into September, and babies because it seemed that many folks in the dance community were expecting. Annie and I began the show by swinging onto stage from a rope. I remember us clinging to the rope and each other for dear life. We were wearing bathing suits and heels, and I looked pregnant. Upon entering the stage and introducing ourselves, I "birthed" some of our props and cue cards for the rest of the show. Later on, Annie "birthed" a Rocky Award fish bowl and fish that was our host award for Anna Drozdowski.

AW: I actually don't get to see the awards being given because Christina and I are usually frantically changing backstage. I know I cried when I gave [Gus Gscheidle](#) his host award, I had a blast *trying* to sing Stevie Nicks when we gave [Judy Williams](#) her award, and I had so much fun secretly constructing that sketch where I gave birth to [Anna Drozdowski's](#) fish bowl for her host award.

CG: Another strong memory was when Jumatatu Poe, Lela Aisha Jones, and [Philly's Dancing for Justice](#) helped culminate the 2015 Rocky Awards by leading the whole audience in song and action to honor and mourn the black lives taken by police brutality.

On what to expect at this year's ceremony:

AW: There are no categories. Also, the hosting is different this year: a bunch of people are co-hosting. We are pairing hosts of yore with 15-year veterans to present the acts and to introduce the award presenters. I am really excited about this model, although it does involve more coordination. I like that the responsibility is shared between folks; it speaks more to the decentralized dance scene in Philly.

I am really excited for Bethany Formica Bender to be re-mounting an old Reactionaries dance on college students and recent college grads! We want to look back on the past, but also forward to the future, and I think this format is perfect. I am excited to see which of the young folks will be dancing, and I couldn't be more excited to finally see a piece by the Reactionaries—I've heard so much about them.

The award itself changes every year—as mentioned previously, the fish bowls were awarded in 2013. But there have been other iterations, including the “award cup” pictured above. Christina reported that the awards for the very first Rocky Awards were rocks with the winner's names on them, and then there was fine glassware and Rocky bobblehead dolls. Our hosts on this year's awards:

CG: I actually think we should keep it a secret. We can say that it is sculpted by the past and the future—kind of like beanie babies meet outer space.

If you want to know this secret, who will be receiving this year's awards, and what other performances you can expect to see in the 2017 Rockies—you'll need to attend, but it's always a blast.

[The Rocky Awards](#), hosted by Christina Gesualdi and Annie Wilson. FringeArts, 7 PM, January 22nd. Drink specials to be announced.

By Becca Weber
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