

Weaving threads of connection

Guest curator **Pegge Vissicaro** of Arizona State University and TerraDance, describes her process of creating a holistic framework to look at socially-based dance practices in the USA

Over two years ago while visiting the Foundation for Community Dance (FCD) offices in Leicester, England, Ken Bartlett, Creative Director approached me with the idea of developing an issue of Animated based on community dance practices in the United States.

I enthusiastically accepted the role of editor/curator thinking that I would focus on different artists working with specific communities. The process for identifying these communities took an interesting turn this past spring when I participated in Anna Halprin's leadership workshop for Planetary Dance. Travelling to her mountain studio just north of San Francisco, I felt certain that the experience would change my life and perspectives about dance in general. Even before the workshop, I knew that understanding Anna's contribution was key to investigating the evolution of community dance practices in this country and that I hoped to include an article written by someone who embodied her work. What I didn't realise was that my interest in the Animated project would also shift dramatically.

The creative practices Anna Halprin taught us emphasised peace building as a tool to expand community. Techniques to engage this process involved expressing individual intention to shape movement rituals that occurred, primarily but not exclusively, in natural environments. The power of nature to heighten sensory awareness aligned closely with my own work, TerraDance, which explores interactions and parallels between people and the Earth. These acts of peace in nature resonated personally and allowed me to open my awareness to a more holistic, integrated view of community dance. No longer did it make sense to single out a particular population based on ethnicity, gender, ability, age, or cultural similarities. Even the range of practices in the United States were so varied that focusing on one group at the expense of another demonstrated inequity and exclusion, the antithesis of my understandings about community dance. I knew it was impossible to identify all the practices that existed since no comprehensive resource was available to access information about every artist working in this field. To offer anything that could be considered representative of the United States was completely superficial and totally unsatisfying. For all these reasons I needed to develop a strategic approach that introduced Animated readers to community dance practices in the United States while examining the role of dance in society. I decided to meet that challenge by

soliciting contributions about context, practice, and debate that addressed key issues affecting Americans as well as offered new insights about a 21st century paradigm shift in which dance is leading the response to those issues.

The reader's journey begins with a rich historical overview of community dance written by Arizona-based dance artist/educator, Mary Fitzgerald. Written from a professional practitioner's perspective, her informative commentary traces roots over the past forty years that highlight individual artists and models, providing an excellent lens through which to observe major developments in the field. One of these artists, Liz Lerman, director of the Dance Exchange based in Washington, D.C., contributes the second article, excerpted from her soon to be published book, *Hiking the Horizontal*. This deeply, personal essay unpacks assumptions about the therapeutic underpinnings of artistic practice. She describes therapy as the transformation that happens when people work with and learn from each other in community-based art making. Meaningful participation through dance empowers individuals and communities, which is embodied in Anna Halprin's work over the past half a century. Taira Restar's article about this legendary arts pioneer and mentor discusses the Planetary Dance ritual, an exemplar of intentional movement that calls for healing and connection to the Earth. Taira, an independent artist/educator based in northern California, explains that the fundamentally interrelated life-art process, a term coined by Anna, explores human experience and the sensing body to inform art making. The integration of life and art is beautifully illustrated in *Ida Dances with Irv* performed by Kairos Dance Theatre. Director Maria Genné shares her process of creating that work which incorporates the experiences of two individuals, Ida Albeit, 100 and Irv Williams, 91 who grew up in New York City during the 1920s-1930s Harlem Renaissance. This Minnesota company is one of the few nationwide that embraces intergenerational dance initiatives and is creatively engaging our growing elderly population through dance. Kairos is a superb example of how life becomes art to build and strengthen relationships between people, their community, and their environment.

Authentically capturing the whole story being told through and with the arts in communities is the goal of the Arizona-based Cultural Arts Coalition. Co-directors, Melanie Ohm and Judy Butzine offer a powerful narrative about documentation as a practice of participatory art making. They explain that their methods for documenting facilitate



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Above: Anna Halprin (centre) and Pegge Vissicaro (behind left) and Marguerite Etemad (behind right) Planetary Dance workshop. Photo: Taira Restar. Above right: Pegge Vissicaro, Hole in the Rock, Phoenix, Arizona. Photo: Don Petelle

discovery to learn about how people know what they know as well as how they see the world. Besides recognising community, honouring individual voices, and allowing for interpretation beyond the event itself, documentation is also an invaluable evaluation tool to advocate and influence social research and policymaking. This type of evidence-based work supports the message delivered by Simon Dove, director of the Herberger Institute School of Dance at Arizona State University (ASU). His article frames why and how socially-based practice makes dance relevant in the 21st century United States. He discusses the role of higher education as a catalyst to move forward curriculum that provides the training ground for socially-engaged and innovative artists. The possibility of radically transforming the American cultural landscape is the theme of my own contribution to Animated. I contextualise this historical moment in which Americans are experiencing a major attitude adjustment to evolve more sustainable living practices. The effort toward sustainability addresses community formation as social capital that encourages diversity and creativity as renewable resources. Importantly, dance is a way to access those resources to promote communal well-being and rebuild the nation's social fabric.

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to present fresh and inspired thinking about community dance practice in the United States. Travelling down the various paths of our contributors yields much intellectual nourishment and provides enlightening perspectives that you are the first to know. The central theme connecting these unique views emphasises expanding the depth and breadth of how we understand community. Expansion in our country refers to many ideas ranging from exploitation and separation to innovation and revolution. Today, there is a growing consciousness that recognises the necessity of reaching beyond our comfort zone to encounter new people, places, and ideas. The articles in this issue collectively guide us toward understanding how dance allows us to transition into a continually evolving future, which always is just a breath ahead.

Breathe deep and enjoy the ride!

Dr. Pegge Vissicaro, director of TerraDance and professor in the Herberger Institute School of Dance at Arizona State University has been engaged in community dance initiatives since 1983. Since 2001 she has partnered with refugee agencies using dance as a strategy to cope with resettlement trauma. Besides writing, dancing, drumming, and researching (mostly in Brazil), she loves travelling and camping with her husband, Vito and sons, Caio and Ari.