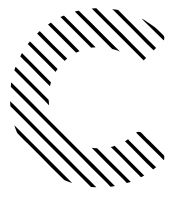


A LOOK AT THE STATE OF DANCE IN EUGENE

BY RACHAEL CARNES



Choreographer David Parsons' signature piece, *Caught* (1982), features more than 100 leaps in six minutes by a solo dancer who is repeatedly trapped in mid-motion by the strobe lights he controls, creating an illusion of flight. Seen live, the work is unforgettable; I saw it once here, in Eugene, at the Hult Center, danced by Parsons himself.

Caught seems an apt metaphor for dance: vital, powerful yet ephemeral, almost fragile. Dance requires a nutritive base to thrive, constant support and a collaborative spirit. Any dance venture is a leap of faith.

Although Parsons' company made four visits to Eugene from 1992-2000, it's unclear when we might see a national or international touring company here again. Dance in Eugene is varied and diverse, yet the community is acutely missing the kinds of opportunities it used to enjoy.

In this city, I can go to the museum and see masterworks on display. I can attend a concert and hear a variety of music from around the globe, played to perfection. I can sit down at the theater and see premiers from playwrights from across the country.

And yes, I can see dance — I try to see everything local — and the talent and verve our community has to offer continually amaze me. But what I can't see with any regularity is choreography from beyond this valley, or dance from beyond this region.

Eugene once hosted stellar out-of-town companies, artists with worldwide and historical significance: Martha Graham Dance Company, David Parsons, Bill T. Jones, Pilobolus, Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE, Nrityagram, even the Bolshoi Ballet — all played the Hult, some making repeated visits to our leafy college town.

Exposure to contemporary dance increases awareness, not just for dance but for other art forms, too. Looking at dance helps people learn to see, to observe, to relate. And looking at dance builds audiences for theater, music and art, for now and for future generations.

So where did the national and international touring companies go? And will the stars align to leverage their return?

For dance to survive in all its vital, questioning, relevant guises, its roots have to dig down into fertile ground. A healthy arts community relies on leveraging funding, ensuring access and cultural equity, supporting smaller organizations, bolstering innovation, offsetting facility costs, supporting distressed organizations and funding arts service organizations.

But none of this matters without occasional access to the broader dance world.

And not just the familiar stuff, but work that sometimes tests, integrates, assimilates. Work that takes disparate threads in our society and moment, and weaves them into a whole — or leaves them unraveled, asking more questions than it answers.

Isn't that one of the roles of art?

We can either invest in creating audiences for contemporary dance or soon wonder why folks have lost their taste for it.

SHIFTING PRIORITIES

Locally, the Hult Center is a crown jewel: a beautiful, spacious gem, likely capable of hosting any performance event the world has to offer.

And the Hult's resident dance companies, Eugene Ballet and Ballet Fantastique, turn handsprings to cultivate audiences, filling the Soreng and the cavernous Silva halls, season after season, year after year.

But when it comes to the Hult's visiting rentals and

touring partnerships, with a few bright exceptions, aesthetics have skewed towards "entertainment" of late: television celebrities, magic shows, jukebox musicals.

The last time the Hult presented a national contemporary dance company was Ronald K. Brown's performance of 2007's *One Shot: Rhapsody in Black and White*, in 2008; it's an indelible, powerful work, inspired by the photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris, who documented African-American life in Pittsburgh from 1936-1975. (It seems incredible, in retrospect, that the city would take a gamble on this then-current piece.)

So I was hopeful when the Hult announced the reintroduction of its Hult Presents series for the coming season, breaking a years-long hiatus. Scanning the shows, it's discouraging that, although Daniel the Tiger will grace our center for the performing arts this year, dance isn't represented in the '16-'17 lineup.

Why have touring contemporary dance companies fallen off the radar?

In 2007, the city of Eugene conducted a Cultural Policy Review (CPR) process, guided by out-of-town consultants from WolfBrown with input from the arts community. According to Sarah-Kate Sharkey, the city of Eugene's resource development and communications manager, the city followed the advice set out by the CPR in shifting gears, putting its occasional presentation of national or international dance companies on hold, and reallocating those resources to other cultural services programs.

The UO's Shannon Mockli, a Dance in Dialogue co-founder, notes: "I heard there was once a day when the Hult Center presented dancers such as Bill T. Jones and David Parsons. I recall seeing Ronald K. Brown when I very first moved here. It is incredibly sad to me that their investment in producing these kinds of critical choreographers has waned."

Mockli's sentiment echoes that of many in the dance community.

"Also, Portland and White Bird Dance are nearly next door," Mockli says. "Eugene could be an easy stop for a touring company."

In the last decade, Sharkey suggests, the city has stressed its relationships with Eugene Ballet and Ballet Fantastique. "Our involvement in dance programming is focused on supporting our two resident dance companies and helping them to have the audiences necessary to thrive," she says. "We are not looking to compete with them, and any dance programming we do is largely in partnership with them."

But would the occasional touring company really threaten Ballet Fantastique and Eugene Ballet?

"I saw the Bolshoi at the Hult when I was a little girl," Ballet Fantastique co-director Hannah Bontrager recalls. "More dance in our community only means more people are seeing it, talking about it, developing an appetite for it."

Neither does Eugene Ballet Company (EBC) seem to see visiting companies as competition, recently welcoming Dance Theatre of Harlem, Ailey II and BodyVox under their programming banner. EBC also routinely commissions choreographers from around the country to set work on its dancers.

"Eugene Ballet's scope of work continues to broaden due in a large part to our residency at the Hult Center," says EBC's executive director Josh Neckels. "Financial support, through the Hult Endowment, allows us to bring in guest artists and commission new music."

EBC has worked tirelessly, for nearly four decades, to create and sustain Eugene's dance presence. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their vision and fortitude.

And there may still be hope for future national and international dance tours.

Says Sharkey: "The Hult hopes to add dance tours and possible outreach to its line-up beginning in the '17-'18 season depending on touring routes, block booking and partnerships."

The fear is that the longer audiences wait, the less patient or engaged they'll likely be if and when something new comes down the pike.

Sharkey notes that in the meantime, the city does provide some rent and fee reductions for smaller local dance companies and studios, free informal dance events during the summer, performance opportunities through (sub)Urban Projections, as well as grants through Lane Arts Council (paid for from the county's occupancy tax) to local dance organizations.

(However, we heard from several sources that the fee structures at the Hult Center, particularly its per-ticket Patron User Fee, could be cost prohibitive to local artists and organizations.)

"I want to be sure you understand our role as a partner with our dance companies and as a venue that facilitates populist programming rather than having an artistic agenda of our own," Sharkey says.

IT'S F---ING HARD TO BE AN ARTIST

"I think artists here, we want to have our cake and eat it too," Shannon Mockli says.

"We want to live in the beauty and small town feel of Eugene, and we want to engage in art that reflects the cutting-edge of our respective fields, such as the kind of art you find in larger cultural centers," Mockli says.

Larger cities foster places for classes, workshops, flexible performances and opportunities to present work without the haranguing of constantly self-producing, which not only include marketing events but the development work that is the mainstay of all arts orgs in the nation: spending countless hours on highly competitive grant applications that throw artists in competition for woefully small pots of cash.

Major cities across the U.S. have performance spaces that provide footholds for new and emerging artists to gain exposure as well as to hone and shape their craft — places with pleasant, hard-working administrators who write grants and execute many of the functions of producers, leaving artists to actually make art.

Eugene has two higher-education dance programs, at the University of Oregon and Lane Community College, but it can be a steep drop for any graduate suddenly confronted with the reality of paying for studio space, let alone pulling together a performance.

Liora Sponko, executive director of Lane Arts Council, says: "Over the past few years, I have met with various dance groups who express the need for more rehearsal spaces and affordable performing spaces in our community."

This challenge should raise alarms, because access to space, for rehearsal and performance, is fundamental to sustaining new work as well as the artists and organizations that create it.

"What we have here are many groups in the emerging to mid-career phase, with strong reputations and steadily growing audience bases, struggling to present one to two events per year," says UO professor and GARNERdances founder Brad Garner.

"Many complain of getting foundational support once and never again, and almost all lose money on their productions," Garner says. "With these single events, many solve the financial problem by involving 30 or more performers, so that they will be assured more ticket sales to friends and families."

ILLUSTRATION BY ZIJUN LI