

# THE FEST TEST

## THE IMPACT OF DANCE FESTIVALS ON TEXAS DANCE

Dance audiences worldwide have long come together for festivals large and small to engage with the art form. The oldest international dance festival in the United States is Jacob's Pillow. Nestled in the Berkshire mountains of Western Massachusetts, the 10-week festival celebrated its 86th summer this year and welcomed over 20,000 individuals to its free outdoor performances.

"For someone whose opportunities to travel may be limited," says dance enthusiast David Lake, "a festival is a great way to see the world of dance while staying in one place."

Based in Houston, Lake attends dance performances regularly throughout Texas, and has traveled to performing arts festivals in the U.S. and abroad, including Jacob's Pillow, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's Time-based Art Festival and Avignon Theatre Festival in France. He knows festivals and recognizes their significance for dance artists.

"As nonprofit arts funding becomes more fragile and it gets harder for a dance company to put on a full season of shows, festivals are becoming more important as a way for small and mid-sized companies to show their work to a broader public," he observes.

As such, Lake need not travel very far to find festivals featuring contemporary dance companies. Houston hosts its own international festival, Dance Salad, which has brought world-class dance to Texas annually for over 20 years. With two festivals coming up this month, the Texas Improvisation Festival at Texas Woman's University (Oct. 11-13), and the Dance Gallery Festival at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville (Oct. 25-27) and New York City (Nov. 2-4), it's a good time to examine this trend.

The state is also home to Austin Dance

Festival, Dallas Dances, Houston's Barnstorm Dance and CounterCurrent Festivals, Big Rig Dance Co-Op in Denton —also home to the Texas Improvisation Festival; as well as The Dance Gallery Festival in Huntsville, Austin's Fusebox Festival, Wanderlust in Dallas, and Waco's {254} DANCE-FEST, to name a few. Though these festivals are generally open to applicants far and wide, a large portion of the contemporary dance companies featured come from the Lone Star State.

### Home-grown Produce

The distance between Texas cities has perhaps been an obstacle in a large state like Texas but there seems to be an increased or renewed interest in what's happening across city lines.

Choreographer and co-director of NobleMotion Dance and Sam Houston State University faculty member Andy Noble helps to curate and oversee the Texas extension of The Dance Gallery Festival, which was initiated in New York City by Astrid von Ussar and Mojca Ussar as a means to offset the cost of performance and space.

The Dance Gallery Festival has evolved to include a master class program, an annual performance featuring three commissioned artists, a residency program in the Catskills and a new Brooklyn-based venue. Noble affirms that his favorite part of the festival is bringing vibrant Texas companies together. "When I first started assisting with the festival, it seemed most of the Texas contemporary dance was coming out of Houston."

From the "polish of Dallas" to the "quirky authenticity of Austin," Noble feels the festival now offers a much broader representation of the art-making personalities of Texas' diverse cities.

Similarly, executive director of Dance Source Houston Mollie Haven Miller

sees the organization's Barnstorm Dance Festival as a platform for the conversation between what dance looks like in Houston, Austin, Dallas and beyond.

Over what will be 10 years this October the Texas Dance Improvisation Festival helmed by Jordan Fuchs has created opportunities for the physical conversation of dancers as it's crisscrossed the state. Its 14-member coordinating committee is a who's who of contemporary dance artists from across Texas and brings a regular roster of performers and educators from across the state, as well as acclaimed improvisational artists from the international dance community.

Supporting the dance community in Austin and beyond is a top priority for Austin Dance Festival founder Kathy Dunn Hamrick. "We have always committed half of the festival's programming to local artists and the rest to artists working in Texas and elsewhere," she explains.

Other than her own work, there was little dance to be found in L. Brooke Schlecte's Waco backyard. Therefore, her goal, when she organized {254} DANCE-FEST in collaboration with Waco Cultural Arts Fest, was to bring the Texas dance community to her. "When I first moved to Waco, I felt very isolated from the dance world. However, since the birth of {254} six years ago, I have felt like we have a real community growing in Texas."

### Map Quest

Schlecte's efforts have helped put Waco and her company, Out On A Limb, on the Texas map, but is that important? "I think it's important to be on as many maps as possible," confirms Dark Circles Contemporary Dance director and choreographer Joshua Peugh. "We are entertainers and storytellers, and we can't share those gifts if people don't know about us."



ARCOS Dance in *In the Ether* at Dance Gallery Festival (Huntsville, TX) 2017, choreography and performance by Erica Gionfriddo with Steffani Lopez, Britney McGarity, and Emily Robison. Photo by Sharen Bradford - The Dancing Image.

Achieving a level of recognition within Texas is more difficult than one might imagine. In fact, Peugh acknowledges that it may be easier to get on the national map than the Texas map. "There are still people in Dallas who are shocked when they find out we are based here," he explains.

According to METdance's artistic director Marlana Doyle, achieving state recognition is a testament to the company's 20-plus years of stability as a trusted dance performance and educational entity. She notes that, while it is an honor to be on a Texas map, it's also not the only way to measure impact and quality of content. "There are many artists and organizations that operate 'under the radar' that provide incredible contributions of art to Texas communities."

The kind of longevity and above-the-radar exposure METdance enjoys is an advantage that few contemporary companies can claim. Yet, getting beyond the border of the Texas map seems integral to the growth of organizations at every level.

## Are fests best?

Peugh's Dark Circles company, Bruce Wood Dance and METdance have been participants in the Pillow's Inside/Out series—twice for Dark Circles, METdance for its third time, and BWD this past summer. Peugh says that following the Pillow performances his company's donor base grew to include people in the Northeast.

Still, money is hardly the primary benefit to taking work on the road. Submission fees, travel fees, shipping costs for set pieces, accommodation fees and payment for artists adds up quickly and usually amount to spending a significant portion of a company's tight budget on the festival experience.

"Most festivals in the States don't provide a fee," says Peugh, "so they're good for exposure but not for finances." He adds that in order to include more artists, festivals generally opt to curate 5-10 minute excerpts rather than complete work, making it even more difficult to justify travel expenses. Still, most artists find that dance festivals are worth it.

"We have a particular audience base in Dallas," says Danielle Georgiou of Danielle Georgiou Dance Group (DGDG), "so when we have the opportunity to travel and present our work outside of our hometown, it's both exciting and terrifying to see how an audience of complete strangers will react to the work." At festivals, these "fresh eyes" may be completely new to contemporary dance or at least an artist's particular aesthetic. New audiences provide valuable feedback with which to gauge the impact or success of a performance work. "Festivals allow me the chance to engage in conversations before the show, after the show and even while dancing," adds Georgiou.

Festivals also frequently receive press and coverage by critics. For emerging companies, independent choreographers and solo artists, such media mentions are a portfolio asset and, as they have for Austin-based ARCOS Dance, can lead to future opportunities.

"We went to the Edinburgh Fringe [in Scotland] to get our work in front of international audiences and critics, and returned with lots of excellent reviews and an award," says ARCOS co-founder Erica Gionfriddo. "Our participation in that major, recognized festival

undoubtedly was a significant factor in subsequent touring." Gionfriddo mentions that festivals have also been a way to creatively sharpen work and the process of dance-making within the limitations of the time, stage or technical settings provided. ARCOS has made artistic decisions like dancer-manipulated lighting when technical support was limited and recently offset the cost of a distant appearance by working with dancers local to the festival instead of bringing dancers from Austin.

Working alongside peers also seems to provide motivation and inspiration that pushes the boundaries of contemporary concert dance as well as its artists. "We love meeting the other artists who participate in festivals and seeing what they're up to wherever they're coming from," says Gionfriddo. "It's essential to have this kind of dialogue with fellow artists and audiences to advance our art form." In fact, Gionfriddo's observation alludes to what most artists consider the primary benefit of festival participation.

## Why do dancers festival so much?

"A majority of the festival participants would say they experience a tremendous validation for what they do and that they leave feeling part of a larger dance community," explains Austin Dance Festival founder Kathy Dunn Hamrick. Hamrick's assertion is echoed time and again among festival performers and choreographers. Dance festivals, it turns out, are a great way to connect with fellow dancers. "I have personally networked with choreographers and dancers alike, and have hired some of them to set work on METdance or come audition for the company," says Doyle.

Similarly, Peugh has hired choreographers to create on his company after seeing their work at festivals. ARCOS Dance has been invited as guest artists to other festivals or workshops, as well as to universities based upon their festival performances. They've also identified future collaborators and performers, meeting a future dancer at their very first Texas festival after the company's relocation to Austin. Von Ussar finds it amusing that her friendship with Noble took root during dance festival performances and led directly to the decision to bring The Dance Gallery to Texas. Peugh describes Texas dance festivals as a great way to celebrate

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local accomplishments and explains that these shorter excursions can be good for company morale.

Gionfriddo had no roots in Texas when she and her ARCOS Dance co-founders decided to move their company to Austin. The sense of community developed at festival performances helped her company feel at home. "Before moving here, we had not really heard of any of the Texas-based dance groups we've met. It was through festivals that we became far more aware of the dance ecosystem around the state that is committed to promoting artists in Texas," says Gionfriddo.

Developing and strengthening this ecosystem is really what makes Texas-based festivals special and important to the local dance community, especially to members that may fly under the radar of most dance cartographers.

Hamrick says that it's been extremely gratifying to see the work being made by Texas dance artists, many of them unknown to her before founding Austin Dance Festival. Watching from the wings has made her fall in love with dance all over again. "I saw anew how meaningful modern dance can be, how delightful, how funny, how kinetic, how intelligent, how relevant and how heart-breaking. These are my people," she proclaims, "and I'm honored to be one of them."

It is a signal of this supportive atmosphere that an online hub has emerged to provide a comprehensive calendar for all of the state's festival-related performance and submission dates, as well as contact information for festival organizers.

"Texas Dance Festival Alliance first popped into my head when I learned of three [Texas] festivals happening in the same weekend," says Schlecte. Schlecte's fledgling project raises the dance community's collective awareness of events throughout the state so that festivals need not compete for participants and support.

Mollie Haven Miller, director of Dance Source Houston and Barnstorm Dance Festival, confirms that Schlecte's Texas Dance Festival Alliance has been a positive and inclusive resource. "Everyone seems to help spread the word about the other [festivals]," she observes.

## Maximum Impact

The number one regret for most festival programmers everywhere is the inability, because of financial constraints, to showcase more deserving local and non-local artists. A weekend of mixed-bag, overly-long performances is sometimes the result of the desire to present as much work as possible. Festivals are learning from community feedback. Take Dallas, where Dallas DanceFest has been re-branded Dallas

Dances. When Carter Alexander took the helm three years ago he looked at what needed to be changed. "As artistic director my first thought was to make the event more of a showcase for the local dance community," says Alexander. "The wealth of dance talent in this area is truly abundant." As a cultural tourist, Lake finds the most satisfying festival experiences offer lively social and educational opportunities beyond the performances, which provide context for the work and allow an attendee to get to know the artists as well as their fellow audience members. "A well-produced festival offers the opportunity to expand one's audience far beyond what a single company could normally do, and to create a sense of excitement around a shared passion."

While a full week, or two, or ten might be ideal to give more exposure to deserving artists, the impact of dance festivals on the Texas dance community can't be measured in weeks, years or even number of attendees. The true tests of any fest are the unique and meaningful opportunities it provides to connect dance artists with their audiences and with one another.

—NICHELLE SUZANNE

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