

# “WE CAME WITH A MISSION”

ASBURY PARK DANCE FESTIVAL A  
MAJOR MOMENT IN CITY'S RISE



**Lorenzo Pagano and Blakeley White-McGuire**  
of the **Martha Graham Dance Company**  
Nina Wurtzel Photography

BY DAN JACOBSON  
PUBLISHER

ASBURY PARK — The inaugural Asbury Park Dance Festival this past Saturday lived up to the huge build-up this newspaper gave it — and actually went beyond. That is no exaggeration. This was a big deal. Ask anyone who was there.

Organizers of the festival were some of the top performers in modern dance from the renowned Paul Taylor Dance Company. Three of the four organizers — Asbury resident Michael Trusnovec, Michelle Fleet and Laura Halzack — were coincidentally given glowing coverage in the New York Times about their careers right after they announced the festival. (The fourth organizer, Asbury resident VJ Carbone, is married to Trusnovec and is a marketing executive in the independent film industry.)

The festival, held at the House of Independents this past Saturday, quickly sold out. All in attendance were blown away by each and every performer, which included festival organizers Trusnovec, Fleet, Halzack, several other Paul Taylor dancers and Martha Graham dancers, as well as various other exceptionally talented performers. Locals were represented by Michelle Joy and Garrett McCann of the Axelrod Contemporary Ballet Company.

“From the artists, to the crew, to our friends and family, everyone operated at another level yesterday, and they all donated their time so graciously,” said Halzack. “I am blown away by them, and by the amazing Asbury audience. I am truly touched — and thrilled to do it all again next year.”

In the crowd were many community and arts leaders from Asbury Park, who immediately realized we were witnessing the highest levels of dance in this country. I don’t think anyone quite expected this. Actually, I’d say everyone was a bit taken aback. For this festival was one of the most magical and important moments in our city’s remarkable rise the past 20 years. It was that good. And as our city grows, it will keep its arts and culture edge by attracting creative work at this level. It simply doesn’t get any better than this.

“Last night was such an adrenaline rush, I think I’m still floating in the clouds from all of the excitement, love and support from everyone in the community,” said Fleet the next day. “I was also blown away by all of the talented artists who gave their time and energy to this festival...We really worked hard on this festival and to see it all come together has been an incredible experience. As the show came to a close I whispered to Laura, ‘I think I’m about to cry, we actually did it.’ Needless to say we are already talking about APDF 2020.”

*continued on p.59*

Given their level of career achievement, organizers Trusnovac, Halzack and Fleet all exhibited tremendous humility from the festival announcement in May to last weekend's performance. But they knew exactly what they were bringing here — meaning the level of what they themselves would provide, as well as their friends and contacts in the dance world who performed. For example, the triCityNews, and almost everyone else we spoke to, had no idea of the greatness in our midst with Asbury resident Michael Trusnovac, who the New York Times described as perhaps the top modern dancer in this country. Indeed, his solo performance at the festival was magnificent. All us bumpkins around here just know him as the affable husband of popular long-time local arts leader VJ Carbone.

Trusnovac and Halzack retired earlier this year, and Fleet will be retiring in the coming months. Together these close friends have 58 years professional experience in dance. Halzack and Fleet have been visiting Asbury residents Trusnovac and Carbone for almost ten years, which made them Asbury fanatics themselves, joining the cult and wanting to become an integral part of our city. They've sure done that through the Asbury Park Dance Festival. We're looking forward to this annual festival growing into one of the signature events in the world of dance, and helping to cement our city's national and international cultural reputation.

What a great project for the organizers to continue their life-long commitment to the art of dance as they retire from active performing. The festival also included two short free preview performances the night before inside the Carousel building, with a beautiful backdrop from the Wooden Walls mural project curated by Parlor Gallery's Jenn Hampton. Close to 300 people attended those two performances.

In addition, local dance students were invited to watch the festival practice sessions of the dancers, and Trusnovac and Fleet gave a class to students at the Asbury Park Technical Academy of Dance. More such classes with local dance

school are planned during the coming year. Finally, the financial proceeds of the festival were donated to Arts Ed New Jersey, a non-profit that makes sure that all public school district students have access to arts education, which the festival organizers said was so important to them in their youth.

During a break in the performances, the four organizers addressed the crowd, with Trusnovac explaining their passion and aspirations for Asbury Park:

"Over the past eight years this town has become close to our hearts. It started when I met VJ — and then introduced VJ to "the Girls" (Halzack and Fleet) — and then VJ introduced all of us to Asbury and the Jersey Shore. We fell hard for Asbury not just for its beautiful beaches, hip dining spots, and Sweet Dani B Cookies, but for what we believe is its beating heart: Our arts-loving community."

"The history here is deep," continued Trusnovac. "From the vaudeville stages of the flapper era, to the legends of the Stone Pony, to the bright splendor of today's Wooden Walls Project, to all of the local shops and galleries in and around town. Asbury is an inspiring place. As four arts-loving friends, this town has become a place we love to spend our time, and we always felt that, when the stars aligned, we would love to contribute another layer to this town's already rich history."

"In the wake of Laura and my retirement from the Paul Taylor Dance Company in June, and with Michelle's upcoming retirement in November, it finally felt like the right moment to pour our hearts into bringing our first love — dance — to this community. With lots of hard work and a little luck, here we are. And we came with a mission: To present dance so that it may be a catalyst for continued community building in a place that we love, with the purpose of raising funds for arts education to ensure that the next generation of budding artists and arts-lovers like us have access to what they need to pursue their dreams of living a life in the arts, or a life that is enriched and made full by the arts."



**Bessie Award-Winner Caleb Teicher**  
Nina Wurtzel Photography



**Alex Clayton, Michael Apuzzo, Robert Kleinendorst and Lee Duveneck of the Paul Taylor Dance Company**  
Nina Wurtzel Photography