



Derek Louie & Michael Trusnovec. Photo Elyse Mertz

TRIUMPHANT SECOND YEAR FOR ASBURY PARK DANCE FESTIVAL

NATIONALLY-RECOGNIZED ORGANIZERS BRING NATIONALLY-RECOGNIZED TALENT

ASBURY PARK — One of this city's most important up-and-coming cultural events — the Asbury Park Dance Festival — had its second successful year this past weekend, as a sold-out modern dance loving crowd once again packed the House of Independents.

The triCityNews has been behind this event since its beginning, and for good reason.

Those involved are not only from Asbury Park, but they were some of the top professional modern dancers in the country before retiring two years ago. That gives them wonderful connections into the modern dance community nationally, and even internationally, to draw into our city.

The founders of the Asbury Park Dance Festival are former Paul Taylor Company dancers Michael Trusnovec, Laura Halzack and Michelle Fleet. The fourth founder is VJ Carbone who is married to Trusnovec and a long-time arts leader in our city, as well as a veteran of the independent film industry. The four are close friends, and Halzack and Fleet became Asbury Park fanatics while visiting Carbone and Trusnovec over the years.

The three dancers were getting ready for retirement after two-decade careers

in modern dance. It struck them that a dance festival in Asbury Park — both to bring the highest level of dance to our city, as well as hold master classes by talented professionals for young dancers in the region — was a way to further their love and passion for modern dance beyond their careers as live performers. The fourth founder — non-dancer Carbone — is happily part of this with his husband and friends, and he brings his own arts organizing talent and much local goodwill.

The pandemic canceled last year's festival, which was to be the second one. The first year's festival in 2019 was a big success. This year's festival again sold out, and the crowd of close to 200 was as enthusiastic as the first year's, and perhaps even more so because of the emotions of watching dance performance at this level after experiencing the pandemic. Both festivals were held in the House of Independents on Cookman Avenue.

"I think it was a pretty electric program," said Trusnovec, who opened the festival with his own performance accompanied by a live cellist.

"You could see people smiling through their masks," he said about observing the crowd during the rest of the performances. "They expressed themselves as audibly as they could and jumped out of their seats at the end."

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The festival also provided two master class workshops this year for area dance students, with professional dancers as instructors who the organizers know from their years in the field. The education component is a big part of the festival, as proceeds from the event benefit Arts NJ, which promotes arts in the public schools. Although those programs are often the first to be cut, they can have an outsized impact on many students. Halzack and Trusnovec in particular have spoken about how the arts program in their public high schools were essential to their later successful careers as artists in the field of dance.

As for the crowd, this year’s festival had many repeat attendees but also a good number of new people, Trusnovec said.

“This year was different for us because of the pandemic,” he said. “It had its challenges, but I feel there is a huge appetite for what we’re doing here. If there is a demand we want to meet it. People seem to appreciate the quality of the performance that we’re bringing here. When it’s appreciated in that way, it makes us want to do more.”

And so the festival will continue on, with the founders envisioning it getting even better and better over time. Educational programs will continue to be a big part of it, with the goal to expand the master classes for students into different parts of the state beyond Monmouth County. That furthers the festival’s mission of education, as well as expands its exposure to people outside our region to further build the festival’s strength in New Jersey.

Trusnovec said the festival can also have an impact through performances specifically commissioned for the festival. Such commissions are another way to build the prestige and reputation of the festival, as they provide the public original material while supporting talented artists by commissioning them for their original work.

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This year’s festival had its first commissioned performance. It was done through a grant and support from the Works and Process program at the Guggenheim in New York. Trusnovec says the festival would love to see more commissions like that.


Of course, the triCityNews always dreams big for something like the Asbury Park Dance Festival. We understand the level of those involved. The founders are highly respected and established in the field of modern dance, and drawing on their contacts can make this festival — here in Asbury Park — a big deal nationally. For us, it’s always about keeping out city ahead of the curve to stay out front as a cultural leader among the smaller cities in this country. This festival is a part of that.

The following were the performers at the festival: Michael Trusnovec, Erin Dowd, Tamisha Guy, Burr Johnson, Aleisha Walker, Xin Yang, Ephrat Asherie, Cy Doherty, SunMi Park, Brandon Woolridge, Zoey Anderson, Lindsay Jorgensen, Olivia Miranda, Tamisha Guy, LeighAnn Curd, Mika Greene, Victoria Santaguidda, Aanyse Pettiford-Chandler and Maurice Chestnut. Musicians who performed live were cellist Derek Louie who opened the festival with Michael Trusnovec and bassist Chris Berger who closed the festival with Maurice Chestnut.

For more information visit apdancefest.org.



Xin Ying, Martha Graham Dance Company. Photo by Elyse Mertz

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