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Going Full Throttle with the Community

by Barbora Píhlová

Nickerson-Rossi Dance is a bi-coastal dance company focusing on modern and contemporary dance. Established in Los Angeles and Palm Springs, California in 2012, they extended their activities into Chester County, Pennsylvania in 2016. In May of this year, the company started working in the Performance Garage in Philadelphia. Here they teach weekly technique classes, master classes, workshops, and rehearse their repertoire. They are also preparing for their performance [Full Throttle](#) to be shown on August 10 at the [Performance Garage](#).

I recently viewed one of their classes and then sat down with Michael Nickerson-Rossi, the artistic director of the company, and Chad Allen Ortiz, the educational director and one of the principal dancers, to chat about their educational and outreach activities, and their upcoming performance.

Barbora Píhlová: Tell me about your new show, *Full Throttle*. I understand that through the show and your classes you are seeking to reach out to the community here in Philly.

Michael Nickerson-Rossi: Yes, the mission of Nickerson-Rossi is to dive into the community and provide opportunity, not just to the company itself. *Full Throttle* is our kick-off here. It is a piece created with dancers from the community who we met at our Spring Series, and who are attending our Summer Program. The program title symbolizes us going 'full throttle' with the community that doesn't know who we are just yet. They may know us through social media but in terms of being here, we are really new. In addition to that, we present some of the repertoire from Nickerson-Rossi. There is a beautiful piece titled *Eterno/Ritorno* by the Martha Graham Dance Company soloist [Lorenzo Pagano](#), who we commissioned to set a work on Nickerson-Rossi dancers. You will also see a piece choreographed by guest artist, [Jamie Nichols](#), danced by Heidi Buehler, Nickerson-Rossi West Coast soloist, as well as some work that I have created.

BP: So, the evening will combine the company dancers and outreach dancers.

MNR: Outreach is how we exist as a non-profit. With this particular program, we reached out to the community in Philadelphia, selected dancers, and invited them to train with us as I set rep on them along with some of the NDR company dancers. The beauty of this is that they share half of the program. Our Summer Series and Lab runs Monday August 6 through Friday August 10th, so we work a whole week, and we present what we build to an audience on Friday. Excitingly, it could be 50, 15, or even only five minutes at length. It's however we live and breathe and the dance takes a life of its own.

BP: Is there a connection between your classes and the performance on stage?

MNR: I always tell the dancers in my class that the classroom is actually the performance, and the performance is actually the classroom. They are always in the performance mode as they are always engaged. By the time they are on the stage to perform for an audience, it feels comfortable and they are as confident as they are in the technique class. I typically end class with a short performance phrase. That's [Barby Hobyak Roche](#)'s piece you saw today. When I saw her dancing it, I knew this section was for her to perform. I think she looks absolutely beautiful in this.

BP: Can you talk more about your [uNdeRstanD Program](#)?

MNR: The uNdeRstanD Program is pretty vast. As an artist, I have a responsibility to my community to give back and be a voice for those who struggle with being heard. The uNdeRstanD Program is about how we design a specific program. In the past, I have brought in programs that were more for 'troubled youth.' I worked with the LGBTQ Center Long Beach in 2014. I had the honor to work with some beautiful young people. I learned most of them were kicked out of their homes simply because of who they are, mostly due to religious faith and hate among the family household. I myself got into dance therapeutically. So, I tailored a program that would allow self-expression for these young hearts. On some level, I related to experiencing a profound loss—I lost my parents at a young age, just as they did. This special and unique way to express yourself without words through movement was something I just lived for. The program was a great success and we ran it for about 6 weeks. I got these kids to express themselves, not verbally but through their bodies with movement directed by me. The director of the Center then told me they had never seen such progress from that particular group. This is just one layer of what the uNdeRstanD Program does. It is really community-centric. There is a professionalism in dance and Nickerson-Rossi certainly has that too, but I'm on the ground level of the community as well, because that's where I started. Losing my parents at a young age was traumatic, and even though dance had sustained my life, I wished there had been someone who I could relate to and had the same sort of experience.

Chad Allen Ortiz: Also when we speak about community, we should have in mind that there are many different demographics to reach out to: it could be troubled youth, professional dancers, or senior citizens who want to be expressive through movement and music. The beauty of it is the movement causes expression, memory, and experiences.

BP: Do you already have a plan as to what kind of program would you like to implement here in Philly?

MNR: We are at the exploration stage. I want to get on the bottom floor and find out who the community is and what the interests are. I

want to have a wonderful healthy relationship with everyone here. My feeling is, your program can be thematic, but if it [also] fits the various desires of the community, you have a happy audience that keeps growing. I'm listening to what they want instead of having the attitude of 'just watch me.' I create and build works around the need, all the while having the artistic integrity and sophistication of quality concert dance. We are a very inclusive organization, and I love meeting many different people of whom I can say, 'that's a friend from my community.'

CAO: We really are very open. We understand that not everyone wants to be a professional dancer. There are so many different levels and ways to approach the dance. However, understanding the community is crucial.

Full Throttle, Nickerson-Rossi Dance, August 10th, Performance Garage, <http://www.performancegarage.org/nrd-fullthrottle>.

<https://www.nickersonrossdance.com>

By Barbora Píhřodovř

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