

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Jillian Jetton

## The Deep Waves of Jillian Jetton

by Mira Treatman

Jillian Jetton is a prolific, multi-talented artist and performer who often works fiercely behind the scenes. Whether as an assistant or associate director, collaborating artist, dramaturge, or administrator, she is an ambitiously pragmatic leader able to work with a beautiful variety of people. She counts Headlong, Pig Iron, Leah Stein Dance Company, and Soho Rep among her credits. When I found out that the Californian turned West Philadelphian would be presenting her own work, [Heat Wave](#), in collaboration with a killer ensemble, I knew this would be a ripe opportunity to shed some light on a member of Philly's creative community who gives so generously of herself. The following are edited excerpts of our exchange ahead of the opening of *Heat Wave* at Bartram's Garden.

Mira Treatman: You've had eclectic training, but how would you describe your practice?

Jillian Jetton: I come from a physical theater and devising background. In the last few years I have focused heavily on exploring the relationship between mind and body. My personal practice includes [Deep Listening](#), [Alexander Technique](#), improvisation scores, somatics, and most recently, [Butoh](#). On my own, I do a lot of automatic writing—three pages nearly every morning, and I always have at least one notebook with me. My collective/collaborative practice is to build relationships, and then create work out of those relationships. Being in nature is fundamental for me as a person and an artist. Last summer I took a three-day outdoor Butoh workshop with Atsushi Takenouchi that helped me articulate something I've always felt to be true: everything in the universe is porous—giving to and receiving from everything else. This is perhaps felt most clearly in nature, but it's also true in a shopping mall or on the freeway. Part of my practice is spending time outside and noticing what I receive, what is passing through my pores.

MT: Where does *Heat Wave* come into play as it relates to your practice?

JJ: The first time I directed was seven years ago. In the interim I have performed, devised, assistant and associate directed,

dramaturged, taught, and been a creative producer with a huge range of people on a huge range of projects. Through those experiences I became much clearer on my personal values, goals, and interests as an artist. *Heat Wave* is my first foray back into directing, fueled and supported by that knowledge. With *Heat Wave* I am building a container for the performers to ask themselves “what do I have to say through this site, and what does this site have to say through me?” Or, more simply, “what do I hear when I am here?” Each performer has crafted their own response to that question, and the whole experience will hopefully invite the audience to ask themselves that question as well. By placing the work outside in the dead of winter we are highlighting our physical state so that it cannot be ignored, it becomes part of the story.

MT: The choice to set your project outside in February is turning out to be not too terribly severe as far as cold weather goes—does this surprise you? Do you feel your work then relates to the climate crisis at all?

JJ: The Philadelphia Energy Solutions oil refinery is right across the river. This is the same refinery that had a massive explosion back in June, ending 150 years of production, and it is very much a part of what's seen and heard at Bartram's. The climate crisis has certainly been present for me in the making of this piece—we were rehearsing in short sleeves in January.

MT: How did you choose your site?

JJ: We have been thinking of Bartram's Garden as a kind of body, with a physical form that holds the imprint and memory of everything it has experienced, from the beginning of time until now. Aseel Rasheed, the Director of Interpretation at Bartram's Garden, talks about it as a place of contradictions. There is colonial history, Black history, Indigenous history, geological and natural history, industrial influence and, of course, present-day manifestations of all of those things as well. The voices one could hear and connect with when at Bartram's are endless. Of course, this is true anywhere you are. But at Bartram's they are very close to the surface.

MT: The “who” of *Heat Wave* also seems to be pretty important. Who's in the piece and how did you cast your work?

JJ: I cast a group of performer/creators who I knew to be deep listeners, and people who aren't afraid to be seen in messy, vulnerable states. Each performer brings a distinct personal and creative background to the process and a unique response to the site:

Sabriaya Shipley is a poet, actor, and educator

Maddie Hopfield\* is a dancer and choreographer

Frankie Ferrari is a physical theater maker

Mia Donata Rocchio is a physical theater maker and movement coach/choreographer

Desireé Hall is a dancer, acrobat, and choreographer

Irina Varina is a performance artist and filmmaker

April Rose, our designer, is a maker of immersive experiences and arts admin leader

MT: You've said that to an extent you weren't really a “dancer” until recent years—do you still feel this way? I've heard that *Heat Wave* is really a “dance.” How do you feel about claiming these titles? I could definitely project a politic myself, but I'm curious to hear how you see yourself, your work, and your collaborators in the context of “dance.”

JJ: I come from a devised theater background, but ever since attending Headlong Performance Institute I have also identified as a dancer, or at least a “mover.” I felt this more so once I started taking workshops at Leah Stein Dance Company. When Leah offered the idea that technique is “how well you listen” not “how well you move,” that was incredibly liberating. I think that anyone who brings awareness to their body and how it moves is dancing.

MT: You're a pretty prolific artist! What motivates you to keep making?

JJ: I've been gathering ideas about how and why I want to make work for many years. Now I'm in a period of trying, failing, and learning.

This is how I relate to the world, how I build community, how I figure out my politics, how I grow as a person. Also, I love being a beginner.

\*Maddie Hopfield is a writer at thINKingDANCE.

[HEAT WAVE](#), Jillian Jetton, Bartram's Garden, February 15-16.

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