

# thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Terrell Halsey

## Staff Tackle Culture and Policy at the Performance Garage

by Kristen Shahverdian

This summer—as reported on [WHYY](#), [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#), [American Theatre](#), and robustly discussed on [Philly Theatre's Facebook](#) page—former staff, interns, and artists from [PlayPenn](#) accused Victor Keen of sexual harassment and assault, which took place during his tenure on the board of PlayPenn. Keen and his wife Jeanne Ruddy co-founded the Performance Garage in 2000 as the home for Jeanne Ruddy Dance, a 501(c)3 dance company. Since its final season in 2012, the non-profit has shifted focus to the dance space for performances, rehearsals, workshops, and classes. Keen is currently President of its Board.

The allegations of sexual harassment and assault surfaced on July 8th, after theater artist Terrell Green galvanized the theater community to speak out against racism and sexism at PlayPenn. These were the allegations as reported in American Theatre:

“Writer Devin T. Randall wrote that Keen had ‘placed his arm around me’ in the basement of his house, in preparation for a PlayPenn pizza party at Keen’s gallery; next playwright and former PlayPenn education director Sarah B. Mantell [wrote that Keen had assaulted her](#) at a company gathering...Other allegations about harassment and unwanted flirtation from Keen soon surfaced on Facebook, along with questions about Keen’s ongoing association with PlayPenn and the failure of its leadership to protect its workers and interns.”

In the July 15th WHYY article, Green said, “I’m asking people to whistleblow. When I started to call out the lack of leadership, we got to a conversation where it was, ‘Oh, this is a conversation about equity. This is a conversation about racism.’ But then we started to get the conversation about sexual violence.”

Keen issued his own statement which [WHYY](#) published in the July 15th article. “These allegations are shattering to me. I am truly sorry and apologize to those who found my behavior to be inappropriate and will be more aware of my interactions with others going forward. It is unfortunate my relationship and strong support of PlayPenn has been destroyed, and I am incredibly disappointed in how the

organization handled it.” According to the same article, Keen has sat on the Boards of the Kimmel Center, Philadelphia Film Society, and Philadelphia Theatre Company. I spoke to Jeanne Ruddy on October 2nd, who told me, “Victor was not required to drop off any boards. He advised his two other boards about the allegations, wanting to be transparent. In order not to create a distraction for these boards, he offered to resign; his resignation was accepted with regret by those boards. I, and the Performance Garage Board support Victor, who has publicly apologized to the extent he ever made anyone at PlayPenn feel uncomfortable. That was never his intention.”

What follows is a report on the response from staff at the Performance Garage and its Board of Directors, as well as my journey documenting it.

## **Does it Matter?**

After reading the allegations of Keen’s sexual harassment, I started looking for responses from the dance community. Given the reckoning, particularly around race at arts organizations during the summer of 2020, coupled with the recent #MeToo movement, I expected more response from dance leaders and dancers. While searching for information, I heard more than once that accusations against Keen at PlayPenn had no bearing on the Garage. I disagreed. I set out to find what the Performance Garage had to say on the matter and how they would ensure the safety of staff and performing artists at their organization.

Two staff members at the Performance Garage, furloughed since March, had also been following the news from PlayPenn. Paige Phillips, Program and Communications Manager, and Julia Bryck, Rental Associate, told me that Green’s leadership in the theater community inspired them to spearhead a letter calling for changes at the Performance Garage. This letter was signed by 14 current and former staff members of the Garage, and they sent it to its Board of Directors on August 10th.

## **Letter to the Board of the Performance Garage**

The letter Bryck and Phillips sent to the Board is not solely about Keen. The three-page letter addresses structures of white supremacy and paternalism that the writers encountered in this arts organization and details the ways the actions of the Garage have failed to live up to its mission, which, according to its website, is “to create an environment that nurtures dance artists and facilitates the building of a broader audience for dance in Philadelphia.” The first request is that Keen step down as President of the Board of Directors and that the Board search for a new Executive Director, to replace Jeanne Ruddy. According to the letter writers, the organization’s current strategic plan already anticipates Ruddy stepping down. By having her do so now, the signers envision that the Garage can create an opportunity for racial diversity in its entirely white staff.

The letter also points to dated language in the Performance Garage’s programming and asks for the removal of “inner-city youth” from all descriptions of the *YouthMoves* program. At least on the website, it appears this change has been made. The signers want the Garage marketing to reflect a diversity in bodies—around gender, race, size, and age. They want renters to have more autonomy over their shows without comment or interference from staff. Additionally, equity in compensation is targeted: “Pay structure should be re-examined to ensure that salaries are commensurate with time and responsibilities regardless of race/ethnicity/gender. Currently, two male employees are paid more per hour than any of the womxn on staff.” They further want the staff to complete anti-racist and anti-oppression training.

On August 21st, two weeks after sending their letter, Bryck and Phillips received a communication from the Board stating that the Board takes the “matters seriously and will respond once we have reviewed each item in accordance with the Performance Garage mission and policies.”

## **Workplace Culture**

During this waiting period, I spoke to Bryck and Phillips over Zoom, joined by Judy Williams, Rental and Operations Manager. Williams, who has been at the Garage for twelve years, did not sign the letter but told me she supports their quest for positive change.

I asked Phillips about their decision to go directly to the Board of Directors, rather than start with Ruddy, their director. She explained,

“Anytime I expressed a concern, Jeanne was dismissive... As well, since our first concern is about her husband, there is a conflict of interest.” According to Phillips, Ruddy threatened to fire her if she ever expressed her opinion at a Board meeting.

When I asked Ruddy about Paige’s comment, she told me, “That is false. We have weekly staff meetings where the staff gives their input around their job, and I always listen. Our handbook addresses the appropriate ways for staff to provide opinions and ask questions regarding the initiatives of the Performance Garage. Bringing them up at a Board meeting is not one of those options, as I commented to Paige.”

Phillips shared a directive from the organization’s handbook, “If you are not comfortable speaking with your supervisor or you are not satisfied with your supervisor’s response, you are encouraged to speak with the President of the Board of Directors.” Given that the President of the Board is the husband of their supervisor, Bryck and Phillips determined that going to the entire 12-member Board was the best option for a fair response.

I asked Williams, who has been at the Garage the longest, what she wanted from Bryck and Phillips’ letter to the Board. She told me, “my hope was for a conversation to be started.”

Williams, Bryck, and Phillips expressed excitement about the prospect of a renewed Performance Garage. Bryck told me change was “the only way to make this a safer place for the next people who come in.” Ultimately, she explained, “we don’t want this space to crumble. My hope is to demonstrate that these concerns are not from just a few disgruntled employees—the problems affect the larger dance community, and we have the tools to start tackling them right now.”

On September 14th, Bryck and Phillips initiated a [petition](#) on change.org, circulated mainly through the creators’ social media outlets. It lays out the remaining asks of the Board. Currently 283 have signed.

## The Board’s Investigation

On September 28th, a representative of the Board sent thINKingDANCE the final response from their investigation. The first page, of this four-page letter, notes the Board’s “deep disappointment into how this entire process has been handled by the initiators of the letter.” They state that the letter writers are not “acting in good faith” and that the letter writers attempted to “coerce” others into signing their petition.

The Board goes through most items from the August 10th letter and concludes there will not be a leadership change at the Garage. They state they are willing to add an additional dancer to the Board “bearing in mind that there is a philanthropic commitment made by every Board member to the Performance Garage.” While they “do not agree that the Performance Garage has been complicit in creating a negative culture,” they will hold trainings if they are needed. There is no mention of the gender pay discrepancy. They end the letter stating, “your handling of this matter, from August 10th until now, does not demonstrate any good faith interest in or real care about the Performance Garage,” and they see no need for further communication.

The Board issued an earlier statement to thINKingDANCE regarding its President Victor Keen:

“Victor has already publicly addressed these allegations, which have nothing to do with the Performance Garage. The Board has fully considered the available facts regarding the allegations, and we find no reason to remove him.”

## Care

I have thought a lot about care since March, especially while researching and writing this article: self-care, caring for others, taking care, the ethics of care, why should I care?

Art scholar Kirsten Lloyd wrote that the ethics of care focuses on attentiveness, empathy, openness, and directedness. It can be used to maintain a gender binary and hierarchy—care as indulgent, soft (read: feminine). It is a bit of a buzzword right now. But it does not need

to be an empty gesture; I am drawn to care holding within it openness and directedness. These actions can be a way to re-organize and re-think the structures of organizations.

The Performance Garage, in my view, is emblematic of the culture of arts organizations that claim to serve us. I go back to its stated mission—to “nurture dance artists”—and I wonder at the disconnect between treating staff well, and their mission, so rooted in the concept of care.

Maybe Williams’ original hope was on target—a conversation, at least, to determine if we care, if these issues at the Garage warrant a deeper look and to choose a path that leads from care into action.

*Read the response from the Board of the Performance Garage [here](#).*

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October 7, 2020