

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Michelle F Smith

Embodying Human-Nature Interdependence

by Caitlin Green

Merging nature and nurture, [Cardell Dance Theater's](#) *TERRA: Bodies and Territories* (choreographed by Silvana Cardell) embodies both the instinctual impulse for survival, and the interdependence that makes communities thrive. This community is particularly matriarchal. The work is inspired by the study of ecofeminism, which examines the oppression of both nature and women as effects of patriarchy. It illustrates the notion of oneness, or a particular synergy between dancers and their connection to the Earth.

Guests are ushered down a trail into the woods at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, where the evening-length performance takes place. A clearing in the forest foliage is claimed as the theater space and decorated with various sculptures made of tree trunks and twigs, accented with red string, fabrics, or paint (designed by [Sarah Kavage](#)).

Some of the objects are used as props while others function solely as décor. A lanky tree trunk has branches carved into fingertips with its nails painted red. The hand lays as a giant centerpiece that gives this piece of nature personality. Similarly, two tree trunks are carved into legs wearing heels and further hint to a feminine quality. Two tall, cone-shaped, stick-woven figures are worn by dancers as dresses while simultaneously creating a half-human/half-tree-centaur effect that gives a new meaning to the phrase “human nature.”

The dancers use the ground, trees and each other to seek support and stability – sometimes becoming a stable foundation or co-creating one for others to stand, sit, or lay upon. With lots of rounding and molding into and around each other, their bodies fit together like vines or branches interlacing with the trees and logs. They perform supple backbends, sturdy handstands, and extensions using the environment to find their balance or offering their own body as a stable foundation for a friend. The interactions are leisurely, like play.

In their more nurturing moments, the ensemble tends to the Earth, or emerges from it. Dancers use wooden bowls to sprinkle dust across the ground as if fertilizing the space amidst a repetitious movement phrase that includes turns, pivots, and pauses. In smaller

groups of three, dancers surround one member of their triads as they emerge from the ground in a way that mimics childbirth. These intentional and tender moments have a slow, rhythmic quality that feels receptive and indulgent. Collectively, they embody the patience and presence of good caregivers and fearless leaders.

Using slabs of wood, dancers create a shelter that they shape-shift into various tableaux of home. Working together to lift and reposition the wooden pieces, they create a new story with each new shape. Inside their shelter, they depict snapshots of sisterhood, motherhood, celebratory gatherings, girlfriend gossip, and care work.

The piece occasionally takes sudden shifts in tone, sparked by a switch in the soundscape or a newcomer. This evokes animal-like impulses from dancers, who quickly synchronize in their sensing and vigilance. They band together in their ready-stance or spread out to take watch from every angle. While their attention disperses, their intention is singular. They work together toward resolution with efficiency. Here, the choreography is more individualized, and everyone seems to know their role. They are primed by instinct and programmed for survival in the context of the wilderness. I imagine they're a pack of wolves, or a scurry of squirrels.

After the show, I return to the visitor's center where the photo installation and virtual reality experience live (video by Michelle Smith and Paula Meninato with technical support by [Greenhouse Media](#)). The gallery exhibit archives the work in images (by Kate Proto) that capture notable moments from the performance and re-absorb viewers into the world of TERRA: Bodies and Territories.

[TERRA: Bodies and Territories](#), Cardell Dance Theatre, Schuylkill Center, June 13 – 29.

Home Page Image Description: *a dancer presses against the bare ground on all fours while another dancer stands barefoot on top of their back with the support of two others who hold her arms. They are wearing long-sleeved clothing in shades of grey, black and red. They are surrounded by trees and foliage. There are audience members in the foreground watching.*

Article Page Image Description: *Three dancers wearing white long-sleeved, hooded outfits hold tall wooden boards in front of them. They are surrounded by forest, trees and foliage. The photo is taken from the perspective of the audience with other audience members in the frame.*

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June 22, 2025