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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Gabriel Bienczycki

The X-Factor

By Julie Diana

PA Ballet Principal Julie Diana talks with Christine Cox, Artistic Director of Ballet X, about getting the company up and running.

What inspired you to start a company?

When Matthew (Neenan) and I were at Pennsylvania Ballet, we had large gaps of time off every year – three months. The idea was to put a show together for the Fringe Festival and do two or three shows in the summer. Matt and I also started choreographing for Shut Up and Dance (a MANNA and PA Ballet collaboration to help people living with HIV and AIDS). We got an understanding of what it was like to put a show together. There was excitement around something that was different from what we would typically do on the main stage. We felt there was a void in the city for this type of dance, more intimate and original work based in classical technique.

Why did you collaborate with Matthew versus starting out on your own?

I didn't dream I was going to be a part of building a dance company! It was really a matter of situations in front of me and saying yes to them. I don't think I could've done it on my own. We were novices – we didn't know anything about what we were doing except that we knew a lot about dance. * Having the strength of our friendship and history, we could bounce ideas off each other and feel empowered. We knew we were going to take risks, but that's what it was about. Our inexperience was helpful because if we knew how hard it was going to be and how much money it required, we might not have done it.

As part of the Philadelphia dance community for almost 20 years, you're familiar with the audience and their likes and dislikes. How do you approach programming and marketing for Ballet X?

Our tastes hopefully align with what the audience wants. We don't want to alienate them. We choose music we're passionate about and when we're curating an evening, the music has a lot to do with how we place a choreographer. Presenting a lot of world premieres is a hard idea to market. What's worked for [Ballet X] is a really strong image. We haven't had a marketing education, but we're clear on the

dance component. The rest is just instinct.

What are the greatest challenges of building and sustaining a company?

Growth. Going from my Blackberry being the office and me running around to having a team supporting the business part of the art. That's been the challenge, getting a strong infrastructure. I'm excited to say that we've had three people move across country – from major companies – to join Ballet X. They feel comfortable enough to leave a big company and come to work for us, and they know they're part of a growing family. I feel really great about that.

What do you look for in a dancer?

Matt and I love strong, individual dancers. Work ethic is important, passion and desire. It's got to be a positive atmosphere; we can't have giant egos pushing everybody around in the studio. We want to work at the highest level and not be bogged down in personality debates.

You and Matt developed a fan base when you danced with PA Ballet that I'm sure has followed you in your pursuits...

Definitely. I've been so fortunate to have the support of Philadelphia to have this idea come to life. Matt and I are honest about what we're doing and the audience feels connected because we're very personable. It's not just this dance company; it's a part of what Philadelphia is helping to create.

How has Ballet X's affiliation with PA Ballet evolved?

When we did those summer productions, it was with PA Ballet dancers. We already had trust, we understood each other, and we could play! We could go in the studio and make something totally different from what we would do at the Academy of Music. As our company grew, we had to identify ourselves as something separate from PA Ballet. We're not an offshoot anymore. In 2007, we started our residency at the Wilma Theatre and couldn't coordinate timing with PA Ballet dancers because they were in season too. It was that residency that really launched us into forming our own troupe.

How do you envision the future of Ballet X?

I would like to offer a more competitive salary for the dancers and have exciting full-length ballets, stories no one ever thought would be a ballet; tour more around the region because we can really jump up and yell quite easily. And we've talked about having a school in a neighborhood that could focus on a community center. Philly is home. When we look into a place, it'll be downtown Philly.

*In 2000, Cox and Neenan partnered with Amanda Miller and Tobin Rothlein to form Phrenic New Ballet. Cox and Neenan then split from Phrenic in 2004 in an effort to focus solely on contemporary ballet. They inherited the non-profit status of Phrenic New Ballet and changed its name to Ballet X.

Ballet X Fall Series, November 16-20 at The Wilma Theater. balletx.org

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