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A Philadelphia Take on the Bessies

by Ellen Chenoweth

"I hope I win a Bessie someday."

"You have to work really hard to win a Bessie."

I was on the subway to the New York Dance and Performance Bessie Awards, and looked up from my book to see who was engaged in such a sweet, striving, New-York-version-of-the-American-Dream conversation. The two young men moved away before I could overhear anything else, but they provided a reminder of the desirability of the awards, at least in some quarters.

Named in honor of influential mentor and teacher Bessie Schonberg and held this year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Bessies ceremony featured several live performances and video clips of nominees, in addition to the presentation of the awards. Although the awards are focused on dance and performance in New York, there were many connecting threads with the Philadelphia dance scene.

--Eiko Otake has been a frequent presence in Philadelphia recently, through her work with Headlong and [Philadelphia Contemporary](#), most recently performing as part of David Brick's *Quiet Circus* at Bartram's Garden. She received a Special Citation for "making herself 'radically available' in public and private spaces over several weeks, actively engaging with pressing political and environmental issues of our time" through the Danspace Project Platform: A Body in Places. In her acceptance speech, she thanked Philadelphia regular and project dramaturg Mark McCloughan for "stay[ing] cool when I was burning hot."

--Former Philly resident and Headlong collaborator Jaamil Olawale Kosoko was nominated along with his designer Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste for Outstanding Music Composition / Sound Design for their work on *#negrophobia*.

--University of the Arts School of Dance graduate Larissa Velez-Jackson was nominated for Outstanding Emerging Choreographer.

Jillian Peña, on faculty in the School of Dance at UArts, was also nominated for Outstanding Emerging Choreographer.

--Ishmael Houston-Jones, also on faculty at UArts and currently a project consultant for David Brick's *Quiet Circus*, led the In Memoriam portion of the program honoring community members who have passed away in the last year. He spoke of his collaborator Fred Holland, describing him as "my best friend for most of my adult life." The two met and started working together in Philadelphia in the '70s, taking classes from Terry Fox and Helmut Gottschild, and performing at the Painted Bride.

--Tap legend Brenda Bufalino was honored with a Lifetime Achievement in Dance award and a performance tribute. In her speech, she thanked her close partner, the late [Charles "Honi" Coles](#), who grew up tapping in the streets of Philadelphia, for "fill[ing] my ears with sonorities that stayed with me the rest of my life."

--Philadanco founder Joan Myers Brown was greeted with warm applause as she came to the stage to present an award for Service to the Field of Dance to Alex Smith of Brooklyn's Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center. "If it wasn't for New York, there would be no Philadelphia Dance Company!" She went on to explain that in its early years, Philadanco used the prestige of performing in New York to try to impress people in the company's hometown.

I have read critiques of awards ceremonies in the dance community. (Dance writer Kate Mattingly articulately summarizes many of the issues in her article "[The Complexities and Contradictions of Awards Ceremonies](#).") They're exclusionary, or promote hyper-individualism, or the process of selecting winners is opaque. I've witnessed these debates in Washington, D.C., and in Philly, and the questions are alive and kicking in New York as well. But for me, the benefits of dance folk gathering and celebrating each other, in a society that under-celebrates our field, are too powerful to ignore. This year's incarnation of the Bessies, to the eyes of a first-time visitor, looked joyful and diverse and real. I learned about several dancers, choreographers, or organizations that were new to me and rejoiced in those that I did know.

There were some complaints that the ceremony was too long. A nine-course gourmet meal takes a long time too, but why would you complain about an embarrassment of riches? When you hear an artist like Molly Lieber (winner of an Outstanding Performer award) emotionally thank the choreographers she's worked with, people she's danced with, and former teachers, don't you think of the other people in this field who have shaped you and how grateful you are? When tap dancer Kazunori Kumagai (another Outstanding Performer) earnestly and simply states that he just loves tap dance, is there any way to resist breaking out in a wide grin?

The future of our own dance awards here in Philadelphia, the esteemed Rocky Awards, is uncertain at the moment. The Rocky Awards began in 2001 and have been held every year since, with Dance/UP organizing and producing the event in recent years. With the loss of funding for Dance/UP, the future of the Rocky Awards is up in the air. FringeArts is hosting a discussion about potential ideas, but the time and date are still to be announced. The discussion will be open to all who are interested in the future of these awards.

The full list of Bessie winners and presenters can be found Eva Yaa Asantewaa's [Infinite Body](#) blog.

Bessie Awards, Brooklyn Academy of Music, October 18, 2016.

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