

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Candice DeTore

Feed Your Friends

by Whitney Weinstein

In the early 1990s, incidences of AIDS peaked in Philadelphia. The disease primarily targeted low-income people with few options for maintaining healthy nutrition and positive contact with society, both crucial criteria for prolonging life expectancy. [Metropolitan Area Neighborhood Nutrition Alliance \(MANNA\)](#), founded in 1990, was created in the spirit of community, where local individuals devote their time so that their terminally ill neighbors can procure balanced meals.

Then, in 1992, the dancers of PA Ballet teamed up with MANNA to create Shut Up and Dance, a yearly benefit production full of laughter, tears, and appreciation. Born on the stage of the Trocadero, this endearing fundraiser has since raised an accumulated \$1.5 million. Every year dancers dedicate their time and talent to care for others by boxing up meals, asking for donations, and dancing their hearts out!

At this year's charitable affair in April, MANNA celebrated the Steve Korman Nutrition Center's move to 420 North 20th Street to match the increasing demands for their services. The new spot will enable the organization to serve 2.5 million meals yearly, which doubles their current production. Dietitians, chefs, and volunteers work together to follow MANNA's "Food Is Medicine" model; they serve 2,500 clients every month, and together they assist in resisting over 70 types of life-threatening illnesses.

The awkwardness of tight seating on a hot night dwindled as I commingled with my neighbors through the lively function. Shut Up and Dance makes you "feel beauty, fun, love," according to Meredith Rainey in a video interview presented during the show. In the words of Ian Hussey, this event is a "beautiful, strange, extraordinary beast...a labor of love." For five years, Hussey has been the producing director and will be bequeathing his role to Alexandra Hughes next year.

Martha Graham Cracker emceed the evening with enthusiasm and quirky monologues. Baskets were passed down the rows near the

beginning of the second half, where \$13,000 was raised. To promote giving, Martha raffled off feats by the professional dancers in exchange for money: for \$50, a dancer executed five consecutive turns. For \$100, a male bench-pressed a ballerina. For one high bidder, a spank!

The ballerinas presented an assortment of dances that displayed impeccable dexterity and a passion for movement. A certain freedom emerged from their dancing. Stiff positioning surrendered to breath, loosely releasing into back bends and turns that reminded me of autumn leaves spiraling in the wind.

Brian Sanders presented a porta-potty parkour, where dancers trapped a man before climbing on, tumbling over, and shoving the bulky blue box. Audience members gasped with concern over the man's safety as the mischievous movers aggressively jostled it back and forth. What a relief to see him emerge at the end, though with a toilet seat around his neck and clothes in disarray!

A string quartet played onstage during some pieces. Rock to the Future, a group that supports Philly youth in music making, featured their student band during another. Martha led the audience to sing, clap, and slow dance during "Lean On Me." Despite the audience's eager participation, as the show's runtime surpassed two hours, I wondered if the artists on stage were having more fun than the viewers.

The final piece performed was "The Dying Swan," an annual tradition that this year belonged to Amy Aldridge, one of PA Ballet's most loved and known principals. At its conclusion, whether in anticipation of her upcoming retirement or inspired by the overwhelming power of the evening's experience, the house stood, cheering for what felt like hours.

Shut Up and Dance doesn't necessarily attempt to present profoundly meaningful work or award-winning choreography. Rather, it is comparable to a talent show, organized by passionate professionals. Its message is clear: stop talking. Dance. Donate. Care. Make a change. Love your neighbor. Feed your friends.

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