

 ARTS+ CULTURE

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# CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN TEXAS

*Talent, Training, Festivals, & More*

In Texas, as in most other regions, funds for contemporary dance are spread thinly, even across companies considered to be the toast of the state's dance scene. Let's throw our hands into the air and accept that, despite some aches and pains like the lack of dollars and cents, the art form continues to move and shake. With such dance focused presenters as Dallas' TITAS, Houston's Society for the Performing Arts and Miller Outdoor Theatre and Austin's Texas Performing Arts, world class contemporary dance is also often at our doorstep. In fact, at the moment, the diagnosis looks pretty good as the overall health of contemporary dance in Texas seems to be improving.

## ARTIST TRANSFUSION

Although Texas can boast some serious resilience when it comes to companies, such as Karen Stokes Dance, METdance, Dallas Black Dance Theater, Forklift Dance, FrenetiCore, Elledanceworks, Kathy Dunn Hamrick and many others, there's always room for new voices. In the last few years we've seen dance artists actually pack their suitcases and migrate to the Lone Star state. For Annie Arnoult, the move is a homecoming. She is a native Houstonian, but over 20 years ago Arnoult moved to Chicago, where there were plenty of resources for emerging choreographers.

"Dance festivals, community performances, choreography workshops, space grants, small project grants and professional development opportunities," Arnoult explains. "I saw that opportunity there, grabbed it by the horns and ran with it, with a strong cohort of colleagues and collaborators running right along beside me."

Arnoult grew up as a dance professional in Chicago, establishing Striding Lion, an interdisciplinary collaborative that was later re-organized into a dance theater company, and teaching as a lecturer in dance at Northwestern University. Then, in late 2013, what Arnoult describes as "a serendipitous chain of events" led her to conversations with Dance Source Houston, MATCH (Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston), and the dance program at University of Houston.

"The violence was part of the time in which they were written." She says, "These things happened; women died in childbirth, and stepmothers came in and children slept with fathers. But it's strange because people sometimes talk about how gruesome the stories are; I found them to be so funny and poetic and lyrical because they really represent their time. They especially represent the women."

Less than a year later, Arnoult and children moved to Houston, where she's wasted no time becoming a contributing member of the dance community, establishing a new company, Open Dance Project; a venue for dance training and education called Hunter Dance Center, which is beginning its inaugural season in September; and joining the faculty of University of Houston's growing dance program.

Arnoult isn't the only Houston native to move back in the last year. Lori Yuill is a performer and choreographer who left in 2003 to pursue a master's degree. After working for a decade in New York and Washington, D.C., Yuill returned. She premiered *In the Upper 30s* at Barnstorm Dance Festival earlier this year and continues to pursue opportunities to make work while making a living as a personal trainer. Pittsburgh-based Jasmine Hearn, who claims Houston as her hometown, straddles multiple cities. Hearn was awarded an Individual Artist

Grant this year by the Houston Arts Alliance for her latest solo project, *memory keep(h)er*, in which Hearn captures images of her hometown and presents them with stories and memories of her grandmother and other black women who raised her. She also was just awarded a Dance Source Houston 2015/2016 residency.

Why this repatriation now? "Houston is quickly becoming the Chicago of my early 20s," says Arnoult. "...a city providing the concrete resources needed to draw and sustain a vibrant community of dance makers and dance lovers."

Make no mistake, Houston isn't the only Texas city attracting new dance residents. Southern Methodist University alum, Joshua L. Peugh, returned to Dallas after dancing in Seoul for a few years. While in the area as a visiting choreographer at his alma mater, he was invited to join Bruce Wood Dance Project as a dancer and associate choreographer in 2011. By fall of 2013 he was 'all in,' debuting the American branch of his company, Dark Circles Contemporary Dance, which he had founded in South Korea. Since then, the 31-year-old has been in demand, setting works on companies like BalletX, BODYTRAFFIC, Whim W'Him and Tulsa Ballet II, and keeping his company busy performing in festivals here and abroad. This summer, Dark Circles played the Inside/Out stage at the prestigious Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, where the company received a standing ovation by the 700 plus member audience.

Peugh was named one of "25 To Watch" by *Dance Magazine* in 2015 and Texas, especially, is watching. "It's allowed me to do more of the work I love to do, which is to create fantasies through movement," Peugh says of the national attention he's received.

Dark Circles, which Big-D magazine recently voted Best Dance Company, will premiere *Aimless Young Man* on Oct. 8-11, a performance that has made the Fort Worth Star-Telegram's must-see list and Peugh will debut his new production of *The Rite of Spring* when the company shares a bill in March with AvantChamber Ballet at Dallas City Performance Hall.

Unlike Peugh, Arnoult, and others, the trip to Texas was not a return for co-choreographers, Curtis Uhlemann and Erica Gionfriddo. When they made the decision to move their award-winning company, ARCOS Dance from Santa Fe, New Mexico, they actively searched nationwide for a new base city. The team settled on Austin because what they found was a community of dancers and audiences hungry for but not inundated with contemporary dance.

ARCOS Dance will unveil *The Warriors: A Love Story* at Austin's Rollins Studio Theater the weekend of Sept. 11-12. The production, which "confronts the disturbing beauty and profound devastation of war," is inspired by the stories and reflections of ARCOS co-director and multimedia collaborator, Eliot Gray Fisher's maternal grandparents. The work received outstanding reviews and Mervyn Stutter's "Spirit of the Fringe" award as a result of its performance at Scotland's Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2014.

Locally, Gionfriddo and Uhlemann have quickly become denizens of the dance community, forging relationships with dance studios, high schools, the University of Texas, theater companies, and art galleries. However, the pair, along with Fisher, are infusing their own creative dynamic and connections as they soak in what Austin has to offer. "Our company has taken us all around the country and internationally," says Gionfriddo, "and the relationships we formed

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along the way have created a dynamic, diverse network that spans the globe.”

Under their non-profit umbrella, ARCOS Foundation for the Arts, the company is committed to sharing resources and information through professional-level dance intensives, development workshops which frequently function as laboratories for independent artists, and initiatives such as their Dance Artist Development Award, designed to provide financial support for performers seeking to expand their personal practice through workshop or class opportunities in Austin.

“The way audiences engage with the arts is changing, due in large part to technological innovations that are rapidly transforming our daily lives,” says Gionfriddo. “The more artists out there working to help audiences re-imagine this relationship, the better.”

## NOURISHING ARTISTS

What keeps a fantastic dancer like Houston’s Candace Rattliff in Texas? Sure, the fact that she can dance with two top companies, Hope Stone and Vault, and guest with NobleMotion Dance is critical, but places to train are also essential. “The great thing about Houston right now is that there are many studios to take class with quality teachers,” says Rattliff. “I am usually at the Houston Dance Collective, but also find myself at the MET, or Vittaca, or Adeum, or cross training with aerial classes at Vault Houston.”

Great minds are thinking alike when it comes to addressing infrastructure and the crucial need for dance artists to have continual and affordable access to professional development. In 2014, when Houston’s Hope Stone Inc. closed its studio space and, with it, a majority of the city’s professional-level open classes, three of Houston’s foremost independent dancers, JoDee Engle, Courtney D. Jones, and Catalina Alexandra emerged to spearhead the Houston Dance Collective, finding space and support from Dance Source Houston (DSH) to offer ongoing professional-level classes at The Barn, a downtown facility that the organization has occupied since 2013.

Jones, named one of “25 to watch” in *Dance Magazine* in 2012, is another native Houstonian who found her way back after working in cities like Miami and New York, and performing on a national Broadway tour. Since her return five years ago, she’s worked solidly as a performer in theatrical and dance productions, a choreographer, and instructing locally and at institutions like Bates Dance Festival and the Joffrey Ballet School Summer Intensive in New York City.

Though she recently accepted a full-time teaching position at her alma mater, Houston’s High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Jones has the drive and spirit of a freelancer. She feels strongly that open classes for professionals are necessary for cities to be taken seriously as harbors for quality dance.



“Local professionals need to be able to maintain their bodies, to be audition- and performance-ready and to participate in continuing education. Visiting professionals need these very options as well.”

Contemporary dancers in Austin have found open classes for professionals available at Ballet Austin, Tapestry Dance, Café Dance, and via Austin Community Ballet, which operates as a weekly co-op where class-members take class from one another. It is an opportunity to stay sharp, get feedback, practice teaching, and network, all while keeping costs low. Forklift Danceworks also offers training through Body Shift in mixed ability improvisational dance.

San Antonio’s Amber Ortega-Perez has been instrumental in offering educational opportunities for contemporary dancers through her company, SpareWorks Dance and Modern Dancers Co-Laboratory (Modacolab), which she co-founded. She’s also the coordinator for the Works-In-Progress program made available to artists by San Antonio Dance Umbrella and Jump-Start Theater Company. Meanwhile, pockets of professional performers and teachers in North Texas provide intensives, such as the Big Rig Dance Collective’s Dance Co-Op, as well as workshops and class opportunities via the thriving dance programs of its local colleges, studios, and companies like Dallas Black Dance Theater and Contemporary Ballet Dallas.

## GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT SERVICE

While dancers must often take professional development into their own hands, service organizations that give and respond with support tailored to dance are critical to the success of contemporary dance in most communities.

For over 40 years, the Dance Council of North Texas has been showing us how it’s done, managing to unify an incredibly diverse group of DFW Metroplex

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LEFT • ARCOS Dancers Kalle Hopkins and Jini Lee Nguyen in *The Warriors*; A Love Story, Sept. 11-12 at Rollins Theater; Photo Courtesy of ARCOS Dance. RIGHT • SpareWorks dancers Fabiola Torralba and Charles Perez performing *Amber Ortega-Perez’s Space*; Light Modulator at the Austin Dance Festival; Photo courtesy of SpareWorks.



dance artists, educators, and studios year after year. The Dance Council provides a quarterly dance newsletter, events and master classes, discounts on space rental, job notifications, and much more.

Likewise, San Antonio Dance Umbrella and its tireless leaders have provided essential resources to their growing dance community since the 1990s. Though Austin's umbrella organization has faltered in recent years, efforts to support and organize the community have not.

In Houston, Dance Source Houston has operated the Bayou City's "Dance Card" for upcoming performances for years, and provides essential online coverage of dance performances and access to funding opportunities for artists. Acquiring its own dance facility, however, was perhaps the biggest step forward for the organization and, under the flexible, service-oriented executive direction of Stephanie Wong, is strengthening the city's dance community.

"I am finding [DSH] increasingly important to keeping our dance community thriving," observes Frame Dance Productions founder, Lydia Hance, a dance-maker who plays by her own rules, whether setting performances in a gallery, in the back of truck, or on Houston's Metro transports. "Micro grants, festivals, education and a venue – it is an organization that has responded to the needs of Houston dancers, and has anticipated future needs."

Indeed, one such timely response has been filling the festival-shaped hole left when both Austin and Houston's Big Range Festivals disappeared from the landscape. Dance Source Houston debuted its Barnstorm Dance Festival last Spring with a familiar three-program format featuring dance artists from all over the state. And DSH has just announced their second round of resident artists, including Autumn Knight, Jacquelyne Boe, Laura Gutierrez, Amy Elizabeth and Jasmine Hearn.

## IMPROVING CIRCULATION

Did someone mention festivals? The contemporary dance festival circuit in Texas is alight with activity at the moment—another sign that momentum is building. According to Peugh, performing at dance festivals is how his company, Dark Circles got started over five years ago in South Korea. In addition to providing welcome exposure for dance artists and companies, festivals serve a crucial purpose in the contemporary dance world in particular. "Being around other artists and seeing their work and passion for our form is an inspiration and an encouragement," says Peugh. "It's important to see what other artists are doing in other cities or countries and to connect with peers creating in our field."

Dance Council of North Texas has nearly 20 years of experience running the educationally-focused Dance Planet festival; last September it brought back the Dallas DanceFest after a hiatus with great success, and the line up for this year's festival, Sept. 4-6 is outstanding. Contemporary Dance/Fort Worth presented the 12th annual Modern Dance Festival at The Modern in collaboration with

the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in July and, for the seventh year, Texas Woman's University Department of Dance will celebrate dance with their Improvisational Dance Festival with classes, performances, and jams in October.

For a while, Austin's dance festival opportunities were largely organized by just a few individuals, namely Ellen Bartel of Spank Dance Company, who directed Austin's Big Range, and Phyllis Slattery, whose untimely passing disrupted events like 10 Minutes Max once presented by Austin's Dance Umbrella, of which she was executive director. Kathy Dunn Hamrick has taken the lead in filling Austin's festival gap and launched the first annual AustinDance Festival in March. When submissions came flooding in for the one-day, three-concert program, it was clear contemporary dancers in Texas were craving the opportunity Hamrick was serving. A 2016 festival is already in the works.

In addition to DSH's Barnstorm, Houston's Fringe Festival has for years welcomed and encouraged dance company submissions and Houston's quirkiest company, Suchu Dance premiered their first annual Comedy Dance Festival this year featuring Houston guest artists and companies throughout a three-weekend program. For the last few summers, Houston has hosted Vault's Festival of Aerial Arts and the yearly Third Coast Dance Film Fest's go-anywhere film festival.

The Lone Star state's largest cities, however, aren't the only ones to get in on the festival flurry. The Dance Gallery Festival began in New York but for five years has partnered with Sam Houston State University in Huntsville. The initiative is unique in that it cultivates relationships between dance students and professionals while also providing exposure for participating companies in Texas. There's also Bailando Dance Festival, which is part of Corpus Christi Concert Ballet's Dance Initiative and hosts a full weekend of dance concerts and master classes in a variety of dance styles, and Brazos Contemporary Dance Festival which is held at Texas A&M University in College Station by Brazos Dance Collective, a dance company directed by Carisa Armstrong and Christine Bergeron, two members of the university's dance faculty.

In addition, one might say that dance has finally reached the heart of Texas with Waco's {254}DANCE-FEST now a feature on the festival map. Founded by Out On a Limb Dance Company director, L. Brooke Schlecte, the 3-year-old festival is still a fledgling. Because performance outlets in Waco are more limited than in larger cities, Schlecte has been particularly active in scouting for festival opportunities throughout the state and has recently begun the Texas Dance Festival Alliance with the goal of providing a forum and collection of critical dance festival details for fellow dance community members.

"Dance festivals provide a forum for established and emerging artists to form relationships," says Schlecte. "In order to share, engage, consider, exchange, dialogue, and support one another. This opens up possibilities for experimentation with new ideas in an intimate and unique way. Festivals are ground-breaking and breaking ground for this generation of artists."

Companies such as Dark Circles, METdance enjoy the camaraderie that can happen in a festival setting. Some of those lively conversations have led to collaborations, too, such as Peugh's new work for METdance later this season.

The field is not without recognition of its past either, on Sept 11-12 at Texas State University's Patti Strickel Harrison Theatre, Shay Ishii Dance Company presents Dancestry featuring recreations of works by Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller and Erick Hawkins.

Nationally-recognized dancemakers, unique projects, thriving festivals, new spaces, additional faces, and programs of service and support are breathing much needed oxygen into the contemporary dance art form. Though from the outside, it may appear that the leg bone isn't always connected to the knee bone, from inside, lately, it feels like a different story. The lungs of contemporary dance are filling, allowing the life-blood of the art form, its artists, to circulate, grow, and mobilize throughout the state of Texas.

—NICHELLE SUZANNE

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