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TIPTOEING (AND PIROUETTING) THROUGH THE TULIPS: NEW JERSEY DANCE THEATRE ENSEMBLE'S INKUBATE® SERIES AT REEVES-REED ARBORETUM



This summer, two cultural organizations in Summit, New Jersey Dance Theatre Ensemble (NJDTE) and the Reeves-Reed Arboretum, are partnering for a three-performance summer dance series called INKUBATE®. The first one happened already on June 22, but hurry and you'll catch the second on Wednesday, July 27, or make plans to close out your summer by attending the third on Wednesday, August 31. The performances take place at the Reeves-Reed Arboretum in Summit at 7:00 p.m. (Insider's tip: the grounds open at 6:00 p.m., so come early and explore before the performance!)

But this partnership is not just a venue providing a performance space for a nearby dance company – it's much deeper and more interesting than that. This is a true collaboration between the two organizations (both based in Summit), placing the artistic process front and center by providing choreographic



residencies at NJDTE's new 8,800 square foot facility for contemporary dance artists, and culminating in the three site-specific outdoor performances at the Arboretum.

During the NJDTE residencies, the hand-selected INKUBATE® dance artists and choreographers investigate movement in a think-tank that enables them to grow their ideas into a body of work. In turn, these artists give back by choreographing works for and/or performing in one of the three site-specific INKUBATE® dance events.

This is not the first time these two organizations have partnered like this. Last summer, they presented the first installment of INKUBATE® with "After the Rain," a one-hour original site-specific dance installation work at the Arboretum. Performed by over 35 NJDTE dancers and Shannon Gillen's VIM VIGOR dance theater company from New York City, it received a tremendous response from arts enthusiasts from all over the area.

For the 2016 festival, the leaders of the two organizations (NJDTE artistic director Nancy Turano and Reeves-Reed Arboretum executive director Frank Juliano) have a distinct vision. They want to create a comprehensive festival that creates a connection between nature and art as moving human sculptures. Each performance is a participatory event, inviting the attendees to move within and through the garden locations. The audience thereby becomes a part of the Arboretum's unique natural landscape, enhancing the open space with three-dimensional human movement.

I used to teach Intro to Art History to college kids, and one of my favorite topics was sculpture, especially when we were about to go see them in person during a museum field trip. Free-standing sculpture is unusual in that it's often meant to be viewed from many different vantage points, as opposed to a painting, which is mostly meant to be looked at head-on. Sculpture invites the audience to move around it, seeing how the work interacts with the space around it. INKUBATE® takes that concept a step further by imagining dance, not as something on a stage that's meant to be viewed by an audience seated in front of them, but as an artform that truly interacts with its surroundings, inviting the audience to move and view the dancers from all angles. This creates a really fascinating world for the choreographers and dancers, who have to envision how the dance will look in a fully 360-degree environment, with audiences potentially on all sides. "We wanted to take dance out of the proscenium," Turano tells me. "We're embracing the environment in these pieces, not just pretending that we have a traditional theater stage that happens to be outdoors." They are embracing the fact that there's grass on the ground, rather than a stage floor, and that the environment is almost part of the set and staging.

This idea of taking performing arts out of traditional theater venues and moving it out into the world is a movement that is spreading throughout the performing arts – a concept that I find pretty fascinating. As people, we don't always operate in silos with perfect environments, so it's refreshing to see art performed in these real-world kinds of settings, especially when art forms collaborate like in INKUBATE® when gardens and dance collide. (That's just my metaphor, of course, not a prediction of what might happen between the dancers and the vegetation! Though that makes my arts-administrator brain wonder whether the Arboretum has to take on additional insurance for performances like this...) I also love the idea that INKUBATE® brings together audiences made up of dance lovers and nature lovers (of course, some audience members may be both already) and intertwines them together, just as it does with the dancers and the environment. I hope that, through this collaboration, dance lovers will discover the beauty of nature, and that naturalists will identify with the dance world.



But anyway, as I mentioned, one of the three performances has already passed this year, and the next one is coming up fast. That's on Wednesday, July 27 and features a collaboration between NJDTE's artistic director, Nancy Turano, and electric violinist Val Vigoda. This will be a world premiere work that explores the interplay of live music with the sounds of nature, along with aesthetic sculptural movement. The performance will feature approximately 35 pre-professional dancers ages 13-17 from NJDTE's Summer Dance Intensive. Turano tells me that creating this work was a bit new for her in that the music is very different than what she typically uses. "But it really makes you go back to the drawing board as an artist and choreographer," Turano says. "You have to see how you can keep your own choreographic style while working with entirely new music – some of which is being composed on the spot! It really gives me a chance to grow, while reinforcing my own artistic identity."

Adapting while maintaining artistic vision and integrity may turn out to be the theme of this entire festival, from the creators to the dancers. For example, the dancers will have to maintain the choreography, while adapting to the audience and landscape surrounding them. And in some cases, the transitions between main portions of the dance will be improvised by the dancers on the spot, which is the very definition of

adapting. For these young dancers, this experience is enormously beneficial for their careers. Not only are they collaborating with the choreographers on the creation of the work, but they are learning a great deal about how to adapt to their environments and solve problems as they go – all before a live audience surrounding them, in close proximity.

For the final performance on August 31, master guest choreographer Elizabeth Roxas, a legendary dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, will create an imaginative work inspired by new water sculptures commissioned by the Arboretum, with movement that reflects the flow and power of water. A multigenerational cast of professional and pre-professional dance artists from NJDTE and will collaborate with Roxas for this installation.

[Click here to watch a video of performance highlights.](#)

INKUBATE® is an ambitious, exciting concept – one I can't wait to see develop further. And, of course, Turano is already thinking ahead, with plans in the works to further develop and enlarge the festival for 2017.

The Details

New Jersey Dance Theatre Ensemble (NJDTE) and the Reeves-Reed Arboretum present the INKUBATE® dance installation performance series on Wednesday, July 27 and Wednesday, August 31, both at 7:00 p.m. (but come early because the grounds open at 6:00 p.m.). The performances take place at the Reeves-Reed Arboretum, located at 165 Hobart Avenue in Summit, NJ. Tickets are free to Reeves-Reed Arboretum members, \$10 for non-members and \$5 for students. For more information about NJDTE, visit njdte.org; for more information about the Reeves-Reed Arboretum, visit reeves-reedarboretum.org.

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