

After three decades, Men In Dance still thrills Jessup

- Seattle dance
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- By: Rosemary Jones



Jonathan Mangosing performs Richard Dekker's Interference Pattern.
Credits: David DeSilva, courtesy of Men In Dance

The 9th biennial Men In Dance Festival opens tonight (October 12) at the Broadway Performance Hall. Founder Richard Jessup began this highly eclectic collection of local and out-of-town choreographers creating works for male dancers – although he actually missed producing the inaugural festival.

After Jessup and Tim Talty received King County Arts Commission to produce what they envisioned as a concert and discussion of men pursuing careers in dance, their careers took them out of state. Seattle choreographer Richard Houle and Jack Yantis produced the first festival entitled Against The Grain/Men In Dance (ATG/MID) in 1996 at Freehold Theatre.

Since then the festival has moved around town, begun a long-term collaboration with Kaleidoscope Dance (a children's company), and has been championed by an “who’s who” array of local dancers and choreographers interested in the artistic exploration of “men in dance.”

Jessup remains involved with the festival to this day, serving as one of the producers of the 2012 Men In Dance. In a recent interview, he discussed the festival’s history as well as the current state of dance for male performers.

Did you expect this festival to span three decades?

When I first started to envision this idea with my friend Tim Talty in 1994, I don't think that I could have imagined that it would have not only survived, but thrived as it has. The Seattle dance community has embraced this festival in a very special way. I am grateful that they see the same thing that I saw then: that an evening of all-male dance could be a very unusual, and dynamic thing to see!

Did you feel that there still is an imbalance in how dance is presented? Or has it become a more accepted to have "all male" pieces?

I think that things have changed a lot since 1994, in terms of the balance of dance presented. It is a truth that there are simply fewer men dancing than there are women. So it is still an unusual experience to have two weekends of men onstage. But the perceptions that people have tended to have about men in dance has evolved, and for that I am glad.

For the men performing in this festival, what does this opportunity mean?

This festival has continued to bring a diverse group of men together, to allow them to create together, perform together, also hang out together, in a way that they have not before. The creative juices really get flowing, and I am thrilled by the level of talent that we have been able to find! Also, we have had very talented men participate simply because they want to be a part of the idea of a festival for men in dance. That is very gratifying for me, and for the audience!

For schools, one of the hardest things is recruiting boys to dance. What does the association with youth groups like Kaleidoscope mean for the festival and the future generations of male dancers?

We have always held a strong mission that one of the things we wanted this festival to do was to show boys and young men that a career in dance was within their reach. We have worked with Kaleidoscope several times, and I am always so moved to watch these young men work together, and develop as strong dancers and performers. We must continue to foster the idea that if a young man wants to dance, and is willing to put in the time and effort to get trained correctly, he absolutely should be able to do so!

Men In Dance continues through Oct. 21. For a complete guide to this year's festival, see their website.