

Dance Celebration Marks 30 Years at Annenberg



Ten years ago, the Pilobolus Dance Theatre company arrived on campus with a brand-new work. It featured two male dancers suspended from hooks, swinging in the air. Exploring “closeness and distance, dependence and self-reliance, intimacy and war,” it would be featured in the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts’ Dance Celebration series. It just needed a title.

That first night, each audience member in the Annenberg Center submitted a suggestion. Reflecting on the University’s famous founder, one attendee scribbled, “Ben’s Admonition”—referring to Benjamin Franklin’s statement before signing the Declaration of Independence: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” For Pilobolus, it was perfect. They’ve been performing the work under that name ever since.

For the Dance Celebration series, which enters its 30th season this year, it’s not uncommon for pieces to come in untitled, or even unfinished. That’s inevitable, really, when you’re consistently presenting new works and world premieres. Over the last three decades, Dance Celebration—a joint effort between the Annenberg Center and Philadelphia non-profit Dance Affiliates—has brought more than 200 dance companies to campus to stage more than 1,500 performances in front of nearly a million people. It has hosted new companies and choreographers along with heavy hitters in the contemporary dance world: Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Twyla Tharp, Alvin Ailey, Parsons Dance.

“In terms of volume and length of time, this program has very few equals,” says Randy Swartz C’67, the series’ artistic director. You can’t talk about the Dance Celebration series without talking to Swartz, who has been booking companies and arranging performances for each of those 30 years. And Swartz can’t talk about the series without recalling specific moments:

Patrick Swayze dancing on the Annenberg stage with his wife, Lisa Niemi, and closing with his famous line, “Nobody puts baby in a corner.”

A theater full of insomniacs watching a work about that very condition. (“We know nobody went to sleep during that show,” Swartz jokes.)

Audience members at a National Dance Company of Spain performance calling their friends during intermission to exclaim, “You’ve gotta come see this thing!”

Swartz says that in addition to presenting, Dance Celebration is one of the country’s few dance series that conceives, commissions, and produces original works, from individual pieces to full-length productions. He comes up with many of the ideas himself, like one that popped into his head over dinner at the White Dog Café about 20 years ago. “Normally, dance companies go into a school and teach the kids stuff,” he recalls. “I said, What about the kids teaching the company *their* moves and then incorporating that into a work?” That work became *Class Act*, which had its world premiere at Annenberg in 1996 and is now

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a part of the Parsons Dance Company's repertoire.

Other performances have sparked controversy. When choreographer Bill T. Jones approached Swartz about presenting a piece on terminal illness titled *Still/Here*, Swartz suggested including young patients from the nearby Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. While the *New Yorker's* dance critic called it "victim art" and refused to come see the show, Swartz says it was a "very provocative and very touching" work.

Rather than shying away from such pieces, Swartz considers them staples of the series. "We try to sustain the audience's interest, but also give them a challenge," he says. "We want people to question what it is they're looking at."

Unchoreographed moments also play an important role in Dance Celebration.

"From the very beginning, we weren't just presenting dance companies and selling tickets," Swartz says. "We really wanted to advance the art form. That sounds a little highfalutin, but the fact is, we have always tried to engage audiences, engage the local dance community, and engage an educational element." The series has hosted 300 schools and special-interest groups, encompassing 30,000 students, teachers, and chaperones over the years. It has also conducted 200 master classes and held hundreds of pre- and post-performance chats, artist meet-and-greets, symposia, and residencies.

This season, Dance Celebration will present Pilobolus Dance Theatre and Dance Theatre of Harlem—two groups that were featured in its inaugural season. The series has also commissioned *Eva*, a new work by River North Dance Chicago that celebrates the life and music of singer Eva Cassidy. She died from melanoma at 33, so Swartz has been working with Penn's Abramson Cancer Center to offer a skin-cancer awareness, education, and testing program in conjunction with the performance.

"We hope to make people more aware of the advances in melanoma treatment and also educate them on preventative measures," he says. "We'll even have doctors do some testing right in the theater so people can check out little spots or anything else they're concerned about."

"The Annenberg is a phenomenal place to see dance," he adds, "but we also try to collaborate with other aspects of the University as often as we can, just as we're doing with *Eva*. I think it's very powerful when you can connect dance and the performing arts with things like science and medicine."

—Molly Petrilla C'06