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Hooking up for Conduit

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When Portland State University closed its dance department and degree program in 1992 and the 19-year-old artistic coalition Dancers' Workshop held its last performances a few months later, local dancers were left with scant resources for education and training and a dearth of viable space for rehearsing and producing work.

To fill the void, local dance artists created their own rehearsal and performance sites. Reflecting on the inception of local contemporary dance site Conduit in 1995, co-founder and current executive director Linda K. Johnson recalls: "As individual artists, it was impossible or very difficult for us to sustain our own performance space. We created a site for our energy to come back again."

The brainchild of Johnson and Mary Oslund, Conduit was created to sustain affordable and consistent work space for its six core artists – beside Johnson and Oslund, Conduit's resident artists include Gregg Bielemeier, Keith V. Goodman, Teresa Mathern and the Really Big Dance Company.

What began as a loose coalition of artists who sought a dedicated space to produce their own work has evolved into a performance venue for local dancers and a training center that offers a variety of technique classes, seasonal performance series, an Emerging Artist Series and workshops with visiting artists.

"What every working artist needs is incubator sites, to study, take classes and meet other artists," Johnson says. "That has become Conduit's crucial role."

For the past five years, Conduit's spacious dance studio on the fourth floor of the downtown Pythian Building has served as an affordable resource for local contemporary dancers seeking performance opportunities and a diverse education in technique. A rotating faculty of Conduit artists and adjunct choreographers from the local dance community offer year-round training in choreography and dance technique for all levels.

While Conduit has enabled its core artists to take on larger professional projects, start their own dance companies and continually produce new work, its success as a regional hub has benefited the local arts community as well.

By presenting independent artists such as Linda Austin and Catherine Egan, Conduit has generated a growing audience for local dance in general while enabling more than 20 local choreographers to teach and show their work.

Through collaborations with Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, White Bird and Portland State University's PIPFest, Conduit has hosted a roster of national and international artists in residence who offer master classes to Portland dancers. Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin, Japanese butoh dancer Setsuko

Yamada, Israeli choreographers Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal, and New York artists such as Ann Carlson, Wally Cardona, Bebe Miller and Paul Taylor, among others, have been accessible instructors while touring their work.

To celebrate Conduit's fifth year of operation and generate some needed financial support to ensure the operation continues, Conduit's resident artists are staging a one-night-only benefit performance. The occasion marks the first time Conduit's six independent core artists will perform together.

A diverse collection of styles makes up a program of new and revisited work. Bielemeier will perform "It's My Party," a solo created for "Anger, the Musical." Goodman and members of his company Dance Gatherer will perform an excerpt from his latest work, a group piece set to live drumming. Goodman's dance style is based on Capoeira, a

highly kinetic Brazilian dance and martial arts form created three centuries ago by African slaves.

Johnson will perform an opening improvisational piece and selections from her solo work-in-progress, "Heavy Metal," created as part of artist Brian Borello's "Guns in the Hands of Artists" project. Mathern will perform solo excerpts from the "Night" section of her upcoming performance, "Night, Day and the Golden Hour."

Michael Menger, founder of The Really Big Dance Company, will perform a new duet of physical theater. Oslund will present excerpts from her recent premiere of "Behavior" and is resetting material from the full-company work as a duet for dancers Carla Mann and Veronica Lee.

A post-performance party, catered by Ripe, follows the eclectic program.