

Dance on Location: Portland

by Sarah Dahnke
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There's something about the Pacific Northwest that has always radiated a creative, artistic energy. Artists of all disciplines have set up shop to create postmodern work in an environment with a similar vibe as downtown Manhattan—without the high cost of living or the stress of the rat race. And Portland is no exception.

Prominent modern and postmodern choreographers have committed their energies and their talents to the city to help cultivate the modern/contemporary dance scene by creating and presenting dance to wide audiences, many of whom were previously involved with Portland State University (PSU), which formerly employed a visionary dance department that has since been shut down.

"There has always been a lively modern/contemporary dance scene in Portland, due to the artists that live/work here and a small and now bigger dance audience," says Tere Mathern, artistic director of Tere Mathern Dance and co-director of **Conduit Dance**, a Portland-based dance center. "The growth is partially due to the persistence of dance artists like Gregg Bielemeier, Linda K. Johnson, Mary Oslund, myself and others who have moved here, like Linda Austin, Cydney Wilkes and younger artists who have stayed, and/or returned to Portland like Tracy Broyles, Tahni Holt, Angelle Herbert and many others who continue to practice and produce interesting dance."

Like many others, Mathern got her start at PSU as a student and later as a choreographer for the university's company, *The Company We Keep*, which had a "big impact on the dance scene with its involvement of local visual/installation and music artists," she says. Through her involvement with the university's company, she met Oslund and subsequently danced with her company, demonstrating the circular nature of Portland's modern dance community.

"I moved away, lived and studied in New York City, but ultimately came back to Portland because of the kind of community that exists here and where more

than your friends have an interest in contemporary dance," she says.

In the more than 20 years Mathern has been dancing in Portland, she has seen it continue to grow. The White Bird Dance presenting series was born and continues to present national and international dance companies, allowing the local scene to be exposed to what is going on outside of the city. Presenting an eclectic roster of artists such as Lar Lubovitch, DanceBrazil, Chunky Move, Trey McIntyre Project and more, White Bird is committed to bringing cutting edge dance to Portland. With a mission to make dance exciting, educational and accessible to everyone, the founders of White Bird have been working for more than 11 years to develop a strong and multifaceted dance series.

"Walter Jaffe and Paul King of White Bird have created a world-class dance series, bringing artists from around the globe and the country to Portland," Mathern says. "This has created an atmosphere and built a larger audience and a more sophisticated level of viewing, which only brings the level of local artist work higher."

Additionally, the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA) annually presents the Time-Based Art Festival, which is a convergence of contemporary performance, dance, music, new media and visual arts projects. The festival continues to push boundaries and build a younger audience for live performance, including dance, according to Mathern. These opportunities to view new and interesting, high-quality modern dance in Portland would not have been possible if it weren't for the dance department at PSU, according to Mathern.

"The department started the PSU Contemporary Dance Series, and brought them some of the newest and most interesting dance to Portland to perform, and also to share their artistry through residencies and master classes at PSU. This groundwork led the way for PICA and White Bird," she says.

Conduit Dance has played its own role in the performing arts in Portland, providing a performance venue for contemporary performing artists of all genres, including dance, performance art, theater and music.

“Conduit was first established to meet the need for a space dedicated to dance,” Mathern says. “It functioned first as a collective, with six core artists renting the space for rehearsals, performance and to teach. Since the close of the PSU dance department, there was hunger for professional level dance classes, and the Conduit core artists could rent space and teach, getting enough students to, essentially, pay for their rehearsal space. Eventually Conduit evolved into a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) to meet the need of the community for dance study, creation and performance. This meant a broadening of the mission to be a resource and support for a variety of artists, dancers and performers.”

Conduit also offers a wide variety of technique classes, which, “explore a broad-based and rigorous approach to the body of knowledge currently influencing contemporary dance training and performance,” according to the center’s website. It offers ongoing classes, as well as periodic master classes and workshops, and an annual summer intensive focusing on the integration of technique, choreography and performance.

The Center for Movement Arts also offers a variety of classes for children and adults from beginning to advanced levels. Classical ballet, ballroom dance, jazz dance, Pilates and modern dance are among the offerings at this Southeast Portland studio.

Dance education opportunities are growing in Portland too, with the addition of Polaris Contemporary Dance Center, which opened on Jan. 31. As the official school of Polaris Dance Theatre, a prominent Portland-based contemporary dance company, it strives to bring a unique dance center to the heart of Portland. Class offerings include contemporary, modern, ballet, hip-hop, yoga and gyro-kinesis for adults, as well as a wide variety of classes for children. Despite the resources and the fantastically positive energy, dancers seriously considering re-locating to Portland should also realize the hardships. Working as a performer in this lively and creative Northwest

hub involves just as much struggle (if not more) than any other city.

“Portland is a growing city and right now we are seeing a bit of a saturation of artists to audience, but that means there’s a lot of energy and creativity here,” Mathern says. “We see many people moving to Portland. It’s not a big enough city yet, that you can easily jump right into performing upon arrival, and we need to build a bigger audience for local work, but if you can endure there’s great potential.”

Agnieszka Laska, artistic director of Agnieszka Laska Dancers and modern dance instructor at Center for Movement Arts, agrees with this sentiment and finds frustration with the dance community’s segregated feeling. “[It’s] still very atomized and divided and consists of separate circles: ballet circle, belly dance circle, jazz circle, post modern, etc. with very little or no influence or communication between them,” she says.

If you are a dance artist who is considering relocating to Portland, Laska recommends doing your homework before you take the plunge. (The Dance Coalition of Oregon has set up a fantastic website with audition listings, booking contacts, employment listings for dancers and more.) “Check what’s available,” she says. “Contact local teachers or choreographers, and schedule your audition ahead of time.”

However, Laska promises Portland will bring good times to those who seek them. “If you just want to have a great time, Portland, ‘P-town,’ is for you.”

