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Dance Is The Answer is a collaboration of the region's dance artists under the umbrella of Dance/MetroDC, the area's service organization. Our goal is to raise awareness of and participation in the valuable dance offerings we collectively bring to the region. Through low-cost and free performances, open rehearsals, classes, lectures and events throughout the metropolitan DC/VA/MD region, dance IS the answer April 15th through May 2nd, 2011!

Sunday, April 24, 2011

Highlight: Dance Box Theater, Inc. with Laura Schandelmeier and Stephen Clapp

By Helen Gineris

In the Gateway Arts District of Mount Rainier, MD, Dance/Metro DC met up with contributing sponsors Laura Schandelmeier and Stephen Clapp in their thoughtfully decorated and spacious artist loft. Founders and Co-Artistic Directors of [Dance Box Theater](#), Schandelmeier and Clapp delivered a warm welcome, an inviting loft tour, and a cup of tea before telling Dance/Metro DC all about their latest and sixth full-length work [Affectations](#), described by Schandelmeier as the most abstract piece Dance Box Theater has ever done.

The absence of both characters and plot marks a departure from the issue-driven work emblematic of the duo. Clapp references *The Loving Project: E-Race* that addresses historical and present-day issues surrounding interracial marriages and nontraditional partnerships. However, Schandelmeier emphasizes, "All of our work has a social justice aspect to it and with *Affectations* we're looking at the body as a metaphor for contemporary culture... and from an abstract point of view it's a trio of two women and Stephen [Clapp], and we lift him as much as he lifts us. On a very basic level we try to keep things equitable. You won't see a man throwing around a woman in one of our pieces [or vice versa]."

Affectations is an "interactive installation" of technological prowess. Markers or reflective tape are embedded into the costumes and, while [technology](#) floods the stage with infrared light, the light bounces off of

the markers, is picked up by an infrared camera, recorded in real time, and processed to a computer triggering visuals and sound – all this before a live audience. The work, which includes 120 cues, is the result of an intricate collaboration between Schandelmeier, Clapp, dance artist Ilana Faye Silverstein, New York-based Installation Artist Lorne Covington, and China-based Composer James Harkins. In this geographically diverse group, the collaborative process involves Skype, email, and video postings. Moreover, Clapp divulges that communication can be challenging between art forms where the language a dancer speaks, the language a lighting designer speaks, that in which the composer writes, or the technology language of a visual artist's interface means constantly "mak[ing] sure we're all on the same page and not assuming that we are."

Although frustrating at times, the company embraces such collaboration honoring "a value for making work on the cutting edge that's experimental," asserts Schandelmeier. Dance Box Theater's works have included spoken word, text, original compositions, sign language interpretation, and dancing with a life-size male sculpture named Giovanni who now playfully decorates the corner of their loft. "We're constantly trying to push ourselves to do new things," Schandelmeier puts forth. The dance company, for instance, has broken out of the status quo performance model of a one-weekend or two-weekend showing, which, Clapp articulates, "doesn't really serve the creative process, the artists, or the venues."

"Or the work," adds Schandelmeier.

Instead, Dance Box Theater has adopted a one-year production model followed by several local and regional performances of the same piece for an entire season. *Affectations*, for example, premiered at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as part of the 2010 Local Dance Commissioning Project, has recently enjoyed a two-week run in partnership with [Joe's Movement Emporium](#) supported in part by the Maryland State Arts Council and Prince George's County Arts Council, and will appear next at [Dance Place](#) followed by showings at the Baltimore Theatre Project and the Irondale Center in Brooklyn, NY. All performances include a post-performance discussion and stage-invitation for audience members to interact with the technology creating "another level of participation that isn't just about 'let's go watch a show'," voices Clapp.



The duo has experienced a string of successes and funding support in the last couple of years and express gratitude for residing within a block of Joe's Movement Emporium, where they are artists in residence, coupled with the ability to use space at Dance Place, where Clapp also works as a Grants Manager. The company attributes its success to perseverance and hard work and their belief in sharing information [and] resources, which Schandelmeier believes as "essential to furthering the art form in our community." Clapp adds, "The one thing that we realize more and more is that the success of another dance company doesn't impede our success at all. The more work that's out there and successful, the better the field is and the better we can each individually survive."


He perceives what he calls a "real, actual, tangible, cultural shift" in the DC-area dance community from a sense of provincialism and fractured sentiment as "I'm going to do my thing... and you can do your thing, but that's my grant application, I'm not going to tell *you* about it," to "Hey, did you hear about this application that's due in a week?' People aren't trying to hoard things anymore because that practice just wasn't serving anybody." Schandelmeier agrees, "It's the only way we can survive. We have to share resources...or else it's going to be harder to continue to make the work."

In addition, conveys Clapp, "being connected with regional and national

networks of artists... and finding out what's been happening in other communities has been *extremely* beneficial," recommending that emerging artists use these networks as resources and to develop connections. For example, as board members of Atlanta, GA-based [Alternate ROOTs](#), Clapp and Schandelmeier have been able to showcase work all over the Southeast United States while membership in a theater-based network enabled them to connect with the Brooklyn presenter showcasing *Affectations* this fall. Schandelmeier suggests artists look into [The Field](#), a national organization with a local satellite component [The Field/DC](#). The Field offers access to free summer retreats with room and board.

"There are resources out there especially for new, young artists," affirms Clapp, whose advice is to keep making work, "*Just keep making work*. If you need to sell used cars, work in a restaurant, you can do that for a little while, but just keep making work, get back to the studio, that's where the work happens." Schandelmeier, also a master teaching artist and trainer for Wolf Trap's Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts reveals, "In our experience, it's not a financially rewarding life and it can be difficult, but," she assures, "it's a very good and a very rich life in other ways. I support myself 100% as a dancer, as a dance artist. It can be done. Stephen supports himself through all dance-related and dance work. So you can do it. And you can do it here [in DC]." Clapp concludes, "That's what's exciting... DC is really *becoming* a place where dance artists can exist and succeed as dance artists."

Observe and take part in *Affectations* in Washington, DC at [Dance Place](#) on May 21 or 22; in Baltimore, MD at the [Theatre Project](#) on September 12 – 18; or in Brooklyn, NY at the [Irondale Center](#) on September 28 – October 2.

Posted by Dance/Metro DC Forward Five at [Sunday, April 24, 2011](#) 

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