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Many Streams Make a River: Seattle Dance 1990 to 2015

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Abstract

The Seattle area's dance ecosystem developed in critical ways during a 25-year period of growth and change between 1990 and 2015. Professional journalist Marcie Sillman brings more than 40 years as a witness to and chronicler of this change to this article, with a focus on four seminal organizations and the artists that have thrived under their auspices: [On the Boards](#), [Velocity Dance Center](#), [Spectrum Dance Theater](#) and [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#). The author conducted interviews in 2022 with ten leaders in the dance community about their lived experiences of this time and integrates their viewpoints. New industries and new artistic endeavors attracted tens of thousands of new residents to the Seattle area during this period, adding new energy and perspectives to the local arts scene. It also intensified some of the challenges faced by performing artists, in particular the escalating cost of living and working in the city. Despite the enormous growth the region experienced over this time period, Seattle remained a city of neighborhoods, with porous boundaries between them. The same porousness holds true when talking about Seattle's many dance companies, artists and schools. Seattle's thriving dance community can be likened to a number of streams that converge and diverge as they race along. Each stream is unique, but together they form something distinctive, a river that is constantly flowing and carving out new channels as the years pass.

Many Streams Make a River: Seattle Dance 1990 to 2015

As a professional journalist, I've spent the past 40 years as witness *to* and chronicler *of* the Seattle area's rich cultural community. I've had both a front row seat and a backstage pass to hundreds of performances and exhibitions. Along the way I've had the opportunity to document artists' personal stories; stories I believe to be the foundation of this community's history.

I've covered every art form, from community chorales to grand opera, but I'm most intrigued by Seattle's multi-faceted dance scene. In this region we're fortunate to have access to global artists as well as participatory folk dance, from b-boys to ballet dancers. While the genres abound, when you look more closely at the dance community, you can see how those genres and their practitioners overlap: shared dancers, shared rehearsal and performance spaces, and a shared determination to continue creating and presenting work despite the financial challenges.

It's impossible to include every Seattle dancer and dance entity in this essay. Instead, I've chosen to focus on four seminal organizations and the artists that have thrived under their auspices: [On the Boards](#), [Velocity Dance Center](#), [Spectrum Dance Theater](#) and [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#). I've also chosen a relatively narrow time frame, from 1990-2015.

This 25-year period was an era of exceptional demographic growth and change in Seattle, encompassing the rise of Microsoft, Starbucks and Amazon as well as the global success of the "Seattle Sound" as exemplified by blockbuster bands like Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam and Alice in Chains. The growth of both new industries and new artistic endeavors attracted tens of thousands of new residents to the Seattle area, adding new energy and perspectives to the local arts scene. It also intensified some of the challenges faced by performing artists, in particular the escalating cost of living and working in the city.

Despite the enormous growth the region experienced over this time period, Seattle remains a small town at heart, what's been dubbed a city of neighborhoods. Although each neighborhood has a distinctive personality, the boundaries between them are porous; you might be hard pressed to draw a firm line between Madrona and Madison Park, West Seattle and Roxbury, or Fremont and Ballard, to name just a few.

The same porousness holds true when talking about Seattle's many dance companies, artists and schools. The arts institution that Nellie Cornish founded more than a century ago has produced choreographers and performers who've gone on to establish their own fiefdoms which, in turn, attracted new generations of artists. The success of [Cornish College of the Arts](#), and the development of dance programs at the University of Washington and the Evergreen State College in Olympia, lured even more dance artists to the Pacific Northwest. The old adage that success breeds success has proved true when it comes to Seattle's dance community.

In the mid-1970's, for example, Chicago-area native Edna Daigre moved to the region and established [Ewajo Dance Studio](#), where she taught thousands of community members some of the dance traditions of Africa and the African diaspora. Daigre's son Chris has established his own student base, as well as a dance curriculum focused on people with Parkinson's disease. The Daigres have ties to the Pacific Northwest Ballet School and to the now-defunct [Black Arts/West](#), where they instructed a number of people who went on to successful dance careers. Meanwhile dance artist Kate Wallich, a Cornish graduate, created the popular organization Dance Church, committed to providing an outlet for anybody who wants to spend an hour dancing, as well as paid work for professional dancers both in Seattle and around the country.

Seattle's thriving dance community is like a number of streams that converge and diverge as they race along. Each stream is unique, but together they form something distinctive, a river that is constantly flowing and carving out new channels as the years pass.

Dance historians have labored to collect and archive information on both the organizations and the artistic achievements of the artists who created and presented work in Seattle over the last 100+ years. This article is not a comprehensive examination of the city's rich dance community; instead, it's an introduction to four specific organizations and the artists who worked with them, based on personal stories shared with me between September-December, 2022, and from my own decades as an outside observer and chronicler. These particular stories can provide some insight into Seattle's contemporary dance scene as it exists in 2023.

On The Boards

In the late 1970's, decades before a single mouse-click could provide dance fans with digital access to works from around the globe, a group of local artists banded together to create [On the Boards](#). Their mission was to present multimedia performances by both masters and emerging artists. Such OtB developmental programs as 12 Minutes Max, a curated showcase for short works-in-progress, and the Northwest New Works series, which presented longer, more developed performance pieces, were created to provide a platform for regional artists to produce and perform for live audiences.

By 1985, On the Boards had joined forces with like-minded contemporary performance presenters across the country to form the National Performance Network (NPN). This collective organization was able to finance U.S. tours for such international stars as Anna de Keersmaeker and Maguy Marin, as well as Americans like Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, and Stephen Petronio.

Andrea Wagner, who came to OtB in 1979 as a work-study student and ultimately rose to the position of managing director, recalls that OtB's founding artists always intended the organization to be both an incubator and presenter of new work. At the time, the National Endowment for the Arts was interested specifically in supporting innovation. Wagner recalls that, when OtB received its first NEA grant, a member of the funding panel praised them for "being up in the middle of nowhere doing God's work."

Participation in NPN not only allowed OtB to bring influential artists to Seattle; it also helped fund national tours for Northwest performers, an opportunity that many cite as invaluable to their career trajectories, among them an Evergreen State College alumna named Pat Graney.

After graduation, in the mid-1980's, Graney formed her own dance company, creating work that often blended contemporary music, athleticism and a unique dance vocabulary. Graney started to present some of her short works at OtB; from there, she was introduced to NPN touring opportunities. Graney cites these tours, and the national connections she forged on the road, as the spark for the creation of one of her seminal evening-length dances, *Faith*. This meditation on women, art and the politics of feminism, was originally workshopped at Jacob's Pillow in Massachusetts, then presented by On the Boards at the Moore Theater in 1991.

Faith was inspired in part by the work of the Italian painter Caravaggio. Graney was interested in re-creating his images, substituting women for the men Caravaggio depicted. *Faith's* final tableau, featuring Graney's all-female troupe lit exquisitely by Meg Fox, was a stunning reimagining of traditional Christian art. The evening-length dance also included playful scenes with the dancers juggling large red beach balls or teetering across the stage in high heeled shoes.

For Graney, the piece was a reimagination of the entire notion of faith itself, extracting it from the realm of church, mosque or synagogue. “Faith is what we do every day; it’s how we move through the world and take our next step and take our next breath,” says Graney. “I really thought people were going to hate the piece.”

Instead, as the lights went down on the final tableau, the opening night audience leapt to its feet, shocking Graney, who performed in the show’s first production. The [Pat Graney Company](#) continues to present the choreographer’s distinctive blend of dance and installation art. Graney also works with incarcerated women through a program she created called *Keeping the Faith*. Graney and participating artists hold workshops in various prisons, teaching the women how to use the written and performing arts to talk about their lives.

Pat Graney’s influence transcends the artworks she’s created. Through the years, her dance company has hired a number of artists who’ve left their own marks on Seattle’s contemporary dance scene. Peggy Piacenza, who arrived in Seattle in 1990, went on to co-found Base Experimental Arts + Space in 2015. KT Niehoff and Michele Miller joined Graney’s company in 1992 then founded Velocity Dance Center in 1996.

1990’s Seattle was an affordable paradise for contemporary artists working in all media. The burgeoning popular music scene, with thriving nightclubs and record labels such as [SubPop](#), attracted hundreds of young people to the region, fueling an era where creative juices flowed freely. Artists like Graney thrived in that atmosphere, but she acknowledges she couldn’t have achieved what she did without support from On the Boards.

“I’m trying to think if there were other commissioning entities at that time,” Graney mused recently. “If there were, I didn’t know of them.”

Another artistic collaboration forged in that heady creative environment and nurtured by On the Boards was *33 Fainting Spells*, co-founded by Dayna Hanson and Gaelen Hanson (no relation). Their intent was to create dance-theater works akin to performances coming out of Western Europe at the time.

The two women met at an artists' retreat and realized they shared a common sensibility. Gaelen had been studying experimental theater in the Netherlands. While Dayna hadn't contemplated creating performances until after she became a regular On the Boards audience member, the touring artists she saw exposed her to new possibilities. She recalls that, "I was planning to be a fiction writer; I didn't have a background in dance. Based on seeing these mostly European works, presented by On the Boards exactly at a time when I was susceptible to new influences, I just changed my mind about what I wanted to do."

The Hansons co-founded *33 Fainting Spells* in 1994. Their first evening-length performance, *The Uninvited*, was presented by On the Boards at Seattle's Moore Theater in 1996. Like Graney's *Faith*, this evening-length work had been in development for several years, and the duo had toured a 15-minute iteration nationally, courtesy of NPN, before OtB commissioned an expanded version.

The Uninvited created a local stir. European audiences may have been accustomed to dancers in street clothing and hard-soled shoes, but in Seattle, the sight of the performers moving onstage around and upon a table and chairs, with buckets dropping from above, wearing heavy black Oxford shoes, was something completely new. Gaelan Hanson explains, "We had something of a film noir thing going on, and that led us to the shoes. The shoes really allowed you to hear the rhythm of the movement in a way that you couldn't if we were barefoot. And we were working with characters, people who actually wear shoes. It seemed logical to us."

Despite Seattle's burgeoning artistic reputation, in the days before the Internet, artists like the Hansons and Graney worked in relative isolation in the Pacific Northwest. They relied on OtB's participation in both the National Performance Network and the National Dance Project to take their art to venues outside the region. "We were able to take this thing that we were developing in this very welcome isolation characterized by freedom, we were able to take it to other communities," Dayna Hanson says. "We got to share this work right away with audiences far beyond Seattle."

The Hansons and Graney both credit Mark Murphy, former OtB Artistic Director, for championing their work. "Without him, I don't know how we would have gotten the exposure that we had," Gaelen Hanson says. "There was a lot of 'right place, right time,' but Mark's support was just really life-changing."

Although Gaelen left the art world several years ago, Dayna Hanson is still working in both film and live performance. In 2015 she co-founded Base Experimental Arts + Space with Dave Proscia and former Graney company member Peggy Piacenza. Located in Georgetown's [Equinox Studios](#), a growing collection of artist spaces, Base provides artists' residencies as well as a small performance space for partnering organizations. Base is now home to 12 Minutes Max, the short works program originally launched by On the Boards.

Velocity Dance Center

Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, atop Seattle's Capitol Hill, is no stranger to performance. Musical ensembles perform there regularly, attracted by the acoustics in the sanctuary with its soaring roof. But in the spring of 2015, the Cathedral hosted an unusual—and groundbreaking—performance.

How to Become a Partisan was the brainchild of Italian-American artist Alice Gosti, the first work of its size and scope supported by [Velocity Dance Center](#)'s *Made in Seattle* commissioning program.

Partisan featured everything from musicians in the church's choir loft to dancers moving around, through and over the pews, to a singer in a massive white gown that slowly turned deep red over the course of the five-hour performance. The performance was both site specific and durational, and helped raise Gosti's profile in Seattle and internationally. It also reaffirmed Velocity Dance Center's pivotal role in Seattle's dance scene.

Velocity has been a key player in Seattle since its founding in 1996. Over the years it has offered an array of classes from entry to professional levels, as well as commissioning and presenting new work by local and touring artists.

Velocity's founders, Michele Miller and KT Niehoff, didn't originally intend to create a performance/presenting organization. The two New York-based dancers, along with a third artist, Kim Root, moved to Seattle in 1992 to join the Pat Graney Company. They were dismayed by what they perceived to be a lack of resources for professional dance artists.

"It was pretty bleak," Miller recalls. Although they found a number of dance classes to take, none met their need for rigorous, more technical, training. So the duo began to offer their own classes at Dance Center Seattle on Capitol Hill, eventually attracting a core group of students. By 1996 Miller, who by then also was teaching at Cornish, recognized that they needed to create more permanent opportunities for young dancers like her college students. Miller says, "They were leaving [after graduation] because there was nothing here for them. We were like 'Okay, if we really want to stay here, we have to build a space. If we want a dance community in Seattle, we have to keep those kids.'"

Miller and Niehoff rented rooms in Capitol Hill's [Odd Fellows Hall](#), pulling ancient nails out of the wood floor to make it safe for bare-footed dancers. Instead of hiring a teaching staff, they devised a studio rental system; dance teachers proposed classes and were paid based on class size. Some of the early instructors included Cornish graduates Amy O'Neal and Ellie Sandstrom.

As Velocity grew, Miller and Niehoff expanded their vision for the organization, as well as their physical space at the Odd Fellows Hall. In addition to adding space for more dance classes, they wanted to provide performance support for both local and national artists.

"The first program we did was *Strictly Seattle*," Miller says. The summer intensive was designed not only to keep local dance students in town; Velocity also marketed the program nationally. "Right after that was when we started doing the first showcase, *Under Construction*," she adds. As the name implies, the program showcased works-in-progress, akin to OtB's 12 Minutes Max.

Many young artists who came from around the country to attend *Strictly Seattle* workshops decided to make the Northwest home, studying at Velocity and picking up freelance work for emerging choreographers. It became clear to Miller and Niehoff that Velocity needed to provide even more opportunities for dance artists to make and present work, and to get critical feedback and mentorship. *The Bridge Project*, started in the early aughts, initially was designed to fill the gap between student and creator.

Eventually Miller and Niehoff left Velocity. Miller continued to teach at Cornish while Niehoff founded her own performance group and went on to open dance and performance spaces throughout the city. Dancer Kara O'Toole stepped in to lead Velocity through a critical relocation from the Odd Fellows Hall to a former auto repair shop several blocks away. In 2011,

Tonya Lockyer, a dancer and choreographer who had been teaching at both Cornish and the University of Washington, took over as Velocity's Artistic and Managing Director.

Lockyer quickly made her mark. She redefined *The Bridge Project*, emphasizing its developmental side and limiting it to artists who'd been creating or performing for three years or less. She also recognized the need for an ongoing program that would commission new work from more experienced artists, those who might not be ready for, or interested in approaching On the Boards, but whose choreography Lockyer deemed to be promising. She'd seen many of her Cornish College students, as well as more established dance artists, leave Seattle because they were disheartened by the lack of funding for new works, particularly after the Great Recession in 2008. She determined that Velocity could step in to staunch the flow.

Lockyer came up with the idea for a new program called *Made in Seattle*, that would provide both money and mentorship for aspiring choreographers. Creators could take all the time they needed to make new work, with Lockyer serving as both program producer and artistic sounding board. Alice Gosti was the program's first participant.

"Tonya asked me what I wanted, what I dreamed of," says Gosti. The question surprised the young artist, but it was exactly the kind of nudge she needed. Gosti wanted to make something big, something that could fill the space of a church like Saint Mark's. "I feel fortunate to have people in my life who were like 'Don't be limited by what you think is possible.' You've got to start with the big dream, you know?" she says.

How to Become a Partisan wasn't Gosti's first site-specific work, but it was her first large-scale durational performance, something that came to define the dances Gosti went on to create with a semi-regular group of dancers who work with her troupe Malacarne. They include performer/teacher/dance writer Kaitlin McCarthy, multi-media artist/curator Alyza Delpan-

Monley and former Seattle resident Imana Gunawan, who also was a member of a Seattle BIPOC dance/performance group called the AU Collective.

Since Gosti's *Made in Seattle* debut performance, the Velocity program has funded new works by Amy O'Neal; Ezra Dickinson's haunting *Mother For You I Made This*, performed on the streets of downtown Seattle; 2022's *Boys! Boys! Boys!*, conceived and performed by the duo Drama Tops; and an upcoming work by former Spectrum Dance Theater company member Nia-Amina Minor.

Gosti, O'Neal and many other artists who developed work at Velocity Dance Center have gone on to create new performances at On the Boards in Seattle, at venues across the nation, and in Gosti's case, the world. But Gosti believes her success wouldn't have been possible without Lockyer's initial nudge. Gosti recalls, "It was very clear to me then that nobody believed I could do what I was saying I was going to do. She gave me the trust that not many people would have. And because she was trusting me, Velocity was trusting me, something was really going to happen!"

Financial problems exacerbated by the COVID pandemic hit Velocity hard. As of early 2023, the organization held its *Strictly Seattle* classes at [12th Avenue Arts](#), where Velocity had a three-year lease. *The Bridge Project* and the *Made in Seattle* commissioning program were still active as the organization searched for a new permanent home.

Spectrum Dance Theater

No chronicle of Seattle's contemporary dance scene in the early 21st century is complete without a look at the evolution of [Spectrum Dance Theater](#) under the tenure of Artistic Director Donald Byrd.

Before relocating to Seattle in 2002 to take the reins at Spectrum, Byrd was a noted New York-based choreographer, recipient of a 1992 Bessie award for *The Minstrel Show* (revived for Spectrum in 2015). He would go on to win a Tony award in 2006 for his work on the Broadway show *The Color Purple*. Despite critical success, Byrd's own company, Donald Byrd/The Group, had succumbed to financial problems and he was looking for a fresh start at Spectrum, which had been established in 1982 as a community dance school with a jazz-based performing ensemble.

"They said to me they were looking for somebody to take it in a different direction," Byrd recalls. "When I got here and started doing that, they were not happy."

Almost immediately after his arrival, Byrd started to nudge Spectrum away from its jazz dance roots, hiring new dancers and choreographing his own contemporary work. None of his former New York company members were interested in following him to the Pacific Northwest, which they perceived to be a dance outback, so Byrd auditioned and recruited new dancers from Seattle and across the country.

Although Byrd was consumed with the task of building both a dance company and a community dance school, he was intrigued by the activity he saw generated by Velocity Dance Center and On the Boards. "I felt I wanted to be connected to other places that were making contemporary dance here," Byrd recalls. "They didn't seem particularly interested in my being part of it, so I thought 'Okay, I'll just do my little thing down on the lake.'"

Spectrum's classrooms and rehearsal studios were—and still are—located in a renovated brick bathhouse at Madrona Beach, on the western shore of Lake Washington. As soon as he arrived in Seattle, Byrd began working with his new dancers to craft a repertoire that focused on global social and political issues, including a critique of the Iraq war, explorations of China under Communism, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Despite his desire to address social issues in his dances, Byrd is also fascinated by movement for its own sake. For the past several years, he has choreographed a series of evening-length programs he calls *Occurrences*.

“I love the *Occurrence* things because I get to go to a place where it’s not about anything,” Byrd explains. “I get to play around with the craft of movement, just putting movements together, very much in the spirit of modern dance.”

Byrd’s choreographic explorations have been enhanced by the skills of the artists he hires, many of whom have remained in Seattle after the end of their Spectrum tenures.

“I’m very proud of that,” Byrd says. “They contribute to this community, and because of that there’s a kind of cross fertilization that didn’t happen before.”

Byrd points to such Spectrum alumni as Jade Solomon Curtis, founder of her own company, Solo Magic; Marco Farroni, an independent dance artist and emerging choreographer; Fausto Rivera, part of the AU Collective; and Nia-Amina Minor, currently working on a project under the auspices of Velocity Dance Center that combines the history of Black dance and dancers in Seattle with a live performance.

Despite Byrd’s early sense of isolation from Seattle’s contemporary dance community, after twenty years in the area, he now acknowledges his status as a Seattle fixture. Not only has Byrd created dozens of works, many of which he and his company members have performed on national tours, he’s also collaborated or made new work for a number of local arts organizations including [Seattle Repertory Theatre](#), Seattle Opera, the 5th Avenue Theatre and Pacific Northwest Ballet.

In 2019, Byrd's life and work were the subject of a retrospective at Seattle's [Frye Art Museum](#), called *The America That is to Be*. In 2022, Byrd was named the Rainier Club Laureate in honor of his body of work and contributions to Seattle's cultural landscape.

Pacific Northwest Ballet

The word "ballet" doesn't necessarily conjure images of cutting edge choreography, but almost from its founding in 1972, [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#) has commissioned new dances by up-and-coming choreographers. During their tenure from 1975-2005, founding artistic directors Kent Stowell and Francia Russell presented dances by Merce Cunningham, Pat Graney and Donald Byrd, among other choreographers.

When Peter Boal arrived to take over PNB's artistic leadership in 2005, he expanded the range and number of new works in the ballet company's repertoire. By 2022, PNB had earned an international national reputation for presenting dances by contemporary choreographic luminaries, including Twyla Tharp, Crystal Pite, Anabelle Lopez Ochoa and Jessica Lang, as well as works by such sought-after modern ballet choreographers as Alexei Ratmansky, Christopher Wheeldon and William Forsythe.

"When I looked at Kent and Francia's programming, there was success in programming new works," Boal says. "I pounced on that and made it more of a priority for the Board and for funders," says Boal who launched a New Works funding initiative.

Boal began adding contemporary dances to the repertoire shortly after he arrived in Seattle, but arguably, the 2008 PNB debut of Monaco-based choreographer Jean-Christophe Maillot's *Romeo et Juliette* is emblematic of Boal's vision for a 21st century ballet company.

Maillot's *Romeo et Juliette*, now one of PNB's signature productions, features dancers in pointe shoes, like a traditional story ballet. But this retelling of the Shakespearean tragedy

unfolds without the usual classical ballet flourishes. Instead, the action is more cinematic, without typical breaks for audiences to acknowledge a dancer's prowess. And Maillot looks beyond traditional ballet vocabulary to tell this story. For example, when Lady Capulet discovers her daughter's death, she communicates her grief through grand, extravagant, movements. The dancer portraying Lady Capulet repeatedly flings her head back and forth, whipping the hair that hangs loose around her shoulders. With each fling, her arms and legs splay out then coil in toward her belly, her grief taking on physical form.

“When I look at the choreography, it looks like Martha Graham,” Boal notes, referencing the esteemed 20th century modern dance choreographer “There is no excess; it's just boiled down to the essence and offering what is most potent and powerful.” (Interestingly, Graham was no stranger to Seattle's dance scene. In the mid-20th century she did a teaching stint at Cornish College of the Arts where she met and recruited a young student named Merce Cunningham.)

This 2008 *Romeo et Juliette* production is also notable because it featured several dancers who've made their own marks on Seattle's contemporary dance scene. Former PNB principal dancer Olivier Wevers, an aspiring choreographer at the time, portrayed Friar Laurence in that production. Wevers was taken by the way Maillot was pushing ballet in new directions. The next year, 2009, Wevers founded his own contemporary dance company, Whim W'Him, featuring his own works as well as world premiere commissions by a number of established and emerging contemporary dancemakers including Anabelle Lopez Ochoa. In late 2022, during Whim W'Him's 13th season, Wevers purchased a building on Seattle's Queen Anne Hill to house both his own company and to provide rental rehearsal space for other small contemporary dance groups.

Two other lead dancers from the 2008 production—principal dancer James Yoichi Moore and former principal dancer Noelani Pantastico—launched Seattle Dance Collective in 2019 with the goal of commissioning and presenting new dances both by established ballet choreographers as well as by artists from the contemporary dance world. Among them is PNB soloist Amanda Morgan. Morgan herself launched The Seattle Project in 2020 with the goal of showcasing BIPOC and Queer artists. Morgan has collaborated with artists from PNB, but also has partnered with former Spectrum dancers Nia-Amina Minor and Marco Farroni.

While Boal doesn't take direct credit for launching these various contemporary dance initiatives, he does take pride in the opportunities PNB provides to aspiring choreographers, via its Next Step program, which encourages company dancers to make work for PNB's Professional Division students. Next Step is now overseen by PNB (and Spectrum Dance) faculty member Eva Stone, a choreographer who produced her own annual dance festival, Chop Shop, before the pandemic.

As the largest, most well-endowed, dance organization in the Pacific Northwest, PNB has been both admired and envied by smaller local contemporary dance groups. That, coupled with the fact that ballet itself requires a very specific type of training and discipline from its practitioners, has created a clear distinction between PNB and the rest of the dance community, a gap Boal is eager to bridge. He was delighted to see so many audience members from the wider dance community at PNB's November, 2022 presentation of *The Seasons' Canon* by acclaimed British Columbia native Crystal Pite, but Boal recognizes that, despite the expanded contemporary repertoire, PNB is still seen first and foremost as a ballet company, no matter how much new work he programs.

Nevertheless, Boal believes those barriers have started to erode, particularly since the pandemic, when artists from various organizations banded together to help one another to survive the crippling economic impact of mandated and prolonged theater closures.

“It’s like we’re all on this little, very endangered island of dance, you know?” Boal muses. “I do think a mindset has shifted and it’s now more of a ‘we’ and let’s celebrate one another.”

Conclusion

Pacific Northwest Ballet, Spectrum Dance Theater, Velocity Dance Center and On the Boards—along with the thousands of artists who have passed through their doors—have served as springboards for dozens of ancillary dance organizations in the years from 1990 - 2015 and beyond.

The river of dance in the Seattle area has many tributaries. New physical spaces foster creative activity. In particular, Georgetown’s Equinox Studios houses Base and Yaw Theater. Both regularly present emerging and established dance artists. [Seattle Theatre Group](#) and the Meany Center for the Performing Arts on the University of Washington campus continue to present touring dance artists and companies from around the globe. [The Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute](#)’s LANGSTON, the [Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas](#), and [Wa Na Wari](#), all in the Central District, regularly feature dance artists on their programs.

The fortunes of the four main dance organizations chronicled for this article have been tenuous since the pandemic. Yet they, and dozens of other Seattle performing arts groups, are extant as of January, 2023. That’s due, in large part, to federal, state and local financial rescue efforts, and to the generosity of individual patrons in the Seattle area.

Despite the high cost of living and creating in this corner of the nation, Seattle continues to be a hot-bed of artistic activity, and a magnet for young dancers seeking a place to live and work. This “city of neighborhoods” offers a place for inspiration and experimentation and continues to be a hub of cultural dynamism.

Note: This article was written for the Arts Ecosystem Research Project by journalist Marcie Sillman through an initiative to commission perspectives by community scholars, journalists, and other voices that illuminate aspects of the Seattle region’s creative ecosystem, with support from 4Culture. More information on Marcie Sillman can be found at www.marciesillman.com or www.kuow.com. The author retains all copyrights. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

Acknowledgements

Any history reflects both the personal experiences and biases of the storyteller and that is the case for this article. Its contents are drawn from specific conversations and interviews conducted between September and December, 2022 and from more than 40 years of reporting on, observing, and documenting the Seattle-area arts sector.

In addition to the interviews listed below, thanks to Olivier Wevers, Artistic Director of Whim W'Him, who has regularly shared his perspective about Seattle dance since 2006.

James Yoichi Moore and Noelani Pantastico, co-founders of Seattle Dance Collective, gave me access to all the choreographers they commissioned to create new work in 2020, the first year of the pandemic. Seattle Project founder Amanda Morgan also has been generous with her time.

Many thanks to choreographers and educators Mark Haim and Wade Madsen for lending their perspectives over the years. Thanks as well to Velocity co-founder and former Lingo Dance Theater Artistic Director KT Niehoff and Base Experimental Arts + Space co-founder Peggy Piacenza for sharing their memories.

Zoe Scofield, of the performance group Zoe/Juniper, has provided particular insights into living and creating work in Seattle.

Dance historian and writer Sandra Kurtz has been extremely generous, sharing her time and expertise for this article and many past works.

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This article is based on a series of interviews conducted in 2022 with principals involved in the cited organizations and artistic productions.

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