

An Invitation to Ocean Dive with Gina Laurenzi and Danceworks

John Schneider : 6-7 minutes : 2/26/2024

“I’m a wild child around Milwaukee, I guess. I like to do it all,” says choreographer/dancer/teacher Gina Laurenzi when I note the wide range of dance companies and styles she’s worked in since graduating from UWM’s dance program a few years back.

She explains that in 2019, already well-established and a part-time teacher in UWM’s dance program, she decided she wanted a master’s degree. That meant that she had to limit her public art making and focus on grad school. Now her master’s thesis is an unusual—even for her—immersive, contemporary fantasia titled *Biome*, created for the professional Danceworks Performance MKE company and premiering February 29-March 3 at the Danceworks Studio Theatre.

“I went back to school to deepen my practice,” she says. “So I had to ask how *Biome* would be different. What’s new?”

The answer involves scuba diving. Also in 2019, Laurenzi started diving with Aquatic Adventures in Brookfield. “They’re wonderful people,” she says. “You dive alongside them and learn the positions and techniques. I’d like to be able to introduce others to all that diving offers so in pursuit of these goals, I’m currently a PADI Divemaster candidate which is just the first level of a career in diving.”

Deep Dive Mentors

She began in Wisconsin’s inland lakes—her favorite is Moose Lake in Waukesha County—and advanced to trips to the ocean with her mentors. “I was terrified,” she confesses. “I literally thought if you step in the ocean some giant shark will eat you.” Finally, last October, she and her dive group went to the Caribbean island of Curaçao where, in addition to ocean diving, she took a two-day course in reef restoration.

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“I’ve become passionate about the way that climate change affects the ocean and all that lives in it, including the coral,” she says, “and how they’re trying to fight what’s happening to the reef and to restore it so the fish have places to live. I want to be able to go to those places and volunteer and do that.

“Scuba diving opened me up,” she explains. “I love the wonder of the ocean. I realized you don’t need to fear this. You can respect it. It’s like an unexplored part of our own planet. I feel so privileged. I’ve only seen a small portion of the Caribbean, but it’s changed what I think about the ocean and what I thought lived there. Now I’m obsessed. It was almost like a realization to tune into the natural world, not just the ocean. Like wake up! Get out of your phone!”

It awakened something new in her that she needed in dance. “How do I take that state of wonder into my body? How do I create movement around the experiences I’m having when I’m diving? How do I help bring that to other people? It’s been a really layered, complex process, and it’s made me love choreographing and dancing more again because it feels like a new way in and I have something new to say.”

Wild Ride

Her wild ride, as she calls *Biome*, will start 30 minutes before the main performance's start time. As audience members arrive at the Danceworks lobby, we'll be led in small groups through the dance studio beside the theatre space for what Laurenzi calls "a little guided journey of about five minutes." As in an immersive visual art exhibit of the sort that's popular now, we'll find ourselves walking through video projections. Composer/musician/collaborator Allen Russell will be performing "unplugged" on violin; which is to say, as he's moved by whatever each moment offers as audience members and any of the show's 13 dancers—including Laurenzi—move among set pieces in ways that prefigure the performance to come.

From there, we'll take seats in the underwater world of the theatre. Laurenzi wants audiences "to feel as if they're actually within this world that we've created, and to feel that they're part of it. This is their introduction to that world."

About the choreography, Laurenzi says, "I love to bring in my own material, so the dancers understand the vision, and have a framework. Then I love to see where they'll take it. Their personal interpretations, and in solo moments where they're improvising, that's them living in that character."

"I'm referencing real creatures," she continues, "but of course they become a hybrid fusion of movement and the dancers' interpretations of that creature, so they're really imaginary. It might be fun as you watch to see what creature you think is being referenced. Sometimes, if any dancers stay behind during a shift to a new section, they might shape-shift or morph into different creatures."

She doesn't want to give away where it goes, "but it does go somewhere," she says. "Something comes to light. The world we've created starts to change. I'd say be ready for a different experience. It might be a little out there but allow yourself to get swept away a little bit."

Performances start at 7:30 p.m. on February 29 and March 1; 4 and 6 p.m. on March 2; and 6 p.m. on March 3. The preshow performance begins 30 minutes earlier and repeats in 6-minute loops until curtain time. The Danceworks Studio Theatre is located at 1661 N. Water Street. Visit danceworksmke.org or call 414-277-8480.

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