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A Timely 'dis/connect' Will Open Danceworks' Season

John Schneider : 6-7 minutes : 11/1/2024

Choreographer Gina Laurenzi aims for surprises with her upcoming new work for Danceworks Performance MKE. "Personally, I like a little bit of mystery," she tells me in an interview. "I don't want people to come knowing everything. I want them to just sit down and let what happens happen. Let them see how they feel about it."

This new contemporary dance piece is titled *dis/connect*. As she did so beautifully and brilliantly last season with *Biome*, her gently immersive dance about life in the ocean's depths and the consequences of plastic pollution and climate change, she'll involve the audience directly. In this case, she's using two separate performance spaces. She wouldn't tell me what will happen, but there might be playful things involved.

She's once again addressing timely questions. "This show invites us to consider how much we rely on technology and how big a part of our life it is," she tells me. "And if we notice that it's not helping us, what happens when we step away from it and allow ourselves to give a different kind of attention and awareness to self, each other, and the environment?"

Urgency Culture?

She talks about her inspirations. "For the last couple of years, I've been thinking a lot about the way my reliance on phones and technology takes me away from other things; about how time just slips away as you slip into Instagram or social media; and about this 'urgency culture' with all these phone and text messages from people needing things and needing them *now*. I started to think: how do I want to live every day?"

"I've been making an effort to separate myself from the technology and do creative things and keep those creative things brewing. I decided to pick up hobbies I'd left behind or cast aside, and I've noticed how that's affected my choreographic process. When I brought those hobbies back into my life, my love of dance, my creativity, was sparked in a way that couldn't be sparked by the phone.

"Naturally, we're on our phones for work," she continues. "We have to be. It's expected these days. But I started noticing, as we all do, how much has shifted over the past 20 years, 10 years, even five years. Now even a person sitting right beside you is on their phone. That's part of our culture. It's just very sad, I think.

"To me it's this fine line," she summarizes. "It's a useful tool, but when it starts to cause a divide between you and the people around you, and between you and the environment, and between all these other parts of you, it's worth taking a second look."

Wonder, Awe, World Building

I ask how she could translate this to dance movement. She answers that while *Biome* was the concert half of her MFA thesis from UWM last spring, the written half was focused on “wonder, awe, and world building in contemporary dance, and on how you might use wonder and awe as catalysts for change through dance.”

Regarding *dis/connect*, she says: “The idea is that with wonder and awe there’s an openness to take the world in differently, to understand people differently, and to deepen your connection with yourself. If we can stay wondrous, the little playful happenings that might occur... Well, that’s kind of the idea with the show. But I don’t want to give too much away!”

She talks about Meow Wolf, an arts production company in Santa Fe that creates immersive, multimedia experiences for all ages. Laurenzi discovered the group in her thesis research. “They were just collaborating and getting weird,” she says, “because they didn’t feel that they fit into the artist community of Santa Fe.”

Immersive art somehow includes the audience in the show. “I love immersive art,” she insists. “I feel that it’s more inviting for people of any background or experience with art. There’s often a deeper message. It’s very imaginative. So I thought: what can I bring into the space that shakes up the Danceworks environment? The performance occurs in two rooms, you see one side and then the other. I invite things in that maybe you didn’t see coming.”

The dance will be accompanied live by Dustin Laurenzi -- composer, saxophonist, synth artist, and the choreographer’s brother – in partnership with guitarist Jeff Swanson. Both are well-known in the Chicago jazz scene. Gina directs me to her brother’s description of their music as “... structured improvisatory soundscapes melding acoustic and synthesized instrumentation.”

“It’s different textures,” she says, “that help shape worlds as we move. It will always be a little different because they have to build each world in real time, so that you’re swept into it and nothing takes you out. It’s an invitation to play and to use your imagination. But I don’t want to say more.”

Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 7-8; 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. Nov. 9; and 5 p.m. Nov. 10 at Danceworks Studio Theatre, 1661 N. Water St. For information or tickets, visit DanceworksMKE.org or call 414-277-8480.

John Schneider

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