

Road to Recovery

Epiphanies and ice packs: Life inside a dance bubble



"New York Is Burning" by Omari Wiles, performed by Les Ballet Afrik. (Robert Altman)

By **Celia Wren**

Feb. 4, 2021 at 7:00 a.m. EST

The word “bubble” may have lost some of its champagne-fizz exuberance, given its covid-19-era sense: a group of people who interact closely while minimizing contact with others to reduce exposure. But pandemic-variety bubbles have offered hope for many, including dancers who have used the sheltered environments to train and generate new work.

Now you can get a peek inside dance bubbles with “Isolation to Creation,” a four-episode docuseries at allarts.org that started streaming Jan. 27. The docuseries, with a new episode debuting weekly through Feb. 17, chronicles the experience of more than 40 dancers who choreographed and rehearsed in six bubble residencies run last year by Works & Process, the performing arts series at New York’s Guggenheim Museum.

Filmed by Nic Petry, of the company Dancing Camera, the series notes the safety protocols that governed the bubbles last summer and fall at Kaatsbaan Cultural Park and Petronio Residency Center in the rural Hudson Valley. But it primarily captures the artists — practitioners of ballet, krump, tap, vogue and more — as they brainstorm, hone dances, talk about art and even partake in a conga line through a meadow.

Time to create is always valuable to an artist, and perhaps especially dancers, whose careers can be short. But amid the health crisis, which has devastated the performing arts, quarantine bubbles offer support that verges on the existential.

[New York is one of the world's great cities for the arts — but the damage from the pandemic is proving to be catastrophic]

“I worked the whole time. I never slept. I was so excited to be back in the studio,” says choreographer Ephrat Asherie, looking back on two weeks of bubbling with members of her company, whose style is rooted in Black and Latinx vernacular dance forms. The bubble, Asherie says, was a chance not so much to recharge her battery but “to make sure there was still a battery.”

Works & Process Producer Caroline Cronson and General Manager Duke Dang began conceptualizing the bubbles in the early months of the pandemic, seeking to support artists who were being walloped by what Cronson calls “a cyclone of nothing.” They were inspired by the protective measures that actor and filmmaker Tyler Perry had announced for [his Atlanta studio](#), and they sought advice from Robert Klitzman, a bioethics expert at Columbia University.

“Bubbles are common now,” Dang says. “But in June, we didn’t know if it was appropriate.”

[Arts workers are building a labor movement to save a creative economy in peril]

To develop protocols, Cronson and Dang sought out ballet-dancer-turned-physician Wendy Ziecheck. A Washington-area native, Ziecheck went into medicine after incurring a serious knee injury and noticing an empathy deficit in some of her doctors. “I felt that I could do a better job,” she recalls.

For the Works & Process bubbles, Ziecheck drew up protocols that included having the dancers self-quarantine, get tested during quarantine and tested again immediately before getting on the bus that drove them to the residency site. The bus driver was tested, too.

Getting on the bus after the second negative [coronavirus](#) test, “everybody had this big weight lifted off them,” recalls Anthony Rodriguez, a.k.a. “Invertebrate,” a B-boy and choreographer who traveled to Kaatsbaan to develop a piece that teamed beatboxers with dancers working in krump, flex and more.

At the residency sites, where they ordered groceries online and cooked family meals, the artists were able to live without masks and social distancing, almost as if it were 2019. Choreographer Leonardo Sandoval, at Kaatsbaan with members of his company, Music From the Sole, which melds tap dance and Afro-Brazilian rhythms, thought he had been coping well during the pandemic. But when he got to the residency, he realized how much he had been missing human contact. The epiphany, he says, “was really emotional.”

The bubbles nurtured a range of projects and artists, including Jamar Roberts, of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and Sara Mearns, a New York City Ballet dancer who helped incubate a version of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s 1930s opus “The Seven Deadly Sins.”

Choreographer Omari Wiles refined “New York Is Burning,” an exploration of LGBTQ ballroom that features his troupe, Les Ballet Afrik, which fuses traditional African dance and Afrobeat with house dance and vogue. Wiles had intended to simply polish the piece (whose title riffs on the New York City ball culture documentary “Paris Is Burning”), but in the bubble he was inspired to add depth, with more about community and “how we use ballroom as a form of activism,” he says.

Wiles put his company on a schedule, with morning meditations and warm-ups followed by rehearsals. In late afternoon, he would put his assistant choreographer in charge so he could make dinner. His rosemary-garlic potatoes were a particular hit.

Late in the bubble period, Wiles admits, “everyone was getting a little homesick.” Asherie, too, experienced bittersweet moments as her company worked on “UnderScored,” about the history of New York’s underground dance and music scene.

After being so long away from the studio and stage, intense rehearsals were a psychic adjustment — “like growing pains,” she says — as well as a physical one, requiring “a lot of heat packs and ice packs.”

Meanwhile, filmmaker Petry coped with an exacting schedule of quarantining, testing and moving between bubbles. To limit exposure, he says, “it was a one-person production: audio, lighting, camera, everything, and that was me.” It helped that, a dancer himself, he sensed “when a dancer might not want a camera in their face.”

Some of the artists performed their pieces outdoors at a Kaatsbaan summer festival for masked, socially distanced audiences. Sequences were also filmed outdoors at New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

[It wasn't the Met, but for these two dancers finally back onstage, it was two minutes of amazing]

In the longer term, Cronson says, they hope to present the dances at the Guggenheim when circumstances permit.

Since teaming with Works & Process, Ziecheck has devised protocols for other organizations and has become a leading dance-bubble expert.

"There's a lot at stake for [dancers] to make this work," she says. "Nobody wants to get sick. And nobody wants to be that person that shut down the production, or that actually did harm to someone else."

And everyone knew that the bubble was a rare chance at a dire time.

"All of us really did understand how precious this opportunity was," Asherie says.

Isolation to Creation Streaming free at allarts.org/isolation. The last two episodes debut Feb. 10 and 17. Some of the work created in the bubbles is available to view at lincolncenter.org.