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Changing of the guard at American Dance Festival

by Byron Woods

It's one of those existential questions that can drive all other thoughts from the brain: How long is now? Thinking about it only underlines the thinness of that experiential ledge we're all standing on—and, just possibly, the precariousness of our perch there. As you're reading, thinking, running, sleeping, the "now" keeps turning, inexorably, into "then."



Stephen Petronio Company
Underland | Photo: Sarah Silver

It's likely that a similar thought has been bedeviling Jodee Nimerichter, who became the sole director of the American Dance Festival (ADF) in January following the retirement of longtime director Charles Reinhart, with whom she shared the post in recent years.

Of course, the dance event itself is every bit as fleeting as the present. That's why we refer to dance (along with theater and music) as temporal or time-based art forms: They last only as long as their specific gestures are enacted and witnessed, the voices raised or instruments played and heard. Since the works keep vanishing, they must repeatedly be recreated, the past continually brought back into the present.

But ADF, so singularly devoted to the new and experimental in dance, sits uncomfortably at times astride the three tenses in other ways as well. Its programming attempts to conserve masterworks of the past, to identify and showcase artists who define the present and incubate the artists of the future. (ADF develops artists in its annual four- and six-week school programs in Durham, an MFA program offered in partnership with Hollins University and "mini ADF" intensives across the globe.) Even in an optimal season, there necessarily will be tension between these three programming priorities.

But as Nimerichter enters the position for which she's been groomed over most of the past decade, new dance itself is approaching something of a fork in the road, one that has already posed a significant challenge to the festival's ongoing relevance. It should shock no one to learn that the ADF remains indelibly connected with modern dance. The term is mentioned twice in the first sentence of the 2012 season press release. It's the reason the festival came into being in the first place: to promote the alternative works and aesthetics of "the Big Four"—Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm—in the mid-1930s.

But the term "modern dance" itself has received an increasing amount of scrutiny in recent years as more and more choreographers draw a distinction between that term and the work that they do now. They point out that the "modern" in modern dance actually refers to a specific period in art history, one that fell roughly between the late 1800s and the early 1960s.

Increasingly, practitioners, critics and scholars refer to this post-1960s work with names like contemporary or postmodern dance and movement research, and though some of the boundaries between these forms are blurred, the terms are not interchangeable with modern dance. In the process of embracing one label and rejecting another, a new generation is simply doing what boundary-pushing artists have always done: delineating their aesthetics from what has come before. And, in a development ADF should particularly note, festivals specifically devoted to them, including American Realness and the Movement Research Festival, have begun and increased in popularity in recent years.

This generational shift presents ADF with a challenge, which was articulated in a May 27 *New York Times* article by dance critic Claudia La Rocco. She asserted that ADF's programming, in aligning itself over the years with a core, largely unvarying group of artists, had become "moribund" and "stale."

This is not a recent development. Ten years ago, when the festival concluded a season filled with artists who had appeared during its previous three years, we noted in these pages that the ADF had "gone as far as it can—or should—in relying on the comforts of the known." A year later, we referred to Charles Reinhart as a "modern dance conservative" after he made a reference in an interview to "the hopefuls of the 1990s"—four years into the new millennium. The statement seemed emblematic of a leadership that had grown too cautious and slow in its consideration of new artists.

Given that Nimerichter is Reinhart's carefully groomed, handpicked successor, no one anticipated a sea change this year. And, in large part, there hasn't been one.

This summer, 11 of the companies and choreographers featured on the festival's main stages at Durham Performing Arts Center and Duke's Reynolds Industries Theater have appeared here in the last three seasons. Unsurprisingly, their number includes **Pilobolus**, **Paul Taylor** and **Shen Wei**. (Two additional artists, **Larry Keigwin** and **Brian Brooks**, performed at ADF in 2008 and 2005, respectively.)

Furthermore, some of the works we'll see from them will be familiar. Although choreographer **Doug Elkins**, who fuses hip-hop with contemporary moves, has done new work since 2006, it's *Fraulein Maria*, his gender- and genre-bending send-up of *The Sound of Music*, that will be performed for Thursday's opening-night gala. His company performed the work here in 2009.

Paul Taylor Dance Company will be reviving older rep work, too, and Pilobolus and Scottish Dance Theater will both present previously performed work with newer material.

Still, there are a number of significant new faces in the mix. Two such companies, **Ragamala Dance** and **Vertigo Dance Company**, reflect ADF's longtime inquiry into Indian dance and Israeli choreographers.

Another promising new face is **Stephen Petronio**, whose *Underland*, a haunting evening-length suite set to the songs and stories of Nick Cave, is this weekend's must-see. The inclusion of this company, which has performed across Europe and at Jacob's Pillow, is discussed in La Rocco's *New York Times* piece, which makes it clear that the leadership change prompted his invitation this year. Petronio told La Rocco that "Nimerichter 'didn't give me false hope about coming and was very respectful of her boss.' But, he added, 'within seconds of the shift, she called me.'"

Petronio's anecdote suggests that Nimerichter has plans to reinvigorate the programming. Perhaps future seasons will finally see, for example, Tanztheater Wuppertal, the company formed by the late Pina Bausch, who received the ADF Scripps Award for lifetime achievement in 1999. Perhaps the works of William Forsythe, this year's Scripps honoree, will be performed by his own company on a night all their own, instead of showcase showings by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in 2009 and **Hubbard Street Dance Chicago** this year.

Among other new faces this summer, Pittsburgh native **Kyle Abrahams** has been prolific in recent years after being named among Dance magazine's "25 to Watch" in 2009. The inclusion during ADF's third week of *The Radio Show*, his evening-length meditation on the passing of a local radio station and his father's descent into Alzheimer's disease, bears noting.

So does the nod the festival has given to three other choreographers coming into their own for the wild-card slot, the night of new commissions generated by rising choreographers and performed by advanced students at the ADF School. Dubbed "Past/Forward" in recent years, this year it's being called "Footsteps," and it bows on July 23, during the festival's last week.

Reggie Wilson, an April recipient of a Doris Duke Foundation grant, has brashly called his work with Brooklyn's Fist and Heel Performance Group "Post-African/Neo-Hoodoo Modern Dance." **Jodi Melnick** is a 2012 Guggenheim Foundation fellow who served as an assistant director with Trisha Brown. Given the ADF's tendencies to favor its own insiders, it's tempting to discount **Helen Simoneau**'s inclusion, since her history with the festival extends to performances on a second stage in 2006 and an MFA thesis dance in 2009. But the precision and audacity at times of her internationally performed work makes her decidedly good company here.

Though all in this group have been performing for a decade (or two, in some cases), their appearances this year still qualify as a possible change in course for a festival whose relationship to the present hasn't always matched its preoccupations with the past. That's a change for the better.