

Put One Foot in the Past, Point One to Tomorrow

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times
Natalie Mackessy and Barrington Hinds of
Stephen Petronio Company.

GROWING up in Colorado, Jodee Nimerichter was a serious bunhead: a driven young ballet dancer, whose dedication had landed her in a conservatory program. And then one day, in 1992, for reasons she still can't fully explain, she quit. Full stop.

"Everything had been all about dance," she said. "I wasn't even sure what to continue majoring in."

A woman she worked for (at a dance store, naturally) suggested arts management, which made sense to Ms. Nimerichter. Fast forward to 2012, and, well, everything has remained all about dance. More specifically, everything has remained all about the American Dance Festival. Ms. Nimerichter, 42, arrived at the festival, a six-and-a-half week juggernaut of performances and classes in Durham, N.C., as an intern two decades ago and, save for one four-year break, has spent her entire career there. In January she became the festival's director.

"This is what she was born to do," said Charles L. Reinhart, her predecessor and mentor, with whom she directed the festival from 2007 to 2011. Chuckling, he added, "If they were interviewing me and interviewing Jodee for that job, I would have lost."

Mr. Reinhart ran the festival for 43 years (his wife, Stephanie, shared those duties from 1993 until her death in 2002), a tenure that spanned sweeping change and growth in an institution that helped to incubate virtually all of the modern dance giants, including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and José Limón. After so many years, Mr. Reinhart had become something of an institution himself. He brokered influential international exchanges and aligned the wide-ranging festival with a core group of artists, many of whom returned year after year, making the festival an important supporter of modern dance but also sparking criticism that it had grown moribund in its programming.

Durham remains a magnet for young dance artists from around the world (last year, 425 students came from 19 countries and 34 states), and a place where important connections are forged. But the festival's offerings have grown stale in the eyes of many. As Donna Faye Burchfield, an esteemed figure in the dance world who left her position as dean of the festival's school last year after 28 years, said, it has become a "fixed institution" — the very thing that Mr. Reinhart cautioned against early in his tenure. Now, as Ms. Nimerichter prepares to oversee her first solo season, the dance world is wondering where, and to what extent, she will put her stamp on the American Dance Festival, which has a budget of about \$3.5 million and will, as of next month, own studio space for the first time.

"Jodee was mentored by Charles Reinhart, and also has an affinity for his vision," said Ishmael Houston-Jones, a curator and highly regarded choreographer who has been a longtime teacher at the festival. "But my hope would be that as time goes on she would find her own voice."

He added: "Durham is a university town but it's still in North Carolina; they have to bring in things that are sure to bring in an audience. So it's a balancing act that she has to perform. But I think some bolder choices could be made."

In interviews in New York and on the telephone, Ms. Nimerichter kept her cards close to her chest, speaking with the polished cordiality of a public figure. She said she could not identify a personal aesthetic, asserting that, “I value all of it and I enjoy all of it.”

When asked what she saw as her mandate, she spoke in broad strokes about feeling particularly responsible for supporting “an indigenous American art form” and “the creative sparks” generated internationally by that form.

But we can glean a sense of her taste by looking at the program for the coming festival, which begins on June 14. It features 18 companies and choreographers and offers some glimpses into how Ms. Nimerichter will balance continuity with change. Many of the names in the lineup are familiar: Pilobolus, Paul Taylor and Shen Wei (all three have been at every festival since 2000), as well as Larry Keigwin and Mark Morris.

“I thought it was important to bring them back this year, to let people know it wasn’t just Charles who believed in them,” she said, smiling and speaking carefully. “If they will return each and every year — that will be something to be determined each and every year.”

There are also seven festival debuts, though three of them (Reggie Wilson, Jodi Melnick and Helen Simoneau) are creating works with the festival students and will be presented in one evening. One of the full company debuts belongs to the Stephen Petronio Company, which was founded in 1984.

“My god,” Mr. Petronio said, laughing, when congratulated on finally making it to the festival. “I guess the stars are in the right alignment — or maybe it has something to do with the new director.”

Over the years, he added, in various conversations, Ms. 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.” The performance duo Eiko and Koma are now widely celebrated in America, but they had only a few years earlier arrived in New York from Japan when Mr. Reinhart showed up at their loft for a sparsely attended show on a snowy evening in 1983, and promptly offered them a gig at his festival. Since then, the couple has returned 18 times.

His continued support has been “tremendous,” Eiko said.

Now, Mr. Reinhart said, it is his protégé’s turn to find the 21st-century versions of Eiko and Koma, those younger artists who deserve to be supported and granted access to a wider audience. “Jodee is so much more attuned now with the younger generation, as it should be,” Mr. Reinhart said.

But not everyone is convinced. “I am not expecting any radical shifts,” said Ben Pryor, an arts manager who created the American Realness festival in 2009 to address what he saw as a lack of contextualization and support for how artists are working today. American Realness has since become an important shopping center for a wide array of artistic directors; Ms. Nimerichter, perhaps tellingly, called it the “Reality Series.”

Ms. Nimerichter’s lineup, Mr. Pryor added, seemed very much in keeping with previous festivals. “For me,” he said, “American Dance Festival is not a very exciting program. But for others it could be seen as an anchor of this certain vein of dance. It’s really following a modern dance tradition and not what I would refer to as contemporary dance and contemporary performance.”

Ms. Nimerichter defended her curatorial choices, pointing to artists like Miguel Gutierrez and, making his debut this year, Kyle Abraham (both have also been at American Realness). “People who think we’re not” supporting “more avant-garde choreographers,” she said, “have not paid close enough attention.”

Cathy Edwards, who has been an artistic director at Dance Theater Workshop and the Time-Based Art Festival in Portland, Ore., and is director of programming at the International Festival of Arts and Ideas in

New Haven, agreed, describing her colleague as “a very considered expert.” Working outside of New York, Ms. Edwards added, means making more measured choices.

“Primarily you’re introducing artists to your community — and your community is not in New York every week and they’re not connoisseurs of dance,” she said. “I do think that she is also interested in work that’s more overtly challenging.”

Time, of course, will tell how firmly the American Dance Festival remains tilted toward blue-chip modern dance. No matter her plans, Ms. Nimerichter, you suspect, will have decades in which to develop them.

“I’m just thrilled about the possibilities,” she said.