
PILLOWNOTES

by Debra Levine

The PillowNotes series comprises essays commissioned from our Scholars-in-Residence and others to provide audiences with a broader context for viewing dance.

Of the companies vying for the attention of Los Angeles's newly fervored dance audience, BODYTRAFFIC, making its second appearance at Jacob's Pillow, naturally aspired to top prominence. Lately, however, co-artistic directors Lillian Barbeito and Tina Berkett have adjusted that goal.

"When people thought of Los Angeles, we wanted BODYTRAFFIC to come to mind," says Berkett, who doubles as the troupe's doe-eyed lead dancer. "But we want to have a more fundamental impact on our city. When people think 'Los Angeles,' we want them to think *dance*."

In full agreement is the equally determined Barbeito, a Botticelli beauty focused on a managerial role having retired from performing last year. "Dance has changed so much in L.A.—and we like to think we played a part in its evolution," she says. "What gets us excited is the idea of L.A. as a world-class, premiere city for dance."

The two colleagues sip afternoon coffee at one of LaBrea Avenue's insistently cool cafés. Their random encounter at a ballet class birthed BODYTRAFFIC in 2008. They rattle off a rich *curriculum vitae* accrued since the company's prior Pillow appearance in 2013—an enviable roster of return bookings and new adventures.

In Manhattan, it spans from Midtown (Fall for Dance Festival at City Center) to Chelsea (thrice on the Joyce Theater stage, most recently to six sold-out houses). There's the company's June 2015 debut at the American Dance Festival; a pair of outings at Santa Monica's hip-and-high-profile Broad Stage. They've touched down in Vancouver three times at the Chutzpah Festival; San Francisco at ODC; and thrice at West Palm Beach's Duncan Theatre. New Mexico was a four-city road trip of performances and residencies. And for Dance Camera West film festival, BODYTRAFFIC made a summery site-specific climb on a Gustavo Godoy sculpture in a Los Angeles Music Center commission.

Foundation support has been forthcoming. Grants from the New England Foundation for the Arts, Princess Grace Foundation, and Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation have cushioned gigs, touring, and commissioning activity.

The company continues to amass significant artistic experiences. A pinnacle was engaging Hofesh Shechter, whose work for BODYTRAFFIC, *Dust*, figures prominently on the Doris Duke Theatre program.

"The rapport with Hofesh was to die for . . . Kismet," proclaims Barbeito, calling the result "sheer brilliance." Set to the choreographer/composer's own score, *Dust* is a further extrapolation of *Cult*, the work that put Shechter on the map in 2004.

The choreographer first dispatched Chris Evans to instill the elastic, sinewy vocabulary—Shechter's 'liquid pelvis'—prior to his own arrival. Berkett and company inhaled *Dust* in a black-box theater at Cal State Los Angeles. "It was the first time we created in a space with no mirrors," she recalls. "It felt like a cave—and the work is ritualistic and primal. We were internalizing as we learned, not relying on the mirror as a tool."

Persistence paid off in a precious rep item from one of the world's top gifted dance-artists. "I first saw Hofesh in Holland in 2008," says Barbeito. "We had *just* founded BODYTRAFFIC; we were one month old. We reached out every year, showing him how we were growing. We were relentless! It was a dream come true for our dancers, the feeling of being ultimately satisfied, the kind of work every dancer wants to do."

Artistic gratification also sparked with Victor Quijada, whose break-dance background underpins *Once again, before you go*. "Victor has one of the most distinctive movement vocabularies I've ever seen: the 'rubber band' method," says Barbeito. "When done right, it's an optical illusion. You can literally see the energy between people."

Joshua Peugh's *A trick of the light*, suggests Barbeito, was inspired by "the infamous green flash that happens at sunset when the sun dips below the horizon." Pillow program opener, *The New 45*, by Richard Siegal (his second work for the troupe, following *o2Joy*) won the co-directors' hearts with its "speed, musicality, and intricate partnering."

Now is a golden moment for the 'Traffickers. Following the July appearances at the Pillow, the Californians will act as American emissaries in a U.S. State Department "Dance Motion USA" tour of Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories from September to November. Returning to L.A., the company has in its corner one of the nation's most influential dance patrons, Gloria Kaufman. The philanthropist, whose generous gifts to the Los Angeles Music Center and the University of Southern California have reconfigured the city's infrastructure for dance, shares her high praise: "BODYTRAFFIC is an exquisitely playful and sophisticated contemporary dance company. I am incredibly proud of this home-grown company we call our very own. They represent just how fertile the ground is for dance in the City of Angels."

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