

Jacob's Pillow, PS21 linked in dance, innovation, season

[Tresca Weinstein](#)

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AXIS Dance Company will perform in Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival 2023, which runs June 28–Aug. 27.

David DeSilva

Jacob's Pillow, the venerable dance institution in Becket, Mass., and PS21, Chatham's 6-year-old contemporary performing arts venue, each kick off a rich season of summer dance programming this week. While the

former is a grande dame of the dance world and the latter a feisty upstart that has nevertheless made an impressive mark in its short existence, the two have more in common than you might think—including deep community involvement, a commitment to bringing international companies to the region, and a dedication to increasing access for audiences.

The Pillow launches its nine-week season with Thursday's opening gala, followed up by the return next week of the Mark Morris Dance Group, the company with the highest number of repeat performances at the festival, director Pamela Tatge noted. The troupe brings an evening-length work from 2022 paying homage to the music of Burt Bacharach. PS21 (which presents performances year-round, also including music and theater) starts its summer dance series with a two-night run (Thursday and Friday) of another icon: The Paul Taylor Dance Company, with three works from the 1980s and '90s.

From there, the offerings at both venues expand to embrace experimental work, dance/theater and artists from around the world. “One of the most exciting things about this summer is the breadth and caliber of the international artists that audiences...

These include Oona Doherty, the first headlining artist from Northern Ireland to perform at the festival; the physically inclusive Resident Island Dance Theatre from Taiwan; the French hip hop company Compagnie Käfig; and the Pillow debut of the Dutch National Ballet. A wide range of global styles will also be celebrated by U.S.-based companies, from Indigenous dance and Irish céilí to Latin and Cuban dance, body percussion and the traditional Indian dance form Bharatanatyam.

Closer to home, the stage will be turned over to Berkshire-based artists as part of the Pillow's annual Community Day on Aug 18. Another special event, Hip Hop Across the Pillow, Aug. 2–6, features the pioneering Rennie Harris Puremovement, hip hop icons Rokafella and Kwikstep and a work

performed by Los Angeles-based multidisciplinary artists d. Sabela Grimes and the Ladies of Hip Hop.

Many of these companies will appear on the outdoor Henry J. Leir Stage, which has become a full-on adjunct to the Pillow's Ted Shawn Theatre with the loss of the Doris Duke Theatre to fire in late 2020. (Plans are underway for the construction of a reimagined version to open in 2025, with \$8 million left to raise in a \$35 million fundraising campaign.)

"The excitement of seeing Ice Dance International doing ice dancing on an outdoor stage or a company like Ananya Dance Theatre performing a work we helped develop in the Pillow Lab, is elemental and universal," Tatge said.

To increase access, a number of performances on the Henry J. Leir Stage offer a Choose What You Pay option. The festival is also considering how to move into the future with a hybrid model after moving its programming online in 2020.

During the pandemic, "thousands of people around the world had access to what was happening," Tatge said. "Post-pandemic, we are thinking intentionally about our online presence and how to engage people using our platform. That is necessary if we want to remain relevant."

At PS21, meanwhile, artistic and executive director Elena Siyanko has programmed a season of experimental work that crosses boundaries and disciplines. "Runners," from the Czech New Circus ensemble Cirk La Putyka, explores the hectic pace of life today via the metaphor of a 10-meter long treadmill on which four performers run, collide, somersault, ride bikes and perform acrobatics. The performance installation "Anima," by French visual artist/photographer Noémie Goudal, theater director Maëlle Poésy, circus artist Chloé Moglia, and composer Chloé Thévenin, explores time, change and the environment, informed by the artists' interest in paleoclimatology, the study of ancient climate trends and metamorphoses.

“As a spectator, you are immersed in this naturalistic atmosphere, this continuous transformation of space that you see on the screens as well as through movement,” Siyanko said.

“Save the Last Dance for Me,” by the Italian choreographer Alessandro Sciarroni, reinvents the polka chinata, which translates as crouched polka, a physically demanding form of ballroom dancing performed exclusively by pairs of men. Members of the company will lead free workshops in this unique style following the performance, for both dancers and non-dancers.

PS21 also presents a free performance by Amoukanama Circus, a troupe of Guinean acrobats, dancers and musicians, Aug. 19 at Chatham’s Crellin Park, as part of the town’s annual community day. In addition to free events like this, on site and at nearby locations like the Hudson Waterfront, PS21 creates access by keeping ticket prices low, typically around \$25 even for world-class companies.

“It’s our attempt to cultivate audiences so they can consider new work on the continuum—take a chance on something more conceptual, and then come back for something more user-friendly,” Siyanko said. “Ultimately, all of this programming needs to engage creatively with critical global and social issues, and needs to be rooted in community collaboration.”

Written By

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Reach Tresca on

Tresca Weinstein writes about dance, visual art, and culture for the Times Union. She also writes, edits, and manages content for national corporations and organizations, with a focus on the arts, yoga, health and wellness, and positive psychology. Her favorite part of her job is talking to people who are passionate about making the world a better and more awe-inspiring place, whether that means creating beautiful things, researching the science of happiness, or doing eight pirouettes in a row.