

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // PERFORMANCE

Pushfest pushes dance artists and audiences

By Claudia Bauer Sep. 14, 2017 Updated: Sep. 14, 2017 2:49 p.m.



Adrian Arias will premiere "Dream #3," inspired by dreams about his Peruvian ancestors. Photo: Mara Hernandez

Even for artistic director Raissa Simpson, it's not easy to talk about the Pushfest Dance Festival without a little corny wordplay. "It's really grown," she says of the weekend-long event she started in 2014, "so I'm excited to see how far we can push it — no pun intended!"

Kidding aside, Simpson, 39, of San Francisco, is seriously mindful about curating Pushfest, which returns to ODC Theater on Friday, Sept. 22. “It’s evolved into this mixed-genre festival, where artists from different disciplines can perform and get to know each other,” Simpson says. “We want to make sure we bring the full picture of the dance community over the four performances.”

This year’s program offers 19 artists in performances up to 10 minutes in length, including four world premieres. The format gives audiences a wide sampling and encourages artists to get out of their silos and cross paths. So while Claudia Anata Hubiak and Liv Schaffer tend toward contemporary movement, “Lalli Venkat is looking to interweave classical Indian dance with modern dance,” Simpson says. “Mary Carbonara is working with a group who came to her saying, ‘We are adult dancers, and we want to make work.’ I think that’s why people enjoy the festival, because you really don’t know what to expect.”

Simpson specifically encourages rising talents, like Berkeley choreographer Tanya Chianese, 29. Her young company, Ka·nei·see collective, debuted in the inaugural festival and returns with an excerpt from a full-length piece to premiere in 2018. Chianese appreciates the interactive aspect that Simpson has designed into Pushfest.

“We’re presenting something that’s a sticky subject matter,” Chianese says of “Please Don’t,” a dance about gender-based public harassment inspired by Brooklyn artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh’s street-art series “Stop Telling Women to Smile.” “There’s a lot of the dancers grabbing each other rather insensitively,” she says. “We’re trying to get feedback on it, and this is a great opportunity where a lot of my colleagues are going to be there, and I can ask them.”

Simpson encourages audience engagement as well, via post-show mingling in the theater lobby and a viewer vote that awards a \$100 stipend to the favorite artist from each program. “I wanted Pushfest to be an exchange of different

viewpoints that can connect or disconnect,” Simpson says. “I have found (that) audiences really do appreciate it, because there is a level of entertainment and a level of social and cultural themes.”

In “Dream #3,” for example, multidisciplinary performance artist Adrian Arias channels a dream in which his late grandfather spoke to him about their ancestry. “I am this kind of person who is living in the 21st century with a lot of indigenous blood,” says Arias, 56, an Oakland artist who grew up in Peru and immigrated to the U.S. in 2000.

“My (artistic) response is surreal,” he says, and his semi-spontaneous performance, deeply influenced by the work of Anna Halprin, combines poetry, movement, Andean song and original music by his daughter, the Boston electronic composer Anaís Azul.

Arias’ work, says Simpson, “is very visually riveting. It’s gonna be different from what our audiences are used to seeing.” She is infusing her own sense of theater into a festival premiere: “Mothership II,” the centerpiece of a triptych on African American history.

The first installment of “Mothership,” which premiered at last year’s festival, evoked the Founding Fathers; for the second installment, Simpson is time-shifting to Afro-futurism. “Afro-futurism asks, If black people are never considered human, or only three-fifths human, are we aliens?” she muses. “What is the mothership? Is it the ship that brought us here, or the ship that may take us away to another planet? I like that imaginative element.”

Simpson hopes that the artists of Pushfest, and the audiences who come to see them, will be open to exploring the wide spectrum of ideas put before them. “Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t,” she says. In either case, “I really wanted artists to push themselves.” No pun intended.

Claudia Bauer is a Bay Area freelance writer. Twitter: @speakingofdance

Pushfest Dance Festival

Friday-Sunday, Sept. 22-24. ODC Theater, 3153 17th St., S.F. \$15-\$50.
415-863-9834. www.pushdance.org/festival.

To see the Pushfest preview video: <http://tinyurl.com/yb6tdf23>

Program A: Tanya Chianese, Ka·nei·see collective; Claudia Anata Hubiak, the Anata Project; Kendra Kimbrough-Barnes, Kendra Kimbrough Dance Ensemble; Halifu Osumare & the Sacramento State University Dancers; Agatha “Agatron” Rupniewski, Iron Lotus; Liv Schaffer & Cole Vernon; Adrianna Thompson, Soulskin Dance Company; Lalli Venkat; Katerina Wong; Raissa Simpson, Push Dance Company. 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 22, and 4:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 23.

Program B: Adrian Arias; Lorelei Bayne; Claire Calalo, for change dance collective; Mary Carbonara, Dancers’ Performance Project; Kathryn Florez, Fullstop Dance; Jamal Jackson, Jamal Jackson Dance Company; Rebecca McCormac, CoreDance Contemporary; Kao Vey Saephanh, Push Dance Company + PushLab; Raissa Simpson, Push Dance Company. 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 23, and 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 24.