PS21 2022 season: "You don’t come to see the familiar"

Tresca Weinstein
May 30, 2022

“C'est pas là, c'est par là (It's Not That Way, It's This Way),” a weblike string installation on a hill above the theater.

© Compagnie Galmae
Like all the best parties, the PS21 performance season starts early, ends late and brings together people (in this case, artists and audiences) who might never have met otherwise. Encompassing dance, theater, opera and music, the packed summer schedule includes performances in the fields and forest, participatory events, work by iconic American choreographers, and half a dozen world premieres and U.S. debuts by international companies.

“What interests us most is work that has never been shown before,” said Elena Siyanko, PS21’s artistic and executive director. “That is the true meaning of a festival. You don’t come to see the familiar, the tried-and-true companies and productions—you want it to be a surprise and a celebration.”

The Nigerian choreographer Qudus Onikeku and QDance Company kick off the season on June 3 and 4 at PS21’s open-air Pavilion Theater in Chatham. Siyanko describes their work “Re:INCARNATION” as “a huge explosion of energy”—a mashup of Afrobeat, dance hall, house and funk, inspired by traditional Yoruba philosophy.
The summer lineup also features the Montreal-based hip-hop collective Vox Sambou; the Ukrainian folk-punk band DakhaBrakha; Art Move Concept from France, drawing from silent comedy, mime and circus arts; and Vertigo Dance Company from Israel, performing “One. One & One” on a dirt-covered stage.

Even the more-recognizable artists will be bringing work that’s a bit outside the box. The Paul Taylor Dance Company returns with lesser-known pieces from the 1970s and ‘80s, including “Cloven Kingdom,” “Syzygy” and “Diggity,” with a set decorated with cut-out dogs designed by artist Alex Katz. Mark Morris will be in residence to expand on his work “Water,” set to Handel’s classic “Water Music.” Along with an evening program in the Pavilion Theater, Morris’s company will offer pop-up dance during a free Wednesday in Waterfront Park event in nearby Hudson.

In a similar pairing, the Sean Mason Quintet performs an evening concert and Mason, a Jazz at Lincoln Center emerging artist, will also lead workshops for local student jazz ensembles. Jamal Jackson Company members will stage an interactive piece at Chatham’s public Crellin Park Day, and will also work with students from the Hudson programs Perfect Ten, Spark of Hudson and Operation Unite NY to create a show informed by the dance rituals of Mali and Burkina Faso.

This community-focused programming, known as Pathways, is central to PS21’s mission, Siyanko said, and was close to the heart of its founder, the late Judy Grunberg. While the name springs in part from the trails that crisscross the property, the series also provides “pathways to ourselves, to each other and to the community,” Siyanko said. Offerings include free and affordable performances, workshops and demonstrations, and Movement Without Borders, a series of yoga, Pilates, dance and fitness classes with both local teachers and visiting artists.
“Our community engagement is not coincidental—as in, whenever a famous artist is performing here, they throw in something for the community,” Siyanko said. “It’s a separate stream of programming that’s tailored to the area’s growing community and the community that lives here year-round.”

Pathways performances often take place outdoors in PS21’s 100-plus acres of meadows, orchards and woods, giving added dimension to the work. For “Field of Vision,” by Bang on a Can composer Michael Gordon, 36 percussionists will be dispersed throughout the landscape, performing the multilayered piece on specially constructed and tuned instruments. In “C’est pas là, c’est par là (It’s Not That Way, It’s This Way),” South Korean street artist Juhyung Lee and his Compagnie Galmae construct a weblike string installation on a hill above the theater, and invite spectators to become part of a problem-solving collective. French director Philippe Quesne’s “Farm Fatale” imagines a dystopian future in which five scarecrows are the sole survivors after an environmental collapse.

“The work embraces the artists’ roles as dreamers, poets and activists in the quest for a kinder, less harmful future for our planet, but it also draws the attention of kids to the most pressing issues of today’s world, without being didactic,” Siyanko said.

The very first event on the PS21 schedule is a “community hangout” on June 1 at 5:30 p.m., conceived and hosted by Qudus Onikeku and QDance. Titled “Middle Ground—an Evening of Creative Placemaking,” it fuses live music, dance, storytelling and sharing among a diverse group of participants, including local non-performers whose craft and dedication support the community to thrive.

The gathering will be a reminder, Siyanko said, that the culture of a place—and a performance space—“is not just created by famous people and festival people, but also by firefighters, electricians, car mechanics, bakers, cooks, bookstore owners, groundskeepers—basically everybody who creates Chatham and its environment.”