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‘City Dance’ hails the Halprin heritage

Performance lauds couple’s impact on Portland public spaces

By ERIC BARTELS

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TBA’s “City Dance” celebrates the experiments in movement, sound and space done in the ’70s by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin and his wife, Anna, a modern dance pioneer, and will take place at the Ira Keller Fountain Park.

The dramatic Ira Keller Fountain and two others designed by the influential landscape architect Lawrence Halprin sprang from a vibrant cultural milieu involving music and dance as well as cutting-edge design.

On Sunday, Sept. 14, as part of the Time-Based Art Festival, scores of local artists will participate in a mobile performance piece called “The City Dance of Lawrence and Anna Halprin,” spotlighting the work of Halprin and his wife, a pioneer of modern dance.

Choreographer Linda Austin, one of four involved in the project, was serving on a TBA panel years ago when she learned about the San Francisco-based couple.

Linda K. Johnson, another dancemaker involved with the project, says an awareness campaign began with local architectural historian and critic Randy Gragg.

“Randy almost five years ago wrote a piece about the Halprin sequence,” says Johnson, using shorthand for the architect’s Portland oeuvre. “It needed the city’s attention in terms of preservation.”

Not long after that, Johnson approached Gragg with the idea that art could be the lens through which the public might view Lawrence Halprin’s work.

In 2005, Gragg partnered with Third Angle New Music Ensemble, a group founded by Oregon Symphony violinist Ron Blessinger, on “Frozen Music,” a site-specific performance that aligned music and architecture.

Later, the company’s board contacted Gragg about undertaking another such project involving Halprin. This year’s TBA provided the opportunity.

Sunday’s two performances will send audiences on a tour of Halprin’s creations, fountains and plazas that were part of an urban renewal effort at the far south end of downtown in the early ’70s.

The architect worked closely with his wife, whose experiments with movement – in conjunction with a circle of avant-garde composers – informed his user-friendly designs.

“What we have is a Portland manifestation of that creative scene,” says Oregon Symphony violinist Ron Blessinger. “Halprin was a very progressive landscape architect. The effects of these parks has been monumental.”

Blessinger says the musical palette he has fashioned for the event will include improvisational elements and will involve 60 musicians, including members of the Oregon Symphony, the Portland Youth Philharmonic and the Portland Cello Project.

Choreographer Austin says her contribution, which is anchored at the Lovejoy Fountain, presented challenges.

“The Lovejoy is interesting because the space isn’t huge, but it is so open as a plaza,” she says. “It was hard to focus down. Working with a specific piece of premade architecture is something I’ve never done.

“It was slightly intimidating, but really fun. We did a lot of exploring. We got wet every rehearsal.”

When onlookers arrive at the fountain, tucked into the 10-acre superblock just south of Keller Auditorium, they’ll see Austin and seven other dancers as well as a 10-person “movement choir.” Twenty-five dancers are involved overall.

Johnson says she’s grateful that the project expanded as it evolved, requiring her to enlist Austin as well as choreographers Tere Mathern and Cydney Wilkes.

“Originally, I was going to do all the dance, which in hindsight would’ve been so wrong,” Johnson says. “You get all this very complex thinking from four different dancemakers.”

Blessinger, whose musical team will honor the minimalist composers associated with the Halprins' heyday, says there's nothing small about the "City Dance" collaboration, which also includes a lecture and workshops.

"The thing is mind-blowingly big," he says.

1 and 4 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 14, Ira Keller Fountain, Southwest Second Avenue between Southwest Clay and Southwest Market streets, 503-224-7422, www.pica.org, free

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