

Park it Here! The Garage Celebrates Ten Years
by Lisa Bardarson

When I arrived at the Performance Garage's tenth anniversary celebration, I felt as though I was being welcomed into someone's home. The performance was preceded by a wine-and-cheese reception where performers and choreographers mingled convivially with Garage supporters, the performers' presence more about celebrating the space and less about their artistic manifest. The proximity of artist to audience member created an intimacy that reflected the evening's theme: we were gathered on this night to celebrate the artistic house that is the Performance Garage. When it was time to partake of the evening's show, we moved to our seats, which we later learned had their story, too.

The evening included a video by Carmella Vassor-Johnson that documented the development of the Performance Garage from its early stages, a slide presentation by Philadelphia Dance Projects (core tenants and sustainers who provide enriching programming to the dance community), plus live performances by the former Jeanne Ruddy Dance Company, Subcircle, Carbon Dance Theatre and Kulu Mele African Dance and Drum Ensemble. All of the evening's participants have been intimately involved in the life of the Garage.

Jeanne Ruddy, Executive and Artistic Director of the Performance Garage, along with Victor Keen, her husband, supporter and co-visionary, were warmly acknowledged for their years of dedication to the Garage's development. Kathryn Keeler, long-standing board member and stalwart supporter of the Philadelphia dance community, presented Ruddy and Keen with an engraved brick, a humble but appropriate token of the sweat equity they have lovingly poured into their decade-long journey cultivating this multi-faceted house of dance. In his speech to the audience, Keen made mention of the chairs on which the sixty or so patrons sat. He told of a local nightclub that was in the midst of a renovation and was offering their chairs for cheap. As it turned out, acquisition of them was more challenging than just showing up with a truck and hauling them off. But it was fun to hear and expressed the point that Keen was trying to make: the Performance Garage has been a labor of love. Let's not let this hard work go to waste.

At this juncture the Performance Garage has more rehearsal time available. Until the spring of 2012 the space was inextricably linked to the bifurcated vision of its founder, Jeanne Ruddy, who saw it as a facility that could both serve the needs of the Philadelphia dance community and provide a home to her own company, Jeanne Ruddy Dance. After a successful twelve-year run of JRD, Ruddy felt that she had completed the intended mission for her company. So, she chose to keep the Garage doors open but close the company's. Ruddy continues to choreograph and teach as the Garage's resident artist and now the short-term challenge is to fill the rehearsal hours that have opened up with JRD's absence.

Because the Performance Garage is a multi-faceted facility, it can grow and show work under one roof. Two studio spaces are available for rent to choreographers and companies for rehearsals. This work can be brought to fruition on the Garage's intimate stage with a theater that offers great sight lines, good technical support, a sprung floor, and dressing rooms. Since 2009 the Garage has been the location-of-choice for Dance USA's Presenter Showcase, where twenty to twenty-five companies and choreographers show work over a two-day period. The Garage's two-studio arrangement allows for one company to prepare and warm up behind the scenes before moving to the theater for showcase presentation. The fact that so much happens under one roof is a bonus to choreographers and companies looking for accessible, Center City space.

Ruddy explained, in an interview with me, that when renovation began on the building, crack needles could be found in front of the door and graffiti was prominent. In the ten years since the Garage took up residence, the Spring Garden neighborhood has dramatically improved. Ruddy expressed pride in offering free classes to local children, just one of the contributions the Garage has made to its neighborhood. These grassroots offerings have been quietly going on while Spring Garden has become increasingly targeted for development. With the recent purchase of the Divine Lorraine by developer Eric Blumenfeld, it will be interesting to see if commercial ventures like this and the Performance Garage can benefit from one another. I'd like to think so.

I suppose that Keen chose to share the Garage furniture lore because it spoke to the tremendous effort of creating this house of dance. An old song with lyrics by Walter Brennan sums up the heartfelt message of the evening;

Well it takes a heap of living,
lots of take and lots of givin' ...
Lord, it takes a heap of livin' just to make a house a home....

<https://www.facebook.com/carmella.vassorjohnson>,
<http://www.philadanceprojects.org>

The Performance Garage's 10th Anniversary Celebration
December 4, 2012, at the Performance Garage, Ruddydance.org/garage