

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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Bringing art to life

Dance Collective's annual fundraiser Thursday

Keiara Carr, *The Journal Gazette*



Fresh off a flight from London, Fort Wayne Dance Collective artistic director John Byrne is already back in the office.

His first year with the organization has been a busy one, but also a successful one. He says the organization has garnered its largest enrollment for fall classes to date.

Now, Byrne will mark his first anniversary at Fort Wayne Dance Collective with the fundraiser “Art Moves” on Thursday.

“It’s been a really good year for us so far. I mean, it’s such a pleasure to be involved with it,” Byrne says.

“Art Moves” showcases a series of dance installations inspired by renowned artists like Georgia O’Keeffe, Wassily Kandinsky and contemporary modern artist Jeff Koons, with contemporary art gallery Wunderkammer Company serving as the backdrop. Performances will feature dancers from the organization’s outreach and on-site programs.

Byrne says proceeds from the fundraiser help sustain and create outreach programming and provide dance scholarships. The event will feature a silent auction, and a photo series, crafted by Byrne and Jeffrey Crane, will be for sale.

Heavy hors d’oeuvres and cash bar will be available.

“The inspiration this year was to create an event that was a really fun, end-of-summer party to celebrate the service Fort Wayne Dance Collective does for the community and to create an atmosphere where people can come and enjoy the creative spirit that lives within our organization,”

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Byrne says. “We have dancers and choreographers from all different areas of our organization to present work based on art pieces that inspired them.”

The fourth annual fundraiser for the organization diverts from the direction of past immersive theater fundraisers, where guests traveled through a venue as dancers interpreted classic stories, such as “Romeo and Juliet,” “Alice in Wonderland” and “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” through movement.

“Art Moves” takes advantage of the gallery space at Wunderkammer Company with the dancers on top of large performance boxes as art installations. The dancers will come to life as visitors walk through.

Byrne says this year’s program has been simplified to make the fundraiser more of a social gathering where “the artwork will just live around all of the guests.”

“Choreography is very much a narrative process,” Byrne says. “When you’re presenting choreography, you’re usually telling some type of story, so it’s great to create dances that are inspired by art that exists, and to really develop those into a physical story.”

Mandie Kolkman, stage director and one of the choreographers for the event, says the organization wants to show how it’s on “the forefront of art,” and encourage audiences to be open to it.

“We’re really trying to showcase the unique things that we do in an inviting way,” Kolkman says. “Sometimes you may not want to go see a dance performance. It’s hard to sit down for an hour and just watch a dance performance. But, when it’s immersive like this, and there’s also breaks, it’s a more comfortable setting.

“They may realize through this less-abrasive form of performance that, ‘Hey, I actually do like this. Maybe I could sit down and see art for a longer period of time.’”

Kolkman says she had an idea in mind and tried to match it to an artwork instead. She selected the 2012 painting “Artist and Muse” by Joe Fig, whose portrait depicts French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, famous for his images of Parisian can-can dancers, painting a muse.

“I decided to play with levels, where the muse is on the platform, and I have the artist on the bottom, and he’s actually painting,” Kolkman says. “The more dynamic the artist’s movements are or, the more he paints, the more the muse comes to life.”

Byrne says he choreographed two pieces. One is inspired by “Under the Wave off Kanagawa,” also known as “The Great Wave” by Japanese painter Hokusai.

The other dance was inspired by “The Ballerina” by Jeff Koons that Byrne says is a playful piece that parallels Koons’ pop-art influence. Koons is often recognized for his mirror-polished stainless-steel pieces, and for this particular sculpture, Koons created a dainty ballerina who appears to be adjusting one of her slippers.

“It was just the tongue-and-cheek humor that I found in the work, which is pretty common in Jeff Koons’ work,” Byrne says. “It’s sort of like this over-the-top, glossy picture package, and in that sculpture itself, I saw a story of this young girl, totally dressed up, hair and makeup and a fancy costume, but in my head, I imagined her being very clumsy.”

For “Under the Wave,” he and dancer Logan Krueger created a narrative of how it would be to be a man facing one of these massive waves in a canoe.

Byrne says Krueger is one of Fort Wayne Dance Collective’s outreach students at South Side High School.

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“It’s really exciting to get a chance to work with him,” Byrne says. “Through my whole life, I sort of worked with major dance companies or film or television dancers, and this past year to be able to work with local high schools in a really up-and-coming city with these kids has been just eye-opening.”