

Akron Beacon Journal

'Encounter: Akron,' made for city's people, reaches beyond assumptions about what dance is

By Kerry Clawson August 2, 2023



How does creating a work of physical theater unique to Akron draw dancers and non-dancers alike to build something new together?

Eleven performers ages 11 to 39 from multiple walks of life have done just that with the new work "The Encounter: Akron," which will be performed for the public Aug. 10-12 at the University of Akron's Sandefur Theatre.

The project is a partnership with the National Center for Choreography-Akron (NCCAkron), Rubber City Theatre and New York choreographer Kimberly Bartosik. The goal for "The Encounter: Akron" is to reach into the Akron community beyond people who already know theater and dance, the choreographer said.

At a rehearsal last month with Bartosik in Akron, the dance started out with a feeling of heavy tension and a foreboding, recorded soundscape as the Akron-area performers ran synchronously in circles amid moving lights and fog. Later, connections between performers began building, including a tender duet between Julia Dillard of Cleveland and Neema Bal of Akron where the two locked eyes and Dillard's fingers traveled up Bal's arm.

In another moment, the cast carried 11-year-old James "J2" Shepherd on his back. Finally, after what felt like an arduous journey, UA dance major Larry White Jr., 21, stood shaking on a platform as the rest of the cast crawled toward him, arms outstretched.

"The Encounter: Akron," which is described as a work of live physical theater, was created in just eight rehearsals in Akron. The cast got to know each other more by sitting in a circle each day for one performer ask each the others a question, from "What's your favorite food?" to "Who's the most important person in your life?"

How Akron-area creatives were drawn to make dance

Britt Oliver, 39, was drawn to audition for "The Encounter: Akron" after attending a dance conversation in June called "Against All Odds: Moving in Museums," which was part of an NCCAkron summit at the museum. The event, tied to the museum's Keith Haring exhibit, left her enthused about the impact of movement, how dance can enlighten people and how it can be "a living, viable art."

"As an adult I hadn't had an opportunity to express myself with my body alone," said Oliver, who has a background in theater.

She moved back to Akron in 2020 after five years doing comedy and improv in Chicago, while working for a lighting design company. After learning about NCCAkron's project "The Encounter: Akron," and reading that the dance had to do with themes of grief and loss, she decided to go through the strenuous audition.

"It was a new challenge to use my body that way and was also a way to connect with other creative-oriented people," Oliver said of the project.

Heading into and throughout the pandemic, Oliver had struggled with her own health issues, her father's health challenges and being laid off from her job in Chicago. She ultimately decided to move back and rebuild her life in her hometown.

Creating the dance with other local performers, none of whom she knew before, has been a cathartic process, Oliver said.

"It allowed me to have a safe place to kind of express myself," she said.

Working with gifted choreographer Bartosik, who danced with Merce Cunningham for nine years, has been a journey that Oliver said she's proud of.

"The Encounter: Akron" allowed Oliver to share what her definition of grief is and how to "get to the other side of it," she said.

Background on Bartosik's 'Encounter' work

The concept of doing "The Encounter" in various cities around the world was born of the pandemic, said Bartosik, who runs the dance company daela in New York. Like all other dance makers at the time, her work came to a sudden halt when the pandemic began.



"It was like my career slammed into a wall," she said.

She thought a lot about themes of loss, grief, mourning, hope and recovery as she slowly rebuilt her career, asking, "how do we communicate what we're carrying in our bodies through motion?"

She carried those themes to her first "Encounter" project in Buffalo, New York, last year, starting the dance with a running sequence that symbolized pushing time forward or "pushing out of this moment of isolation."

Rather than bringing her usual virtuosic New York dancers to Buffalo, Bartosik worked with nine performers there ages 17 to 64 with a variety of backgrounds. She didn't want to work with trained dancers; the goal was to get to the core of using the body as a form of communication.

"Just be yourself and run as fast as you can as long as you can... Be yourself and crawl across the floor toward that person," she said.

Since "The Encounter: Buffalo," Bartosik has created "Encounter" projects in New York; Pozzuoli and Perugia, Italy; Akron and Rockland, Maine. Bartosik was already familiar with working in Akron's Sandefur Theatre, having done residency projects there with NCCAkron in 2017 and 2018.

In each city, an emotional snapshot is created through dance with people who live there and are digging out of the pandemic age.

"I believe first of all that bodies don't lie. I just think dance is the purest form of communication," Bartosik said.

Beauty queen/experimental performer drawn to 'Encounter'

Kay DePew of Akron, who competed last year as Miss Akron in the Miss Ohio pageant, auditioned for "The Encounter: Akron" with the goal of expanding her knowledge as a performance artist. She's lead singer of the abstract performance band Profit Profit and has no background in dance or theater.

"I saw an opportunity for something really outside of myself that would push my boundaries and challenge me to take up a new form of storytelling," said DePew, who saw a notice for the open audition for "The Encounter: Akron" on Facebook.



DePew, 28, works full-time at Nidec Motor Corporation in Green as an elevator salesperson and is studying business at Kent State University. She also helped run the Hive Mind collective performance venue in Akron for five years, before it closed in 2020.

Through "The Encounter: Akron," she's made a group of friends from diverse backgrounds, including those from the multicultural Gum-Dip Theatre.

"I'm glad to know more people doing art that I didn't even know about in Akron," she said.

How 'Encounter: Akron' was funded

To support "The Encounter: Akron," NCCAkron received a \$125,000 grant from the [Knight Arts Akron Community Fund](#) at the Miami Foundation to connect local theater organizations with choreographers and expand spaces to present

dance in Akron. The award funded both the collaboration for "[inCOPnegro: Aftermath](#)" at the [Center for Applied Theatre and Active Culture \(CATAC\)](#) this summer as well "The Encounter: Akron" with Rubber City Theatre. The award also includes digital documentation of the projects.

A \$20,000 Grants for Arts Projects that NCCAkron recently received from the National Endowment for the Arts also supports the "The Encounter: Akron" project as well as two other artist initiatives in 2023-24.

Arts and restaurant writer Kerry Clawson may be reached at 330-996-3527 or kclawson@thebeaconjournal.com.

Details

Physical theater: "The Encounter: Akron"

When: 7 p.m. Aug. 10-11, 3 p.m. Aug. 12

Where: Sandefur Theatre, Guzzetta Hall, 228 E. Buchtel Ave., University of Akron

Onstage: Melissa Ajayi, Neema Bal, Katie Beck, Kobe Calain, Key DePew, Julia Dillard, Josy Jones, Elyse Morckel, Britt Oliver, James "J2" Shepherd, Larry White Jr.

Offstage: Kimberly Bartosik, choreographer; Burr Johnson, creative associate; Eugene Rogers, technical director/lighting designer; Jennifer Lehane, stage manager; Carlos Diaz Stoop/CDS Creative Productions, creative producer

Cost: Pay what you can; suggested donation \$2-\$10. Limited number of free tickets.

Information: rubbercitytheatre.com