State of the Arts

Bringing dance back to the Gardner

Kristen Giddings Wednesday, March 16, 2016

Credit: Unknown

Photo by Sarah Whiting
Before Betsi Graves even moved to Boston, she dreamed of
dancing at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Spurred on
by her first visit to the city in 1999, she fell in love with the
magic of the museum, as well as the history and legacy of
Gardner herself.

As anyone who has had the privilege to journey through the
museum hallways and courtyards understands, Graves fell
captive to the beauty. And everywhere she looked, she saw
dance.

Dance was a vibrant piece of the museum history and of
Gardner herself, who supported early modern dancers such as
Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Dennis, who visited the
museum for inspiration. These pioneers of modern dance did
the unthinkable: they danced in bare feet, and broke free
from traditional and classical pieces. Gardner took a risk in
supporting this new and provocative genre.

Now, over a decade after her initial spark, Graves has realized
her dreams. As the Director of Urbanity Dance, the growing-
with-force dance company out of South Boston, Graves
brings her company to Calderwood Hall at the Isabella
Stewart Gardner Museum on March 17, as a part of the
museum's Third Thursdays series.

Graves describes the dearth of dance beyond classical in Boston

“The Gardner is going back into the original traditions of Isabella supporting modern
dance and Boston as a city is getting behind that too,” said Graves. “For years, I feel
like there wasn’t a strong alternative to classical [dance], and now there’s this
emergence of modern dance. I think this performance at the Gardner could reflect
that. It’s interesting that everything is new again.”

Mayor Martin Walsh acknowledges this struggle himself, as he begins efforts to invest
in the arts for Boston, rolling out a $1 million plan for arts funding and several new
grants and art initiatives in the city.

So while this performance by Urbanity at the Gardner is a dream realized for Graves,
it also reflects the re-emergence modern dance has been making In The Hub.

And what a better way to celebrate the art form – and as a more artistic alternative to
St. Paddy's Day festivities – than to experience the museum and this performance for
yourself.

“The ambience of the Gardner is just unbelievable, it’s a space like no other in the
world,” said Jessie Smith, Director of Program Planning at the Gardner. “And the
museum at night is just magical, so then to have it activated through programming,
like dance for example, is just a really unique experience”

Smith is excited to see what Graves and her dancers create for the performance in
Calderwood Hall. The architecture of the hall, where audience members are seated on
one level of a three-tier balcony, all overlooking the stage, allows for an entirely new
experience for even a seasoned theatergoer.

“I envisioned doing something completely different with perspective, with the dancers
lying on the ground and the audience viewing from above,” said Graves. “So that for
me was really inviting a lot of geometric imagery and playing with angles of dancers. I
am really interested in playing with human connection, but in a really kind of
awkward, flat-lined, one-dimensional way.”

Don't expect to see any traditional jumps or turns in this performance. As a result of
her surroundings and the audience's view, Graves created a whole new way of
moving, specific for the exquisite architecture.
The evening also offers music in the courtyard, dancers moving throughout the gravel pathways of courtyard, gallery activities, and an opportunity to sketch in response to a live dancer.

Smith quotes words from Gardner’s will that she often takes into account in developing programming for the museum: “Isabella Stewart Gardner created the museum for the education and enjoyment of the public forever.”

“Third Thursdays and this performance in particular really speak to both of those ideas, education and enjoyment. We’re really inspired by the incredible legacy of Isabella Stewart Gardner and how we can really connect with creative thinkers today.”

And Graves thrives on those connections as well, continuing to work together to build a strong art culture in Boston.

“I think Urbanity is all about collaboration in this amazing city of eccentrics and artists and art supporters.”

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