

Saxapahaw's Culture Mill unveils new initiatives, residencies, performances and a mysterious bus

By Byron Woods

Infrastructure just isn't sexy. Thus, the administrative and logistical support that artists must use to produce and sustain their work requires an occasional demonstration, such as the one **Culture Mill** offered in Saxapahaw **last Saturday, March 28**.

After leading the Philharmonia Chamber Players in a stirring rendition of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending*, **violinist Jennifer Curtis** shadowed **VECTOR** choreographer **Leah Wilks** across the **Haw River Ballroom** in a performance of *Mess*. Before that, **Anna Barker** and Wilks reprised Real.Live.People.Durham's dance-theater piece, *it's not me it's you*, which premiered in November.

None of these works would have been realized without the aid of Culture Mill, an emerging support organization for regional artists. Though the group has been active since May, Saturday's official launch—a daylong series of multi-disciplinary performances and classes emphasizing collaboration among practitioners of classical, world and indie music, modern dance, puppetry, video art and dance-theater—provided proof of concept for about 300 artists and audience members.

Co-founders **Tommy Noonan**, Murielle Elizéon and Wilks revealed that in its second year, Culture Mill would be expanding its activities with increased fiscal sponsorship of selected cultural groups, production of specific projects, and an intriguing transportation initiative, adding to a portfolio of artist services that already includes residencies, workshops and open retreats.

A full calendar of residencies will bring regional artists—and creators from Europe, Asia and across the United States—to Saxapahaw. Their projects range from evening-length dance works to perfecting a mobile, solar-powered theatrical lighting system, and they'll share their processes with the community through workshops and showings. This month, the first of these residencies, France's Compagnie Marie Lenfant, stages its works alongside regional artists in public performances in Chapel Hill and Durham. Other performances will take dance into underserved areas in Alamance County.

Culture Mill is already providing the ability to solicit tax-deductible donations and apply for grants to five local organizations, including **Durham Independent Dance Artists** and **Beat Making Lab**; they will begin selectively accepting new clients by the fall.

In June, the group presents "Being Two," a free, daylong open retreat of workshops and performances for artists at Haw River Ballroom and Paperhand Puppet Intervention headquarters.

But perhaps the most enigmatic offering comes in August, when Culture Mill asks folks attending Saturdays in Saxapahaw to "Trust the Bus"—a 1999 Bluebird passenger bus converted to biodiesel—to take them to undisclosed locations in the surrounding countryside for a series of mystery performances, installations and art experiences.

"We're interested in playfully pushing the way that people engage with and go to theater and performances," Noonan said in a pre-launch interview last week. Culture Mill is also examining the possibility of using the bus in regular commuter service between Saxapahaw and Carrboro. A poll for residents of both towns is at culturemill.org/bus, and a fundraising campaign is underway at www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-culture-mill-bus.

"Culture Mill is still a work in progress; we're still evolving," Noonan says. "It is artist-driven, and our compass of interests as artists is central to the

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work."

Elizéon adds, "We're not creating this structure from the outside, but from the inside." Life without infrastructure has long been a reality for many of the region's artists. This was a promising glimpse of the alternatives. Learn more at www.culturemill.org.

This article appeared in print "Advances & retreats."

Tags: **Dance, Culture Mill, Haw River Ballroom, artist organization**

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by Byron Woods

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by Byron Woods