

## After changes in leadership and location, Culture Mill road tests mobile performance series Trust the Bus

By Brian Howe



Photo by Brian Howe

**D**id you know there was a bus line between Carrboro and Saxapahaw?

A 44-seat Blue Bird, dingy white with cerulean trim, ran the route one day a week from May to July, before and after each **Saturdays in Saxapahaw** market and concert. A \$5 fare would get you from Carrboro Plaza to the **Saxapahaw General Store** and back again.

The bus is owned and operated by **Culture Mill**, a Saxapahaw-based nonprofit that has been in development for more than a year but just had its official launch in March. Though founded by dancers and choreographers, it offers residencies, retreats and, soon, modest fiscal sponsorship to dancers, musicians, writers and more, seeking creative cross-pollination.

The other side of Culture Mill's mission has been more nebulous, as endeavors to foster "community" frequently are—especially for an arts organization in an area that may not widely share all its views. The bus, donated by board member Doug Williams, offered Culture Mill the chance to try integrating both parts of its mission more concretely than ever before.

"What we are doing is about linking communities, and the bus is a great symbol of that," says cofounder Murielle Elizéon, a 43-year-old dancer who is originally from France. The new venture comes at a time of great change for Culture Mill. It recently moved into its own space, outside of its ad hoc HQ in the **Haw River Ballroom**, and lost a third of its original leadership when Leah Wilks stepped down in June (see sidebar).

And there's more to come: In August, the transit service ceases, at least temporarily, for **Trust the Bus**, a new series of site-specific performances after each Saturdays in Saxapahaw event. Armed only with the names of the performers, you board the bus without knowing where you'll go or what will happen there.

"Trust the Bus provides an experience, not only a performance," Elizéon

says, sitting on the bus one afternoon. "It starts once you step onto these stairs and meet the Dragon."

**T**he bus is a 1999 model, but it looks vintage. It's running on diesel, but thanks to a new membership in the Piedmont Biofuels co-op, it will be burning biodiesel by the time Trust the Bus debuts. Culture Mill directors Elizéon and Tommy Noonan, a 32-year-old choreographer and dancer who grew up near Saxapahaw, are testing routes for the first performance (disclosure: Noonan is an occasional *INDY* contributor). The driver is a cheerful middle-school science teacher named Mark Dragon.

The bus jounces along narrow, winding roads. The tomato-colored clay and flaxen meadows of Saxapahaw wheel through the windows. A tunnel of trees suddenly lets out beside a pond in a clearing, and Elizéon murmurs appreciatively.

"To arrive at the body of water and stop there would be quite dramatic," she says.

Elizéon and Noonan, who are married, are willing to say that the performances take place on and off the bus, and that they are playful and informal, but not much more. The secrecy is meant to deprive audiences of their usual preconceived notions. When Noonan lets slip that something in the first performance "takes place partly underwater," Elizéon stops him with a warning look.

The first Trust the Bus departs from the General Store at 8:15 p.m. on Aug. 1 and features **Direwolf** and **Jennifer Curtis** along with Noonan and Elizéon. Direwolf is the DJ alias of Durham composer Alex Kotch. Curtis, an artist-in-residence at Culture Mill, is a keen violin improviser. The next three Trust the Bus performances feature The Archive Project, ShaLeigh Dance Works and Jeff Wood; email [info@culturemill.org](mailto:info@culturemill.org) to make free reservations.

The idea predated the bus. "Creating really crafted experiences, where you take away people's normal way of experiencing a performance, was already interesting to us," says Noonan.

Several years ago, at a festival in Berlin, the couple produced a show that involved "shuttling people to an unknown location, in a forest, in the darkness of November," as Elizéon describes it. When they moved from Berlin to Saxapahaw at the end of 2013, they quickly imagined doing something similar in the idyllic countryside.

As someone whose dance works are often intimately tied to unique sites (you may have seen him running up the Carrack's walls in January in his **dance work *Brother Brother***), Noonan relishes the idea of working in a bus clogged with rows of seats. It's nothing compared to the logistics of running a transportation program. After Trust the Bus, Culture Mill hopes to find locals with the qualifications to take over transit, having demonstrated the demand for it.

"We don't have the skill set, and that gets out of nonprofit territory, but there are people in the community that do," Noonan says.

**C**ulture Mill is committed to Saxapahaw, if not exactly of it. Elizéon and Noonan are among a movement, following the likes of Haw River Ballroom founders Tom and Heather LaGarde, to build a liberal arts scene in a rural mill town. Inevitable contradictions ensue. As upscale music venues and art galleries fill the infrastructure of the former cotton industry, at least four Confederate flags fly on the roughly three-and-a-half mile stretch of Saxapahaw-Bethlehem Church Road between Highway 54 and the Haw River Ballroom.

"We're making [Trust the Bus] informal because we're trying to engage the people who live here," Noonan says. "There's a lot of people participating with different politics and backgrounds." The effort to involve locals, and not just bus people in from Carrboro, broadens this autumn when the Culture Mill Lab opens to the public.

Culture Mill has been in the space at 1616 Jordan Drive, where clothes-and-crafts seller The Saxapahaw Mercantile used to be, since June. The main room is long and narrow, and has evident mixed-use potential. Sharing the space with theater company Run of the Mill Players, Culture Mill will use it for residencies, exhibitions and performances.

When the Culture Mill Lab opens in September, it will include a small community library of art books and films. But there are opportunities to get inside earlier. San Francisco's The Archive Project mounts an exhibit Aug. 8-15, featuring books from the libraries of celebrated arts figures alongside films chosen by local artists.

"What we are doing *is* a laboratory," Elizéon says. In this experiment, cross-

pollinating artists is the easy part. With Culture Mill Lab and Trust the Bus, the harder work of cross-pollinating cultures begins in earnest. The question will be who is along for the ride.

## LEAH WILKS LEAVES CULTURE MILL

**D**ancer and choreographer Leah Wilks is one of the busiest artists in Durham. But the cofounder of Culture Mill and **Durham Independent Dance Artists** lightened her burden—a bit—when she stepped down from co-directing Culture Mill in June.

"With Culture Mill going on its first year, we realized we were really rooted in Saxapahaw," explains cofounder Murielle Elizéon, "and with DIDA and **VECTOR**, Leah was so committed to Durham." After a heart-to-heart, all agreed that Wilks should take on an advisory role in Culture Mill so she could focus on DIDA as it prepares to announce its second season.

"I am so grateful to Tommy and Murielle for letting my role shift so I can still remain connected to what they're growing in Saxapahaw," Wilks says, "but can devote more of my energy and time to being in Durham and pursuing my endeavors here."

This looks like a net gain for local arts, as it allows both organizations to focus on their complementary goals—roughly, Culture Mill develops work, while DIDA promotes it once it's ready for the stage—with greater clarity of leadership and purpose. —*Brian Howe*

*This article appeared in print with the headline "Mystery Machine."*

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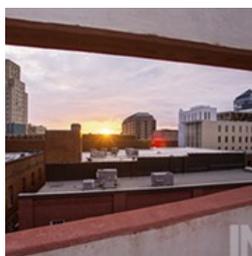
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