

One small theater, two very different Boston dance premieres coming up on consecutive weekends

New York tap company Music from the Sole and Ashwini Ramaswamy, a Bharatanatyam dancer from Minneapolis, to perform at Plimpton Shattuck Black Box Theatre.

By **Karen Campbell** Globe Correspondent, Updated January 4, 2024, 5:26 p.m.



Bharatanatyam dancer Ashwini Ramaswamy will present "Let the Crows Come," Jan. 19-20 at Plimpton Shattuck Black Box Theatre. JAKE ARMOUR

The Celebrity Series kicks off the 2024 dance scene with back-to-back weekends of Boston premieres that offer audiences a stylistically diverse experience. Tap dance company Music from the Sole makes its Boston debut with “I Didn’t Come to Stay” (Jan. 11-13), and ground-breaking dancer Ashwini Ramaswamy presents the area premiere of her new “Let the Crows Come” (Jan. 19-20). The series takes place in New England Conservatory’s intimate Plimpton Shattuck Black Box Theatre and features post-show conversations with the artists about the many diasporas and different dance styles that influence their work.

“Both companies are exploring cultural heritages and identities through their different dance forms and vocabularies, which is important to include in the mix of programming we do,” said Nicole Taney, the Celebrity Series’s artistic director. She joined the organization last year after eight years with the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C., so this is her first season of programming in Boston.

“I love that in that space, it’s almost immersive with close proximity to the dancers and musicians as they are performing,” Taney said. “I think it lends a quality to the experience that you might not get in a bigger venue, an immediacy of engaging with the work.”

That intimacy is built into performances by Music from the Sole. Based in New York, the group started as a collaboration between two friends, Brazilian tap dancer and choreographer Leonardo Sandoval and composer/ bassist Gregory Richardson. As the duo’s work picked up a following and momentum, they started envisioning more ambitious projects and pulling in an array of performers, creating a hybrid Richardson calls both a dance company and a live band. “I Didn’t Come to Stay” involves eight dancers and five musicians. “Now it feels like a big family,” Sandoval says.

Commissioned by Works & Process at the Guggenheim, “I Didn’t Come to Stay” reflects the company’s mission to bring tap and its lineage to a broad range of audiences while exploring connections to Afro-Brazilian, jazz, soul, house, rock, and Afro-Cuban styles.

The work plays off what Sandoval calls “collaborative synergy,” with roughly 60 percent of the piece choreographed to sync with a tight musical structure, and 40 percent improvisational, to highlight the company’s array of artistic voices.



Music from the Sole will perform "I Didn't Come to Stay" Jan. 11-13, for the first of Celebrity Series's two weekends of dance. TITUS OGILVIE LAING

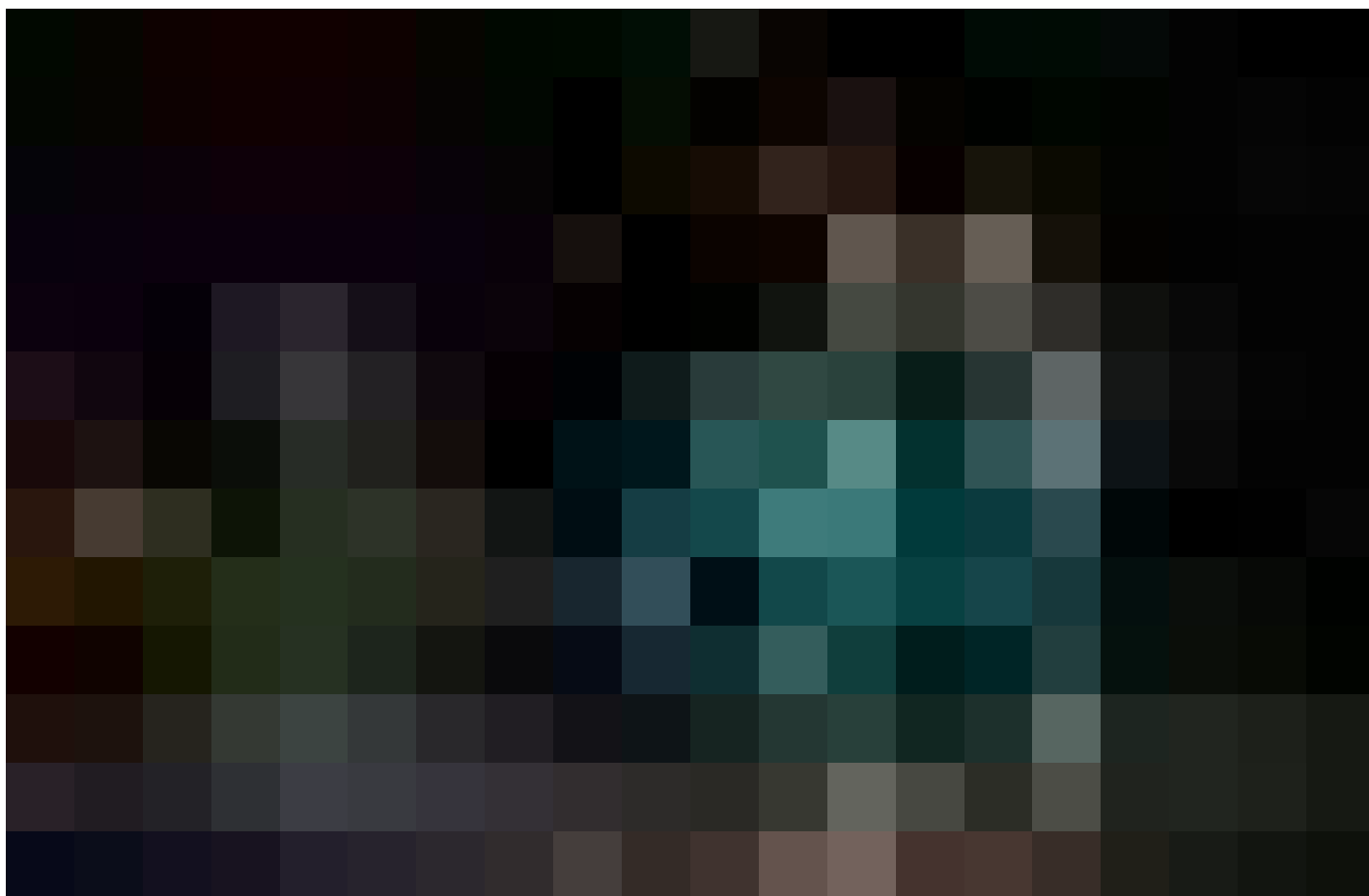
Sandoval says creation of the work started during a COVID bubble residency. “After six months of not seeing each other, we needed to celebrate being with people we love doing what we love,” he says. “The vibe reminds me of Carnival, like group therapy for everyone.”

Taney agrees. “The blend of live music with tap and samba and percussive body movement really sparks joy,” she says. Music from the Sole’s engagement will also include a free community dance workshop Jan. 9 at 7 p.m. at Center for the Arts at the Armory in Somerville.

Ashwini Ramaswamy's "Let the Crows Come" incorporates live music, too, but with a spiritual context, featuring ancient texts that evoke the symbolism of the crow as a messenger between the living and the dead. The work explores memory, a sense of home, and how ideas pass from person to person, generation to generation, culture to culture. "Ashwini's piece has a contemplative quality that I think is really beautiful," Taney says.

Ramaswamy calls the 60-minute trio a hybrid collaboration between eras, forms, and styles.

It features Ramaswamy, who comes from a family of notable Bharatanatyam teachers and practitioners, Alanna Morris, a modern dancer grounded in Afro-Caribbean technique, and Berit Ahlgren, who trained in the Gaga Movement Language developed by Ohad Naharin. Ramaswamy's Bharatanatyam solo is the core of the work; Morris and Ahlgren recontextualize and transform it in turn.



Ashwini Ramaswamy will present the Boston premiere of "Let the Crows Come" January 19-20. JAYME HALBRITTER

Each solo has its own unique music as well, from South Indian classical to electro acoustic cello, with composers Jace Clayton (DJ/rupture) and Brent Arnold drawing from Prema Ramamurthy's original Carnatic (South Indian) compositional structures for their original scores. Trios within each solo bring the dancers together.

"It's like the idea of a DJ taking a song and remixing, recalibrating, keeping the essence but sharing it in a new way," says Ramaswamy. "It reminds me of being a multiple cultural persona." She grew up and lives in Minneapolis where she is a founding member of her mother and sister's Ragamala Dance Company.

Ramaswamy hopes the work gives audiences a new lens to appreciate the malleability of Bharatanatyam when seen alongside the other dance and music forms. "And the idea of sharing the stage [as] three such different, strong women dancers showing [our] power and how we can work and collaborate together is a beautiful message of unity," she believes. "I hope people are moved and their imaginations are fired up."

TWO WEEKENDS OF DANCE

Presented by Celebrity Series. At NEC's Plimpton Shattuck Black Box Theatre. Music from the Sole, Jan. 11-13. Ashwini Ramaswamy, Jan. 19-20. Tickets \$67-\$95. 617-482-6661, www.celebrityseries.org

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