

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Walkin' the Walk

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, August 21st, 2019

Two spacious lawns bisected by a sidewalk with embedded letters spelling out “I Have a Dream” provide an inviting, but easily overlooked side entrance to Martin Luther King Jr. Community Hospital (MLK-LA). This weekend, that entry way becomes the stage for *Stay Awake*, the latest site specific performance from **Heidi Duckler Dance**. The free early evening performance welcomes the audience to bring a picnic, park (also free), sit on the grass, and discover the space along with the performers.



Heidi Duckler Dance in “Stay Awake”. Photo by A.Haskins.

At a late afternoon press preview, it’s long past lunch time and the lawns are vacant except for hospital staff walking to or from their shifts, most not noticing the dozen dancers clambering around the exterior of the new parking structure or when they move on to the adjacent lawn. One passerby stops to ask the slight blond woman at the staircase base what is going on. Choreographer Heidi Duckler explains that these are dancers exploring the possibilities of the area for a new site specific work being premiered in August. Duckler’s gracious response reflects having fielded such queries over three decades as she, her dancers and their collaborators invade, create and perform in unconventional locations. While her venue-specific skills have gained her an international reputation, Duckler’s deepest art may be her ability to draw audiences into L.A.’s cultural archeology, revealing often overlooked history in sites scattered throughout LA’s many communities and then linking the past with often cautionary, sometimes anthem-worthy insights that resonate.



Heidi Duckler (in white hat) with dancers. Photo by A.Haskins

From her early explorations of movement possibilities in a laundromat and along the concrete banks of the LA River (with performers that included a motorcycle gang), what began as Collage Dance Theater morphed into the eponymous Heidi Duckler Dance. In recent years, HDD could be found on a multi-masted schooner in San Pedro and in a historic abandoned jail in Lincoln Heights. HDD’s traveling *telenovela* moved to a different L.A. locale for each chapter and at the San Gabriel mission where the book *Ramona* was set, Duckler provided a contemporary reconsideration of that early California romance. Duckler draws audiences out of familiar L.A. and into historic sites that have tales still to tell, sometimes for the last time. An excursion under a downtown high-rise into the deep bowels of what was once LA’s Red Car streetcar garage and a walkabout through Chinatown’s oldest movie theater proved to be their last gasp before

redevelopment. HDD also has created a traveling “site,” an enormous skeletal fish sculpture that travels with Duckler and other invited choreographers who create works exploring environmental issues and larger climate change concerns under the banner Ebb and Flow.



Heidi Duckler Dance. Photo by Sean Deckert.

The upcoming performance *Stay Awake* is part of a larger two year HDD residency at the Martin Luther King Memorial Community Hospital under the banner, *Move Well@MLK*. Begun in 2018 the residency was initially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts marking the first *Our Town* grant to an LA dance company. Additional funding from the California Arts Council will continue the project into 2021.

At the press preview, Duckler recounts the pairing of the endeavor with Martin Luther King Memorial Medical Center and how her newest venue was not an easy find.



Heidi Duckler Dance. Photo by A.Haskins.

“I wanted to do something about health and dance as well as explore the connections with being a healthier community. MLK seemed the place to do that,” Duckler explains. “In addition to the new hospital, there’s a library, the King-Drew high school, affordable housing, a new mental health facility, and this new parking structure, plus the tremendous building activity in the surrounding Willowbrook area.”



The parking structure/stage for “Stay Awake”.

“I had been here for months and months. I thought I’d walked all over, but I never knew this was here, but now I keep discovering new details.” Duckler pauses and her head inclines toward the grassy space. “It’s such an oasis. The community should know about such a beautiful place. So I thought I should make a piece here.”



Rob Ley’s “Endless Miles.” Photo courtesy of Rob Ley Studio.

Duckler plans to use the exterior of the new parking structure her dancers have been having such fun with and one lawn alongside the structure. The street facing side of the parking lot is covered with a Rob Ley sculptured facade that moves in the wind. Duckler is clearly taken with the possibilities, but comments that it poses challenges. The audience would have to move from the wide grass, walk around the building to a sidewalk and would have a distorted view of the Ley sculpture which is best viewed from across the busy four lane road. While incorporating even more public art is tempting, Duckler has to consider choreographing the audience movement as well as her dancers, factors in making final decisions about how and how much to incorporate the multiple tempting possibilities presented by the site.



Heidi Duckler Dance. Photo by A.Haskins.

The dozen HDD dancers for *Stay Awake* include Raymond Ejiorfor, Tess Hewlett, Lenin Fernandez, Roberto Lambaren, Lily Ontiveros, Ryan Walker Page, Rafael Quintas, Jasmine

Rafael, Alyse Rockett, Carissa Songhorian, Himerria Wortham, and Luke Zender. Two composers will contribute to the *Stay Awake* score. New York-based percussionist Jessie Cox has composed a new work and CalArts alum Justin Bardales brings his band *Large Shiva* along with his music. Like the dancers, the musicians total 12 which match the dozen puzzle-like pieces that are incorporated into the walkway along with the Martin Luther King quote and significant dates for the medical center starting with its founding in 1965 and up to the present. Between the picnic and the performance, the audience will have time to consider the art and the message. Many choreographers intermittently offer site specific work in L.A., but when it comes to Heidi Duckler Dance, nobody does it better. *Stay Awake* at Martin Luther King Jr. Medical Campus, Front Lawn, Wilmington Ave. & 120th St., Los Angeles; 90059. Sat., Aug. 24, 7:30 p.m., picnicking at 6 p.m., free with reservation. Free parking in Structure A. <http://heididuckler.org/>

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