



USING DANCE TO TRANSFORM THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The Alabama Dance Festival
Celebrates Twenty-five Years

by Lisa Gibbs, Ed.D.





PHOTO BY CLARK SCOTT

Twenty-five years ago, a small group of dance educators and performers got together at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama to talk about how to grow the community and impact of dance in Alabama.

The group, the Alabama Dance Council (ADC), brainstormed ways to connect, develop resources, and expand opportunities for the dance community. With a mission “to promote the study, creation, performance, and enjoyment of dance in all forms,” the ADC determined that an annual gathering would serve to fulfill a part of that purpose.

The Alabama Dance Summit became the annual meeting hosted by the Alabama Dance Council. The Summit consisted of discussions, master classes, and performances by members of the ADC. Summits were

held in Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, and Selma before settling in Birmingham in 2002, the same year that acclaimed pianist, educator, and arts enthusiast Dr. Rosemary Johnson became Executive Director. As the scope of the ADC widened to encourage broader community involvement, the Summit was renamed the Alabama Dance Festival in 2007.

In January, the ADC celebrated twenty-five years of serving the dance community through the annual gathering. The Festival now spans two weeks of events and typically draws

over five hundred participants from across the region. Under Dr. Johnson’s leadership, the Festival is one of the largest gatherings of dancers and arts supporters in the Southeast. More than that, the Festival promotes the ADC values of equity, connection, community, and integrity by presenting professional companies whose work is relevant, thought-provoking, and innovative.

What Exactly Is the Alabama Dance Festival?

The Festival is comprised of numerous events held at a variety of venues in and around Birmingham. The events include master classes with world-renowned teachers in various genres for sixth graders and up, audition opportunities, teacher training, and performances by diverse dance groups. A professional



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dance company headlines the Festival and participates in outreach, teaching during the Festival, and performing.

Dance Across Birmingham

Dance Across Birmingham (DAB) kicks off the Festival as a single day of free community classes taught by local dancers, along with a free showcase performance of local performing groups. Free classes were a part of the Festival from the beginning, and in 2008, DAB became its own event. According to Dr. Johnson, DAB “is now one of the most diverse and popular events of the Festival.” Participants can take classes in a variety of styles such as Mexican Folk Dance, West African, Belly Dance, Hip-Hop, and Bharatanatyam.

Dance for Schools

Dance For Schools provides teachers in K-12 schools with strategies to connect curriculum and dance. The day-long

workshop is conducted by leading dance educators and specialists in arts integration; the workshop provides continuing education credit for attendees.

Guest Companies

As the Festival has grown, the search for innovative dance companies doing significant, impactful work now spans across the United States. Dr. Johnson explains her process:

“I always begin my curatorial process by building relationships with artists whose work I see and find interesting. These conversations take place at conferences, such as Dance/USA, or other dance festivals, like Jacob’s Pillow and American Dance Festival. These artists are usually first invited to be a part of the guest faculty before their company is presented at the Festival. I am assisted by an advisory committee

of ADC board members, who are all professionals working in the field of dance. Funding opportunities also play a role in determining the “right time” to present a certain company.”

Alabama Screendance Festival

As digital technology has progressed, new methods of performing and capturing dance on film have emerged. Added to the Festival in 2020, Screendance offers creators of dance for film a place to show their work in a professional setting with a diverse audience.

New Works Concert

New Works is a curated performance of new dances and is adjudicated by a select group of professional dancers and dance faculty. This event offers emerging choreographers and dancers the opportunity to perform in a professional setting.

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Alabama Dance Festival Showcase

The Showcase closes out the entire Festival and is an afternoon of performances by local and regional private dance schools, public school and college dance programs, and emerging professional dance companies. The Showcase is another opportunity to perform in a professional setting in front of a diverse audience.

Dr. Johnson reminisced about a few of her favorite and most impactful experiences with the Festival over the years:

"The 2015 Alabama Dance Festival's guest company, Kyle Abraham/Abraham.In.Motion (A.I.M), engaged in an eleven-day residency to stimulate community conversations about the civil rights movement through Kyle's all-new collection of dance works, *When the Wolves Came In*. The residency included three pivotal communities in the civil rights movement: Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham.

The culmination of the ADC's 2019 Bicentennial project celebrated the cultural perspectives that are a part of Alabama's history, and the largest

community engagement project ever undertaken by the Alabama Dance Council, thanks in part to a Dance/USA Engaging Dance Audiences grant. The program, Stories in Motion: Community Celebration Gatherings, toured to five Alabama cities and one Native nation, involving a collaboration between guest artists and Alabama artists. All were presented at the 2019 Alabama Dance Festival: Rosy Simas Danse, Rosie Herrera Dance Theatre, Wideman Davis Dance, Zoe I Juniper, Dahlia Nayar, Mystic Wind Choctaw Social Dance Group, Poarch Band of Creek Indians Pow Wow Club, Natyananda: Dance of India, Notinee Indian Dance, Nathifa Dance Company, Corazón Azteca, Jasmine Dance Ensemble, Bollywood Jammers, MAD Skillz Dance Company, and Shivalaya School of Dance.

At an antebellum plantation house in Harpersville in 2020, Wideman Davis Dance presented the world premiere of the site-specific work *Migratuse Ataraxia*. Preceded by five site visits to work in the community, plus a ten-day residency with six performances, it was the most in-depth collaboration to date with the guest company artists, the

community of Harpersville, and co-pre-senter Klein Arts and Culture. *Migratuse Ataraxia* shifts the rules of representation in antebellum domestic spaces to memorialize the lives of enslaved individuals through movement, technology, visual installations, a curated meal, and community dialogue."

Dr. Rosemary Johnson and the Alabama Dance Council are to be celebrated for creating and sustaining such an event for the past twenty-five years. As for the future, the ADC plans to increase the visibility of dance in Alabama and broaden who gets to do it by valuing multiple truths and forms. With a long range vision of using dance to transform the human experience and our connections with one another, the Festival will continue to reflect the ADC values of equity, connection, community, and integrity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Productions* staff writer Lisa Gibbs earned her Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration in 2018. She is an advocate for arts, particularly dance, in education and for increasing the financial well-being of artists through financial education.