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CULINARY & CULTURE GUIDE

Moving stories

Stewart/Owen Dance team premieres new work at Wortham



COVER STORY

Asheville couple's Stewart/Owen Dance team premieres new work at Wortham

Hayley Benton

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For Gavin Stewart and Vanessa Owen, storytelling is the art — and dance is the medium that brings it to life. It's a universal language with the potential to break down cultural barriers, cross political divides and make deeper connections possible.

It's a lesson the husband-and-wife duo learned while dancing with Company | E, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that led cultural diplomacy tours all over the world through contracts with the U.S. State Department. "We spent quite a few years just touring and teaching choreography in countries like Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Cuba," Owen said. "We'd show up somewhere — nobody speaks the same language — and we'd have to put together a show with them on the fly."

This experience, Owen continued, "shaped us as dancers and as choreographers. It taught us to be resourceful in ways that we never would have imagined" — something that's stuck with the pair to the present day. "It's about figuring out what we can make together. It allows for unexpected possibilities, for things you couldn't predict — things that are really beautiful."

However, just after moving to Asheville and founding their own company, Stewart/Owen Dance, the world shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, immediately halting all opportunities for the arts, for sharing stories and for connecting with audiences in a meaningful way. But that's also when the duo connected with the Wortham Center for the Performing Arts — which, dedicated to keeping the arts alive during the shutdown, asked Stewart and Owen to create a pandemic-proof outdoor parking lot performance for a socially distanced audience.

"We just jumped on it," Stewart said. "Despite our reservations about dancing in a parking lot, we were determined to figure out how to make it work, because we really missed that in our lives — honestly, everyone did at that time. The arts are symbiotic in a way. We need each other: The performers need an audience, and the audience needs performers to bring ideas to life."

The five sold-out drive-up performances of "What Remains," featuring a full company of dancers in masks, knee pads and padded gloves, proved to the duo that dance was truly their calling, Owen said. "The fact that we were able to create such an intimate performance while navigating all the rules of the pandemic solidified to us how important it is that we continue this work, both for us and for the community. It was the first time some people had been outside of their homes, been to a community function, in months. It was powerful for us all."

Following the success of the July 2020 outdoor shows, the Wortham Center continued to invite Stewart/Owen Dance to not only collaborate on performances for Asheville audiences, but to also use its space to choreograph and rehearse these new works as the organization's resident dance company. In November 2020, the duo produced "Still: Life," a walk-through dance performance at the venue, and their critically acclaimed piece, "Silver Spoon," premiered on the Diana Wortham Theatre stage during the organization's 2021 season preview party.

"We are just in love with our team," Owen said of the nine-person dance troupe, from North Carolina, Los Angeles and New York. "Each of our team members has brought their passion and dedication to the stage. It's their life's work, and we're excited to share our stories with Asheville."

This month, Stewart/Owen Dance is bringing its latest work, "Again, for the First Time" — commissioned by the Wortham Center — to pre-

IF YOU GO

What: Stewart/Owen Dance

When: 8 p.m. April 21-22, with a 10 a.m. matinee on April 21 (open to students and the public)

Where: Wortham Center for the Performing Arts, 18 Biltmore Ave.

Tickets: \$20-\$58 at worthamarts.org

Extra: A dance workshop with Stewart/Owen Dance will be held at the Wortham Center at 11 a.m. on April 22. For all experience levels; age 16 and up.

Gavin Stewart and Vanessa Owen moved to Asheville just before the COVID-19 pandemic started. STUDIO MISHA PHOTOGRAPHY

miere at the Asheville venue on Friday, April 21, with a follow-up performance on Saturday, April 22. The piece, which is broadly inspired by the human life cycle, was created collaboratively with the Wortham and a local feedback panel, which enjoyed behind-the-scenes looks at the choreographic process and offered constructive comments throughout the creation of the piece.

"It's about the naivety of new experiences — of learning to fit into a group and to build relationships with others," Stewart said. "And we've also brought in this abstract idea of a cosmic connection between us all, woven into transitional pieces between each section of the work," which all focus on a different stage of life.

Each stage of life, Owen added, "can often

feel like a return to infancy, to childhood" — and that theme of repetition is present throughout the piece. "At any age, it can feel like you're going through those stages of curiosity and learning all over again," Stewart interjected: "It's almost like history repeating itself, like an echo bouncing throughout a person's life."

The April 21 and 22 performances of Stewart/

Owen Dance at the Wortham Center will include "Again, for the First Time," "Silver Spoon," a reimagined for-the-theater version of 2020's outdoor show, "What Remains," and another new and zany piece set in an imaginary and blissful past, "Memory Affair," which explores themes of nostalgia and escapism.

STAGE PRODUCTIONS

Share your event at least two weeks in advance by emailing cterrell@citizentimes.com or at events.citizen-times.com. Click on "Add your event" to submit details.

"Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike": To April 16, North Carolina Stage Company, 15 Stage Lane, downtown Asheville. Digital livestream available April 14-16. 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, 2 p.m. Friday, April 7. \$26- \$46, student tickets \$10 with ID. Call 828-239-0263 or visit www.ncstage.org. COVID protocol: masks optional in lobby but required in theatre.

Adult improv classes: "Intro to Sketch" Thursdays April 20-June 8, Whitmire Activity Center, 310 Lily Pond Drive, Hendersonville. \$180. Students of all skill levels encouraged to attend. To register, visit www.hendersonvilletheatre.org or call 828-692-1082.

"Elektra": 7 p.m. April 20-22, 2 p.m. April 23, Theatre UNCA, Carol Belk Theatre. A new translation of Euripides' "Electra" by UNCA's Ancient Mediterranean Studies Department and infused with original Appalachian roots music. \$15.

"Bright Star": April 21-May 14, Asheville Community Theatre, 35 E. Walnut St., downtown. 7:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Sunday. Set in our Blue Ridge Mountains, "Bright Star" tells story of Alice at two different points in her life: as a young girl in the mountains and 22 years later as the well-to-do editor of a successful Asheville magazine. Visit www.ashevilletheatre.org. Contains swearing, language that some may find blasphemous, incidental drinking and smoking, kidnapping.

Disney's "The Little Mermaid": 6 p.m. April 21, 4 p.m. April 22, 2 p.m. April 23, Owen High School, 99 Lake Eden Road, Black Mountain. Silent auction one hour prior to play. \$10. Visit www.tlc-tickets.org.

"Ring of Fire: The Life and Music of Johnny Cash": April 21-May 6, Flat Rock Playhouse, Greenville Highway, Flat Rock. \$52/\$62/\$72. Visit www.flatrockplayhouse.org for tickets and specific dates and times.

"Lies": April 21-30, Attic Salt Theatre Arts Space, 2002 Riverside Drive, Asheville. 7:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Sundays. The play revolves around Benny, a fresh-out-of-law-school Public Defender assigned with trying to win the parole of a notorious German World War II radio propagandist who has a hard time telling the truth. \$20. Visit www.atticsalt.org.

Volunteer opportunities: Parkway Playhouse, 202 Green Mountain Road, Burnsville. Ushering, set building, landscaping to costuming. If interested in signing up, email deo@parkwayplayhouse.com.