

PUBLISHER'S MESSAGE BY DAN JACOBSON

BIG ACCLAIM IN NY TIMES FOR PAUL TAYLOR DANCERS STARTING ASBURY PARK DANCE FESTIVAL

A couple weeks ago we jumped on the story about the first annual Asbury Park Dance Festival to be held September 14.

Of course, I'm clueless on the subject of modern dance.

But I do know what can propel Asbury Park ever higher as one of the best small cities in this country, if not the world. At this stage, it's about drawing in the highest-level creative talent that we can attract from anywhere in the country and abroad. In any creative field. In any capacity. This is now a whole new level. Just watch.

The team behind the Asbury Park Dance Festival (apdancefest.org) includes three Paul Taylor Dance Company veterans who are retiring this year. One is Michael Trusnovec, who provides the Asbury Park connection to the other two dancers, Michelle Fleet and Laura Halzack.

The three have been inseparable friends for their combined 40 years as Paul Taylor dancers. Fleet and Halzack fell in love with Asbury Park through their regular visits here with Trusnovec and his husband VJ Carbone, who's the fourth member of the team starting the dance festival. Carbone is well-known as one of the most dynamic arts leaders in our city. He's a co-founder with Marilyn Schlossbach of the Asbury Park Film Initiative, as well as a veteran of the independent film industry as vice president of marketing at Focus Features.

A week after my Asbury Park Dance Festival article hit, the New York Times did

a large Sunday feature about these three Paul Taylor veterans retiring this year. The Times even called Asbury resident Trusnovec "the company's long-time star."

The accolades of the three by Times dance critic Gia Kourlas were indeed impressive, validating our front page coverage of the Asbury Park Dance Festival. We wrote how the three are at the highest level of modern dance and they would be bringing their talents and connections from around the world to Asbury Park.

The one downside of the Times article is that Kourlas didn't include the Asbury Park festival, although Carbone told me all three dancers repeatedly mentioned it to get it in. God, I thought I was lazy. This Kourlas woman puts me to shame. She should have included it. (I won't forget. I have a long memory when it comes to those slighting Asbury Park. Whenever I can, I shove the slight back into the face of the perpetrator, no matter how many years later...) Anyway, the reputation of Trusnovec, Fleet and Halzack — obviously recognized by Kourlas — means we should get Times coverage of the Asbury Park Dance Festival as it gets closer. So long as Kourlas doesn't have to leave her desk to write about it, of course.

In her article, Kourlas also described how the Paul Taylor Dance Company is transitioning into the future after the death of Paul Taylor last year. Here's some excerpts from her Times article, entitled "At Paul Taylor Dance, a Generation Departs":

"Mr. Taylor picked his dancers for their individuality, both in looks and in spirit. While Mr. Trusnovec, a chameleon, can take possession of a role in many ways —

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from portraying a cold villain to a strapping hero or a sensitive poet — Ms. Fleet, strong and musically sensitive, dances as if movement is melting off her body. Ms. Halzack, born elegant, has a dark side and can show it — she's a wonderful actress."

Kourlas then went on to interview the three and list their final performances:

Michelle Fleet

Final performance: Nov. 17, Lincoln Center

Ms. Fleet wants to end her Taylor career on her own terms. "I'd rather make the decision than have it made for me," she said. "It's just that time for us, as individuals, to move forward. Not that we'll be forever gone: It's in our blood. Once you're a Taylor dancer, you're always a Taylor dancer."

At 41, she has been with the organization for 20 years — three with Taylor 2, and 17 with the main company — and she said it's time to get off the road. "Touring is a major part of the lifestyle here, and wanting to start a family is really difficult," she said. "I've been thinking about retiring for some time — having the relationship I have with my boyfriend and looking at the future, it's been in the air."

She stayed with the company while Mr. Taylor was alive, even as she managed a side gig. Well, two. She raises alpacas with her mother — they have a ranch on the West Coast, where Ms. Fleet hopes to build a performance space one day — and she runs Suri & Cava, a fiber arts company featuring alpaca products.

Most dancers have dogs, but not Ms. Fleet. "We have 24 alpacas," she said, laughing. "People are like, you have a what? But they are the sweetest things."

Laura Halzack

Final performance: June 29, American Dance Festival, Durham, N.C.

Ms. Halzack, 37, also wants to start a family and said it's time for her to leave the company. "It's the right decision for me," she said. "But it's still going to be emotional that last day."

And it's been an emotional year of transition. "I was worried that once I gave my notice that it would distract me, and I've found it to be quite the opposite," she said. "I'm relishing every moment onstage: It's an odd sense of being grounded and in the moment. I surprised myself."

She said she hoped to stay involved with the Taylor school — and even to try to

teach a regular class in another part of town. (The school is close to the East River on Grand Street.) "Our school is in a tough spot," she said. "It's kind of a march down here."

Was she reluctant to leave the company while Mr. Taylor was still alive? "It would have been hard to tell him, but I would have," she said. "Selfishly, I wasn't quite ready to step into my next life. Now, I feel in my heart, it is the right time, and perhaps part of it was easier to let go in a way. He let go of all of us first. Sadly."

Michael Trusnovec

Final performance: June 23, OSL Bach Festival

For some time before Mr. Taylor died, Michael Trusnovec, 44, had been considering wrapping up the dancing part of his life. He said the last time the studio felt electric was probably during the creation of "Beloved Renegade," a 2008 work. A lot of dances that followed "didn't seem as inspired," he said. "They felt very thrown together — maybe not as developed — and that makes sense. He was getting older. That's not saying that there weren't moments of 'I love being here with him and doing this,' but they were definitely a little bit more rare."

Last summer, he told Mr. Taylor that he was thinking of leaving in December; in retrospect, that felt hasty, especially after he saw the lineup of dances for the Bach festival. "And I saw that the last dance was 'Cascade,' which was the first dance I was ever in that he made."

That made the decision to stay on a bit longer easy. Mr. Trusnovec, one of the most lauded Taylor dancers, also serves as associate rehearsal director — a role that will end on June 23 — and as director of worldwide licensing, a new position. But it's hard to tell how long he will remain. "As of right now, the picture is me continuing on doing the licensing," he said, "but I never know what's going to come up post dancing."

And he needs new challenges: "I'm always looking to dig just a little deeper and get something else and be pushed in a way that I can fail. I want to fail again."

(Note from triCityNews: Visit apdancefest.org for more information on the festival. As a non-profit, they are looking for sponsors of all different types. For example, there's a need for more house sponsors to host the 20-25 dancers who will participate. And, of course, any corporate or individual philanthropic sponsors who want to support the highest level of modern dance in Asbury Park should contact this impressive group of founders through the website.)