



the Great Return

By Kimberly Nicoletti

The Vail Dance Festival is a hotbed of creativity, community and collaboration

Every year, as wildflowers and evergreens form a natural, mountain backdrop at the Ford Amphitheater, a midsummer's night dream awakens the senses and stirs the soul. It's not the typical Shakespearean theatrics, but rather, a more diverse, multi-layered exploration that emerges on stage: the Vail Dance Festival.

The Vail Dance Festival infuses the best of ballet with street dancers at the top of their game — and just about every dance form in between, from traditional Hispanic and Indian forms to tap and modern. This summer's 32nd season is especially poignant, as artists return in-person, after desperately missing the festival — and all other live performances — during the pandemic last year.

Making a comeback

New York City Ballet (NYCB) soloist Unity Phelan never thought performing was her favorite part of dance — she loves the work of rehearsing. But she soon realized the “gaping hole” that lack of in-person performances left.

“It's a really pure embodiment of the deepest part of who you are,” Phelan says. “You can let everything go and be the purest form of yourself.”

Phelan and her peers spent the last year honing their technique, and she says they're coming back stronger, both physically and mentally.

“I can confidently say we've all been in our heads, focusing on technique, and everyone's ready to let go of that and perform for an audience again,” she says.

The Vail Dance Festival will be NYCB principal Maria Kowroski's last before she retires in October. The event holds a special place in her heart, because she met her husband, British actor and former Royal Ballet dancer Martin Harvey, there. She also performed her first principal part during then-NYCB principal (and now artistic director) Damian Woetzel's retirement piece, *Prodigal Son*, in 2007. She has spent years benefiting from the festival's supportive environment.

“When you have someone who believes in you and instills that confidence in you — from Damian and Heather Watts and the other dancers, you do dance better,” Kowroski says. “When you're in small groups rehearsing and collaborating at the festival, there's more inspiration because everyone is supporting each other. Damian always picks such a wonderful group of dancers. I think it's going to be special just to be out there again.”

“I always leave a more clarified dancer,” Phelan says. “I find out something new about myself and become a little more in tune with who I am. It's been a driving force in my artistic development. There's a lot of care taken

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Unity Phelan and Calvin Royal III; dancers perform during NOW Premieres; during the festival, multiple artistic disciplines are celebrated.



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with each dancer. Heather and Damian call it finding my Unity-ness in every piece I get to dance. It’s a warm and welcoming and caring and honest way to rehearse.”

Dancing for joy

When COVID-19 hit, “most artists and performers were just dropped,” says Susan Campbell, Vail Dance Festival committee chair. “Suddenly, they felt dispensable.”

One dancer lost a parent — and hope — during the pandemic. Another American dancer who was training in Russia and

returned to the U.S. just before shutdown to see his ill father couldn’t return to Russia, couldn’t obtain unemployment because he hadn’t worked in the U.S. recently, and still had to pay rent in Russia. Dancers struggled to support families; some turned to delivering food by bicycle. Last year’s Artist Relief Fund, sponsored by the Vail Valley Foundation, gave artists and support staff hope; 64 artists received \$3,000 each. But mostly, it helped them feel cherished.

“Besides the financial problems, the hardest thing has been feeling so

dispensable and non-essential,” says one artist who received a grant from the Vail Valley Foundation. “To feel valued and cared for just by seeing this generosity meant the world.”

It’s with this gratitude and new appreciation for performing that artists return to the festival this summer.

“The Vail Dance Festival is the perfect place because it celebrates and spreads the joy of dance,” Phelan says. “It’s a real partnership between the audience and the performers.”

Phelan looks forward to the festival being “like a big hug, and a big high-five.”

Since Vail is one of the first festivals to open up again, it’s attracting new patrons from across the nation, Campbell says.

“To be back in person is special,” says Sarah Johnson, senior vice president of the Vail Dance Festival, “and I think there will be an emotional piece to that, which we haven’t seen before.”

“What the festival does for our mind, body and soul without a pandemic is extraordinary,” says Christine Cox, BalletX artistic and executive director. “This time is going to be really special.”

Hence, the theme: Gathering.

“This year will have a great spirit of revival, and of coming back together,” Woetzel says. “All of the artists are craving the reconnection with each other, and with audiences. In Vail, the reconnection for artists comes through the unique collaborative work that happens every year, and for audiences it comes in the opportunity to be a part of these pivotal moments in artists’ careers. It will have a spirit of tremendous pent-up energy that will be truly expansive.” **vvm**