

Industry and Memory: *Mill Town*

By Debra Cash

Industrial spaces concretize the history of the idea of progress, the harnessing of nature, the aspirations of wealth, and the persistence of memory. In the broad open expanses of mill buildings in places like Lewiston/Auburn, Maine, immigrants and native-born working poor labored to fill the need and the desire for textiles, shoes, and other consumer goods, their work powered by flowing water harnessed to the machinery of capital.

Today, when those mills are repurposed as valuable real estate for housing and commercial uses, the story of these landmarks and the struggles of their early inhabitants are easy to forget.

The Bates Mill complex at the crest of Lewiston Falls on the Androscoggin River was founded in 1850. For a period in the mid-1800s, it was Maine's largest employer, as workers produced textiles for uniforms for the Union Army. In 2010, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Laura Faure, director of the Bates Dance Festival, first thought about using the area as a location for site specific dance work more than four years ago. She recognized the special way the railroad trestle bridge, park, and historic mill buildings were beloved local landmarks.

Faure invited choreographer Stephan Koplowitz, then Dean of Dance at CalArts, to explore these locations with her while he was a member of the Bates Dance Festival faculty. Over time, they devised a plan for *Mill Town*. Ambitious and expansive both conceptually and in its execution, *Mill Town* caps Faure's thirty-year tenure leading the festival. It is presented as a gift to the people of Lewiston/Auburn, who have supported the festival with such encouragement and affection over the years.

Site specific work -- that is, dance that is created for very particular places, taking advantage of the visual and experiential qualities offered by dancing in a particular location -- has been featured at the Bates Dance Festival for many years. Faure explains that in site specific work, the audience has freedom to choose how long they linger in a place, where they direct their attention, how they engage with other members of the audience.

Site work is Stephan Koplowitz' specialty. Since 1987, he has surprised audiences with dance in unexpected settings ranging from the windows of Grand Central Station and the steps of the New York Public Library to swimming pools and urban sidewalks.

Site specific work, with its creative and logistical challenges, typically has a long lead time. Koplowitz and Faure began exploring the potential of the Bates Mill site in 2013. They conducted what Koplowitz describes as a "site inventory" -- assessing the physical design and architecture of the area, writing down impressions and taking pictures, and physically walking through the site and measuring it without any regard for what the final production might be.

By 2014, the creative team got to work in earnest. Koplowitz partnered with BDF videographer Ellen Maynard to create film of the mill site that could be used as part of the immersive decor installed in the building. Environmental studies students created independent studies to research how the site came to be what it is today, evaluating the geography and environmental issues around the river and the phases of city development that created the current architectural form and landscape of Lewiston/Auburn. The team arranged to borrow antique molds for shoes, bobbins, and other industrial artifacts from the collection of Museum L-A to bring the physical traces of mill activities up close. Koplowitz also invited his longtime collaborator, violinist and composer Todd Reynolds, to provide a hybrid acoustic and digital score that would honor the traditions of Franco-American musical life.

Koplowitz may build his work out of awareness of a site's history but he doesn't end there. *Mill Town* is not merely about the past, but about how local inhabitants think about and experience their environment and the Bates Mill buildings today. Among the 47 performers in *Mill Town* are young dancers from the Bates Dance Festival Youth Arts Program (YAP) and local adult dancers to whom the Bates Mill are familiar parts of their daily lives. As Koplowitz once told an interviewer, "working with a community means spending time getting to know what people value in their community and how their environment influences or contributes to their values. From there you will find sites that have meaning that you may not have discovered had you just used your eyeballs and your prejudices."

But Faure says it best when she explains why site specific work, despite its challenges, has been so important to the Bates Dance Festival and to her. "Site work has the power to completely transform someone's sense of place," she explains. "Once you've created a work in a park or an Audubon sanctuary or a historic building, and experienced it as a viewer, you never experience that place the same way again."

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