

2019

# Byrd and the Bath House: A Case Study of Spectrum Dance Theater (1982-2012)

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## Recommended Citation

Burrows, Erin Naomi, "Byrd and the Bath House: A Case Study of Spectrum Dance Theater (1982-2012)" (2019). *Spectrum Dance Theater*. 1.  
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectrum-dance-theater/1>

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Byrd and the Bath House

A Case Study of Spectrum Dance Theater (1982-2012)

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Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

March 19, 2019

### Abstract

Spectrum Dance Theater has been a pillar of the Seattle dance community since its founding in the early 1980s. Spectrum's contemporary choreography under Donald Byrd is well known for its political and emotional depth, especially content around geopolitical conflict and race in the United States. This case study follows Spectrum's history from its establishment in a converted 1928 bathhouse through the first decade of Byrd's tenure as Artistic Director, 2002 – 2012.

Byrd and the Bath House: A History of Spectrum Dance Theater (1982-2012)

**The Madrona Bath House**

On the shore of Lake Washington the wind pushes small waves over concrete stairs in the shadow of the old 1928 bathhouse. What at first glance looks like another community center building instead houses an arts institution that since 1982 has been the home of dancers: youth and adults, students and professionals. The bathhouse was converted to dance studios in 1971 by the Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation. Engineer Don Sherwood captured the changing purpose of the building in his 1974 report:

Community mores change, so that by the 1960's there was no longer a need for the large rooms for bathers to change clothes and check street clothes in the bag room; it was quite acceptable to wear swimsuits to the beach or under street clothes. So the big bathhouse was mostly empty, dark and dusty, as were the three other bathhouses in the park system. The recreation demands of the public had changed as well, so more emphasis was placed upon cultural arts. Facilities were not available - or suitable- for these specialized activities, until Mildred Noble, Cultural Arts Director, looked at the empty bathhouses. Some Forward Thrust bond funds were available and the Federal Model City program found that a dance studio fulfilled a need - so major funding came to support the conversion of the unused portion of the bathhouse, plus a new second story addition, into the Madrona Dance Studio, dedicated in 1971. The studio describes its service as a "halfway house between the introductory courses offered at various recreation centers and the private studios." (Sherwood, 1974)

A report produced for Seattle Parks and Recreation in 2017 gave a similar account of this shift in the building's purpose, noting that,

Over the years, the popularity of the beach at Madrona Park remained constant, however demand for the bathhouse facilities decreased dramatically. At the same time, SPR was expanding its cultural arts programs and needed larger and better-equipped facilities. As a result, the underused bathhouse was rehabilitated to provide space for Dance programs. In 1971, a large second-story addition was made to the bathhouse, creating a Dance Studio for children and adults. The newly renovated building housed two large studios as well as a dance library. (Innova Architects, 2017)

Stella Hortensen was hired as the Dance Specialist to direct the studio and coordinate activities in the dance community in a program described as “unique in the nation” (Sherwood, 1974).

### **Spectrum Dance Theater**

The Dance Advisory Council, a.k.a. Discover Dance, the nonprofit that had been providing adult and youth dance classes at the Madrona Dance Studio closed in 1982. Five dancers joined together to found its replacement: Spectrum Dance Theater. Dale Merrill, one of the co-founders recounts the origins of the Spectrum name: as a dancer, he and Carol Borgmann, another Spectrum co-founder, collaborated on a Twelve Minutes Max production at On the Boards. Utilizing the technology of the time, the dancers moved in front of colored light projections in white costumes, creating a spectrum of color on their bodies (personal communication, March 1, 2019). In the years following its founding, the term ‘spectrum’ would become an even richer metaphor. Under Merrill’s direction, “Spectrum grew from a community dance company to a repertory jazz company of national prominence performing works by Ann Reinking, Margo Sappington, Lou Conte, Lar Lubovitch, Lynne Taylor-Corbett, and Danny Buraczeski” (Backhausdance, 2019).

Spectrum Dance Theater was both a dance school and the home of the company. Seattle Parks and Recreation provided crucial support as Spectrum built its infrastructure and assets as a young arts nonprofit. Merrill fondly recalls Parks' staff member Royal Allen-Barnes, who tolerated occasional late rent payments. He underscored that, without Allen-Barnes' championship of the dance program, Spectrum would not have survived (personal communication, March 1, 2019).

Fifteen years into their tenancy, Spectrum's beloved bathhouse was in need of updates. In the late 1990s, the staff and board mounted a capital campaign to renovate and expand the building to accommodate the organization's growth. Merrill, in his 1998 appeal to donors on the Spectrum website wrote that,

...what attracts people to Spectrum's community is our mission of accessibility. This mission is embodied in Spectrum's successful development of the Madrona Dance Studio. The Madrona Dance Studio gives Spectrum an incredible sense of community that makes us stand apart from many other arts organizations in Seattle.

Tricia Stromberg, a Boeing engineer, joined the board of directors in 1999 and accepted the office of president in 2004. She recalls the stress of the fundraising campaign and construction project. With the expiration date looming on a \$75,000 grant from the state of Washington, work was completed on a conference room, three offices, an additional restroom, and new locker rooms. Installation of a sprung floor in the upstairs studio afforded more professional conditions for ballet courses and rehearsals (personal communication, March 15, 2019).

According to Merrill, adult dance programs were rare in Seattle in the 1970s. Spectrum's ability to provide such a public asset was key to the organization's success at Madrona Dance

Studio. Stromberg notes that the adult students became loyal audience members and the company's ambassadors in the community. Both Merrill and Stromberg feel that Spectrum's acceptance of body types and shapes outside of the Eurocentric standards of traditional ballet created a warm, welcoming and accepting space for a diverse student body and dance company (D. Merrill, personal communication, March 1, 2019; T. Stromberg, personal communication, March 15, 2019).

### **The Changing of the Guard**

Merrill had received his MFA from the University of Washington in 1992 and joined the university's faculty in 1999 in the Dance Program and the School of Drama's Professional Actor Training Program (Backhausdance, 2019). In 2002, he announced his resignation as director of Spectrum Dance Theater. In an interview in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, he cited the stress of fundraising and managing a mid-size company as factors in his decision to accept a position at Chapman, a liberal arts college in California.

It seemed like I had reached a point in my life to make a change. Among them is the difficulty of being mid-size in this community. (Spectrum's operating budget is \$600,000, a jump from \$250,000 10 years ago.) The city needs the major arts organizations, but it also needs those that are mid-range, between the majors and the fringe. Without them there is no diversity. The issue is not necessarily the desire to get bigger but to sustain oneself. Today, everyone is out for themselves. After awhile there is burnout. (Campbell, 2002)

However, Merrill left Spectrum on a strong note saying, "I feel good about Seattle. There are a few more things I wish I had been able to accomplish but time ran out. However, I feel I left a good foundation for the next artistic director. Spectrum is entrenched" (Campbell, 2002).

According to Stromberg, the board reconsidered Spectrum's mission in the wake of Merrill's resignation, specifically whether to be only a school or to continue to build the professional dance company. They decided to "go for the gold," launching a national search emphasizing contemporary dance, not jazz, choreography. Donald Byrd, a choreographer of international stature with his own dance company, emerged as the leading candidate (personal communication, March 15, 2019).

Byrd was artistic director of Donald Byrd/The Group, a company he had founded in 1978 in Los Angeles and later moved to New York City (Spectrum Dance, n.d.). Sarah Weaver, a Spectrum board member at the time, told the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, "We wanted someone who would take us to the next level, although we never expected we would attract someone of his national and international prominence" (Halsey, 2003).

According to Stromberg, Byrd's race was not a consideration during the interview process (personal communication, March 15, 2019). But race was part of Byrd's artistic legacy. An African American raised in the south, he had trained in elite universities and dance companies in the Northeast (Beason, 2012). In 1992, he won a prestigious New York Dance and Performance Award, also known as a Bessie, for a racially charged work titled *The Minstrel Show*. In a Los Angeles Times review of the production, Byrd commented on the influence of his blackness on his work saying,

It's an incredible dilemma to be an artist of color and to always be in denial about that, saying, 'I'm a choreographer first and then I'm black,' when in fact, that's not the case. I'm black first and then I'm also a choreographer. The blackness, the Afro-Americanness, came first. And I don't think that minimizes what I do. In fact it gives a point of reference to what it is. (Pasles, 1993)

In Seattle for the interview process, Byrd spent three days observing the dancers, learning their names and strengths. Following his formal interview with the search committee, Stromberg remembers a more casual gathering at a board member's home, where Byrd spoke about one talented dancer in particular, and how it broke his heart that the man had to stock groceries in order to make a living outside of his dancing. Stromberg knew then that Byrd was going to bring something special to Spectrum, working with every dancer to make the most of their assets, giving each the opportunity to shine (personal communication, March 15, 2019).

Donald Byrd accepted the position of artistic director in December, 2002 and Spectrum launched into a new chapter with his vision and name at the forefront. Byrd wrote in his blog for Spectrum that his transition to Seattle was challenging. He arrived with the sadness of closing his dance company of 24 years and experienced alienation, misunderstanding and loneliness. He found insight and inspiration in the science fiction TV series, *Stargate SG-1*.

When I came to Seattle I had to use a new model for how to do things. What worked in New York did not work here. It didn't work because my job was in many ways different. In New York I was a choreographer and by default an artistic director; while at Spectrum I was an artistic director and by default a choreographer. So, I began to model how I went about things like the developer/writer/producers of the television industry. At first, back in 2002, I was not conscious of what I was doing, but all that *Stargate SG-1* watching had insinuated itself into my subconscious. It became clear to me that my job was to create a vision, oversee production, control quality, maintain consistency of product and deliver the highest quality dance that I could (set the standards by initially choreographing all the works myself, then begin to find others who could) and to do it all in the *SG-1* spirit of ensemble, engagement, and pleasure. (Byrd, 2010, January 1)

### **Byrd's Impact**

Byrd's first choreographic work to have its world premiere at Spectrum, *Cruel New World*, explored the impact of 9/11. Stromberg remembers sitting on the edge of her seat, hypnotized by the intensity of the emotion on stage. "I just thought 'I am viewing a genius.'" During a post-performance conversation, an audience member insisted that Byrd explain what the show means and what it meant to him. Byrd responded with the same question, "What does it mean to you?" He challenged the audience, saying that if he told them what it meant, they might judge him for not meeting their expectations. Stromberg believes the audience got it (personal communication, March 15, 2019).

Another turning point was the first touring production of the *Sleeping Beauty Notebook*. Stromberg recalls that funds were tight but the board took a risk, charging the company's airline tickets to New York on a credit card. The performance was covered by the New York Times and led to an invitation for the company to appear at the Spoleto International Arts Festival in Italy (personal communication, March 15, 2019).

By 2004, Seattle dance critics had embraced Byrd's choreography. A review in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer concluded,

'Bhangra Fever' is loaded with movement; the piece builds and builds before breaking on stage like a tsunami. Byrd is the rare artist who can embrace any subject that piques his interest and use his considerable talents to choreograph a complex and completely original dance around it. Since he moved to Seattle to take over Spectrum nearly two years ago, the company has become the hottest dance ticket in town. Once again, the audience left its seats exhilarated and engaged in lively conversation about what they had just seen. (Demetre, 2004)

Byrd reached another career hallmark in 2006: a Tony Award nomination for his choreography for the Broadway musical, *The Color Purple* based on Alice Walker's classic novel (Broadway World, n.d.). A Seattle Times Review stated that,

The musical element is most satisfying, and the attractive, ebullient dances choreographed by Tony-nominee Donald Byrd (head of Seattle's Spectrum Dance Theater) are allowed to be more than garnish too rarely — in the rousing prayer-meeting number, "Mysterious Ways," and a sensuous juke-joint interlude, "Push Da Button." (Berson, 2008)

Spectrum Dance Theater celebrated a retrospective of Byrd's work in 2009 with a three week studio series of his earlier and newer works for the company as well as commissions from other contemporary choreographers. The series illuminated the significance of Spectrum Dance Theater, its bathhouse site, and its school as an incubator of new work. Thomas DeFrantz (2009) wrote in the program introduction,

Medium-sized dance organizations rarely achieve enough stability to think big; still, it shouldn't surprise anyone that Spectrum Dance Theater has taken on the mantle of advocacy for contemporary dance in Seattle. Graced by a high-functioning building that houses company offices, studio space, and a glorious view of Lake Washington, the company boasts school facilities that serve a large, diverse student population.

### **Beyond Dance**

Byrd strives to produce work that confronts challenging issues: racism, rage, despair, deep ethnic and political conflict, love and violence. He is driven by a deep commitment to serve dance itself. He reflects that, in his early years, when he told friends of his desire to be a modern dance giant akin to Martha Graham, he was met with ridicule and laughter. He wrote on his blog,

Now I know that what I desired then was not to be a “modern dance giant” in an egocentric sense or in a public acknowledgment way (both which may also be true) but rather in the sense that I loved dance so much I wanted to not only be a part of it but wanted to make a contribution to it as well. How could I serve IT, The Dance? How could I give back to the one thing that had so transformed me? With The Dance I had found an identity (dancer, choreographer), a voice (a way of expressing how I saw the world), and my Calling. And I wanted to share my enthusiasm. My fervor would be evangelical in its intensity and passion. I would be a fiery John the Baptist for The Dance. I would serve that which had awakened and transform me. And the results would be monumental! (Byrd, 2009)

In 2008, Byrd launched *Beyond Dance: Promoting Awareness and Mutual Understanding (PAMU)*, a series of three choreographic works to be developed over the course of three years. The subjects would be geo-political: Africa (*Mother of Us All*), China (*Farewell*) and the Middle East (*A Chekhovian Resolution*) (“Choreographer Donald Byrd”, 2012). The series became a vehicle to transform his aesthetic approach to staging dance:

The PAMU projects... with their focus on complex geo-political issues, seemed to demand that I explore other ways of working and structuring. I saw these projects as a possible way, an opportunity, to break the old habits and begin to explore other kinds of structures and organizing principles, something more ‘authentic’- structures that mimic or attempt to replicate the complexity and the unknowable(ness) of the subject of the pieces or even of life itself. I was weary of the neat and tidy on stage, viewing things from only one vantage point, everything organized so that the eye could easily take it all in. I wanted something that was closer to how the contemporary world appeared to me - so

unknowable and complex that order as it had been known seemed to disappear and become unpredictable, even chaotic. (Byrd, 2010, September 1)

Byrd's artistic explorations through the PAMU projects avoided hypotheses or solutions, preferring to pose questions for his audience to wrestle with. Critics and audiences proved receptive and even eager to explore global conflict and humanitarian crisis through the prism of art. Reviewing *Mother of Us All* for CityArts in 2011, Rachel Gallaher observed that,

Steering clear from the view that Africa is merely a continent that needs the aid of wealthier nations, Byrd removes the typical images of starving children and war-torn villages to creating a frenetic atmosphere and athletic movement that presents the idea of Africa without presuming solution or forcing any particular interpretation on the audience...In a Post-show discussion Donald Byrd...said, "I don't know what the answer is; even the people in Africa don't know what the answer is. I never felt that the goal of any of these projects was to present a solution. The goal of this piece is to get people to think about Africa during the entire piece. Most people don't even think about Africa once during their day."

### **Byrd's Controversial Approach**

Byrd has a reputation as a creator of powerful work with emotional depth, someone unafraid to talk about life, death, love, war and justice through the medium of dance. A review in Seattle Magazine described his fearless approach:

Byrd is no stranger to tackling big topics in his choreography at Spectrum, but more often his pieces are social commentaries about hard-hitting issues, such as the Holocaust (*Theater of Needless Talents*), the Iraq War (*Interrupted Narratives/War*), African-

American stereotypes (*The Minstrel Show*) and even the suicide of Kurt Cobain (*Nevermind*). (“Choreographer Donald Byrd”, 2012)

In a profile in *Dance Informa*, Byrd acknowledged his expectations of his audience:

“We ask the audience to be a decision maker in the process,” says Byrd, who is always looking for ways to pull the audience into Spectrum’s powerful world. “The work that I do is about the need to communicate, the passion to explore and ask questions.” He further asserts that Spectrum is always pushing for more, bigger movement and a bigger impact. “I try not to settle.” (Wolf, 2013)

Byrd’s methods as a choreographer and the demands he puts on his dancers, have also been scrutinized over the years at Spectrum. A profile in the *Seattle Times’ Pacific NW Magazine* described that pressure:

One of his current dancers told me that Byrd’s approach in the studio up until a few years ago was a kind of psychological intrusion, a poking at the ego that goes on and on until you’re at the breaking point. Over the years, some dancers have recoiled and refused to work with him any longer. (Beason, 2012)

Olivier Wevers, choreographer and founder of his own company, Whim W’Him danced in two productions that Byrd choreographed for Pacific Northwest Ballet. Although Wevers admires Byrd and considers him a mentor, those experiences tested him. “His process really pushes the dancer into a defensive mode, and it pushes them to feel things that they don’t really want to feel” (Beason, 2012).

### **The Foundation of a Dance Legacy**

A *Seattle Magazine* critic stated that,

[Byrd] wants to remind us that the visceral experience of watching dance is useful because it makes us linger a little while on complex questions, while we're not just intellectually, but emotionally present. In his own words: "I want audiences to start to understand that dance has the ability to deal with things that perhaps they didn't think it could—the work that people expect really wonderful literary artworks to do."

("Choreographer Donald Byrd", 2012)

David Lieberman represents Spectrum Dance Theater. His agency's website summarizes the impact of Byrd's artistic vision and direction on the company, declaring that,

Under the artistic leadership of Donald Byrd, Spectrum Dance Theater has become the preeminent modern dance company of the Pacific Northwest. Byrd's body of work is varied and impressive, spanning more than four decades pushing the boundaries of movement and message. The work may be purely an aesthetic experience for an audience to absorb his ambitious dance vocabulary, or it may wrap itself around a compelling civic issue, encouraging a community to examine ideas and attitudes that may impact lives long after the dancing has stopped. (Lieberman, n.d.)

Sixteen years after he became Spectrum's artistic director, Byrd's legacy continues to take shape. He is able to draw audiences in, to get them to engage in difficult conversations about social justice because, at the center of it all is a dedication to the production of high-caliber arts experiences. In an interview with the Stranger, he stated that,

I really want to remind people we are talking about art. And the art that we are doing, I believe will be really engaging and fulfilling and satisfying. One of the problems with Black artists being underrepresented, underproduced, all those under-whatever things are, is that we as a culture and society are denied the richness of their contribution. So we are

made less-than. That is the thing that I want to say: come see it, come experience it, because it is good art. (Graves, 2016)

Method note:

This case study was developed by Erin Naomi Burrows, MFA 2020, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Dale Merrill, Spectrum Dance Theater Founder and Artistic Director from 1985 to 2002, currently Dean of the College of the Arts at California State University, Fullerton; and Tricia Stromberg, Spectrum Dance Theater Board President, 2004 – 2011, currently Board Member Emerita of Spectrum and President of the Boots to Shoes Foundation; as part of this research during Winter Quarter 2019. Susan Kanimatsu provided editing.

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Appendix: Photos of the Madrona Dance studio: 1971, 2000, 2010



1971

Madrona Dance Studio Bathhouse, July 29, 1971. Courtesy Seattle Municipal Archives, Don Sherwood Parks History Collections, 29817.

<http://archives.seattle.gov/digital-collections/index.php/Detail/objects/63747>



2000

Photo collection for 800 Lake Washington Blvd / Parcel ID 4114600995 / Inv # DPRO56, November 6, 2000. Courtesy City of Seattle.

<http://web6.seattle.gov/dpd/historicalsitere/QueryResult.aspx?ID=2054911116>



2010

The beach side of the Madrona Beach House, February 9, 2010. Courtesy Joe Mabel, CC-BY-SA-3.0.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seattle\\_-\\_old\\_Madrona\\_bathhouse\\_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seattle_-_old_Madrona_bathhouse_02.jpg)