

Choreography as conversation: Doug Elkins at the Annenberg Center

Gary L. Day

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New vaudevillian Doug Elkins. Photo by Christopher Duggan.

Choreographer Doug Elkins is no stranger to Philadelphia nor is he a stranger to me. I first encountered Elkins and his unique style of dance about twenty years ago, when he had been commissioned by the Off-Center Ballet (a now-defunct experimental offshoot of the Pennsylvania Ballet) to present a piece as part of a program of four up-and-coming young modern dance choreographers. Then I found Elkins the man to be as engaging and enthusiastic as his

choreography was lively and refreshing.

A reunion

I had a chance to speak with Doug Elkins again last week, after a span of two decades, in connection with his upcoming presentation with Dance Celebration at the Annenberg Center on March 6-8. His company, [doug elkins choreography, etc.](#) will be presenting two new works: *Hapless Bizarre* and *Mo(or)town/Redux*. The years have done nothing to diminish his energy or enthusiasm. When asked how his work has evolved over the years, Elkins responded with examples of how he has been drawing inspiration from an increasingly worldwide range of cultural influences. “It’s a constant cross-fertilization,” he says. “It’s like having a conversation with people from the different cultures.”

A new vaudeville

For the new shows at the Annenberg, Elkins emphasized the comedic elements of *Hapless Bizarre*. “It’s like a new vaudeville,” he says, with a lot of influence from clowning and other forms of physical comedy. The second piece on the program is *Mo(or)town*, which he describes as “a deconstruction of *Othello*, as interpreted on Soul Train.” It’s “a strange riff on intimate relationships.”

Elkins does not keep a formal company in the same manner as other modern dance companies maintained by Paul Taylor or Philadelphia’s David Koresh, but assembles his company on a project-by-project basis. “Of course, if I’ve worked well with someone on a particular project, I’m going to want to continue that conversation again,” he says. “There’s a certain pleasure in working with people you know.” By the same token, Elkins infuses new people and new energy into each project as well, allowing for new perspectives and voices in a process he clearly views as a collaborative one between himself and his dancers.

Elkins tends to frame his responses in terms of conversations. Themes of communication run throughout his speech, and he thinks of his choreography as a conversation between himself, his influences, and his audiences. In the past, that conversation has always been lively and exciting. Now, Philadelphia is in for yet another stimulating conversation with the irrepressible Doug Elkins.

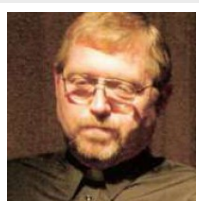
Doug elkins choreography, etc. performs *Hapless Bizarre* and *Mo(or)town/Redux* on March 6 at 7:30pm, March 7 at 8pm, and March 8 at 2pm and 8pm at the Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut Street, Philadelphia. For tickets (\$20-\$55) and more infomation, call 215-898-3900 or visit annenbergcenter.org.

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ARTICLE OVERVIEW

I first met choreographer Doug Elkins twenty years ago. Now that his work in back in Philly, chatting with him is as rewarding as ever.

ABOUT GARY L. DAY



Gary L. Day is a produced playwright who lives in Center City Philadelphia.

