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Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts announces new season



Christopher Gruits is the new executive and artistic director of the Annenberg Center. (Peter Crimmins/WHYY)



BY PETER CRIMMINS

This week, the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts will release the schedule for the 2017-2018 season, beginning in the fall. It will be the first season programmed under the direction of its new leader, Christopher Gruits, anticipating the future of the organization.

Gruits is looking to reboot the Annenberg Center. Once known for cutting-edge music and theater, the Annenberg had become a major dance presenter. But two years ago its partnership with Dance Affiliates ended. Dance Affiliates became NextMove Dance (based at the Prince Theater downtown) and the Annenberg was left without much dance at all.

Gruits, who had been executive director of Interlochen Presents in northwest Michigan, was brought in as executive and artistic director of the Annenberg Center last November to chart a new course.

He started by considering what Philadelphia needs.

"Historically, the Annenberg has been a place of innovative arts," said Gruits. "In the 70s and 80s it was bringing cutting edge music and theater — Phillip Glass, Steve Reich were still unknown names. More recently, Philadelphia has had a gap in the market in terms of having those artists perform."

To fill that gap, Gruits will start the 2017-2018 season with site-specific work by the local experimental theater company, Pig Iron, with the largest project it has ever attempted, involving the new music choir The Crossing. It will open as a headline event of the upcoming Fringe Festival.

The performance is a multi-tiered partnership between the Annenberg Center, the Fringe Festival, Pig Iron, and the University of Pennsylvania's Environmental Humanities program.

"The only way to do it was to scale up through partnership," said Gruits. "If we had tried to do it just by ourselves with Pig Iron, it would have been a lot more challenging in terms of cost of schedule."

Gruits will also bring back dance in a big way by launching an artist residency program with choreographer Mark Morris, in February, and feature, for the first time, the local company BalletX and the L.A. Dance Project. A festival of Cuban music and dance artists — many of whom have never performed in Philadelphia — is scheduled for March.

Gruits sees the Annenberg Center as holding down the western edge of Philadelphia's arts sector, with FringeArts on the eastern edge and the Avenue of the Arts at the center. He claims the Annenberg's Zellerbach Theater — with its 936 seats, clear sight lines, and sprung floor — is the best in the city for dance.

The Center also has two smaller spaces onhand - the Harold Price and the Bruce Montgomery theater — but Gruits is looking outside the Center's box.

"In future, we're looking at presenting programs across Penn campus and in other areas of the city," he said. "We're trying to get out of the theater, bring programming to audiences that are not necessarily within our four walls."

The Annenberg Center will release its full season schedule on Thursday.

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