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By: Andrew Alexander

American Dance Festival kicks off with long-time director Charles Reinhart at the helm for the last time



“Animal Lost” by choreographers Yossi Berg and Oded Graf will be among the pieces performed at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina, this summer. Director Charles Reinhart—who is retiring after 43 years running the American institution—says that the festival has sought a balance between honoring the work of the past and giving space to new talent.

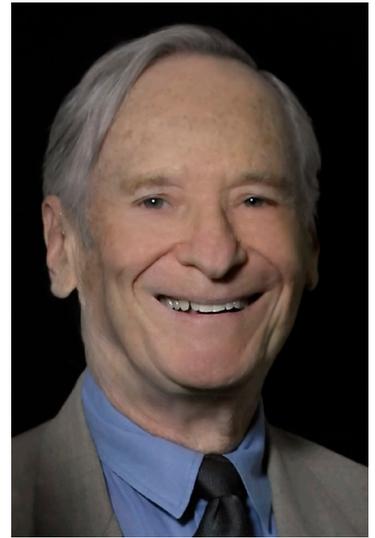
After running the American Dance Festival for 43 years, director Charles Reinhart will be stepping aside at the end of this year to retire. Many of the most familiar names of modern dance— José Limón, Martha Graham, Pearl Lang, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Alvin Ailey, Twyla Tharp, Pilobolus, and more—have been an integral part of the American institution, which had its origins in the Northeast but has taken place every summer in Durham, North Carolina for the past 33 years. We caught up with Reinhart to talk about his tenure, the changes he’s seen and what he sees in store.

How did you originally get involved in the American Dance Festival as director?

They asked me. I think the reality was that they had fallen behind in what was artistically happening. They had that conflict of not wanting to change and self-realization that something had to change. So they came and asked me to do it, and I was a little hesitant because there was so much ensconced in the festival at that time and people were going to be upset with change. They said, “Try it for one year and if you don’t like it we’ll take it back.” One year has stretched into 43.

You talked about change. What sort of philosophy did you bring to the festival? What changes did you want to make?

Well, some people make a definition of what modern dance is. My definition is: there is no definition. When you try to establish one, a choreographer's going to come and blow that definition up. At the time we're talking about, Graham and Limón were the reigning king and queen. But there was all this young talent going around like Twyla Tharpe and Meredith Monk. They were exploding. We tried to do both. That's been the philosophy all these years. You pay respect to what's gone before as well as being an environment for young talent you believe in to do their thing.



Is it challenging to run a dance festival in a place like Durham that's so far from New York? Or do you see that as a benefit?

When we moved from Connecticut to Durham, we moved from the minor to the major leagues. The reason is that it was a competition to get us. They won here. They had no idea who or what we were, but they knew they had won something on a national basis. They supported us in a way that we never were in Connecticut. They responded to our needs. That's been sensational.



The American Dance Festival has played a part in the lives and careers of many contemporary choreographers, dancers and dance companies. Pictured here: The Doug Varone Company which will perform at ADF this summer.

Do you think the audience for dance has changed?

It's definitely changed. When we first moved to Durham, the audience came to see everything. Now they're too educated. They pick and choose. This is a success story. Word of mouth is still crucial. The first time we presented the performers Eiko and Koma, maybe 60% of the audience walked out. We brought them back and 30% of the audience walked out. The third time nobody walked out. There are many types of audiences. To find the right niche takes a little time.

Will you continue to be involved with the festival after you retire?

No. You don't want somebody hanging on who knows too much of the old ways. I want my successor to blow it up and start again. Looking back over the years, it's been a hell of a ride. But it's time to get off the horse. I'm really pleased about both: the ride and getting off.

Why do you think dance is important?

Audiences get the message of dance not through the traditional ways of gaining information. We're talking about a non-verbal art form. In essence, it's nothing you can put down on paper. The audiences get that. It's like waves entering them. It's something you can feel. It's such a spiritual lift, a pleasure unto itself when it moves you. It's an informational highway. There's a whole emotional learning apparatus that we have that is not tuned to the verbal. I like that. It can send my spirit soaring. It's my spirituality. My religion. It's a high. The best kind of high.

The American Dance Festival takes place on the campus of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina during June and July. The line-up this year includes performances from Eiko and Koma, Pilobolus, Shen Wei Dance Arts, Paul Taylor Dance Company, and many others. For a complete schedule and more information, visit ADF.