

Amanda Selwyn Dance takes on the Theme of Habits



For the 10th year in a row, Amanda Selwyn Dance Theatre will present a modern dance performance in the gardens of the home of retired architects, Marcia Previti and Peter Gumpel.

This year called Green Afternoon X, the garden is the center of the experience, according to Selwyn. The first 45 minutes of the event feature cocktails and a reception as dancers perform throughout the grounds. It's followed by a performance on the great lawn.

The property consists of various "outdoor rooms," designed by Previti. Each

"room" is unique not only in its landscape design, but also in the natural elements that surround it, said Selwyn.

"They are each very unique in their sculptural design in terms of the way that the light hits the trees and the bushes and the flowers, and depending on what time of the summer we've been there, there are always different things in bloom," she said. "It's such a robust garden. The dance is kind of like 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' [The dancers] float around the property like nibs and do all these movement installations."

Essentially, as guests enjoy their cocktails, the dancers will do movement meditation throughout the space, standing near and blending with the sculptures, trees, or flowers. The dancers follow structured improvisation, Selwyn said.

"As the audience mingles around the space, they might see something loop or if they just wander around freely, they might never see the same thing twice, and it's really just a feast for the eyes and the senses," she said. After the installations are over, it's time for the lawn performance.

Selwyn's goal with the work is to incorporate her theater background into the dances. "My background is in theater and dance, and my work is really grounded in strong theatrical elements and themes," she said.

It takes Selwyn about a year and a half to put together a dance, before taking it to the stage. She tries to have every dance theme ask a "philosophical question," and, through episodic sections that bridge duets, solos and group sections, "explore the different motifs and ideas," she said.

Her background also expands into yoga, which she said gives her work additional depth.

"A lot of the themes of my choreographic work are rooted in yogic philosophy and different questions of the human experience that I explore in my own yoga teaching; so this idea that the way we show up manifests in our actions and our thoughts," she said.

Each year has a different dance theme. This year it's "Habit Formed," which aims to answer the question of how habits are formed and broken.

"These habits can manifest strength, ease, and freedom and also create limits, boundaries and affliction," the theater said in a statement. "The ultimate journey of the work will tell a story of discernment, unpacking how we can be empowered by our habits and not impaired by them."

Habits are both positive and negative, simple and nuanced, Selwyn said.

"We're looking at both healthy habits that can serve us and that we can develop patterns around in our lives to steer us towards being the person we want to be and then also unhealthy habits of that," she said. "So how we develop and gain more control over our habits in our lives is kind of a central theme."

The message behind the performance, Selwyn said, is that every small action has an impact.

"Once something becomes a habit, it actually takes a lot less effort. So if we cultivate healthy habits in our lives, we actually don't have to work as hard to be the person we want to be," she said. "It's just that initial habit forming."

The habit theme fits perfectly into the dance world, which is where Selwyn got the idea for the it. To be effective, dancers have to be diligent and present about working their craft in the studio to develop repetition. In executing these themed dances, Selwyn poses a question relating to the

theme to her dancers and draws inspiration from their movements, which in this case, symbolizes their feelings about habits in general or habits that they want to add to their lives.

"I let the movement do the talking. So then we just respond to the movements and see what the movements hold up," said Selwyn.

Selwyn was first introduced to Previti and Gumpel through her company manager, a friend of the couple who knew they were strong patrons of the arts and have studios of their own on the property. Previti is an opera singer and also a sculptor, and Gumpel is a watercolor artist and sculptor. Given their architectural background, they designed their home from the ground up.

"The moment I showed up at their house, I was so inspired by all these ideas about ways we could dance," Selwyn said. "And what's fun is that even though we've done this 10 times, every year, there's something new in her gardens. The first thing I'll do when I get there next week is [Previti] will show me, 'Oh, this is a new shrub that we got, and I built this new sculpture over here.' She's worked every single day on her garden, and it's an ongoing project, so there's always something to respond to."

The venue also gives the audience the space to experience the performance as they see fit.

"Someone could get really diligent about wanting to see everything, or someone could just see a couple of things and just enjoy the beauty," said Selwyn.

Some audience members fully immerse themselves in the experience, dancing with the performers. Others park themselves on a bench and relax.

"I want to set up a performance that is available for everybody, in which somebody who's more mobile can wander around someone who needs to sit in a chair and also experience it," said Selwyn.

Green Afternoon X takes place on Saturday, July 8, at 5 p.m. at the home of Marcia Previti and Peter Gumpel, 230 Old Stone Highway, East Hampton. Wine and hors d'oeuvres will be served. Tickets are \$150 at amandaselwyndance.org/green-afternoon-x.