

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Eli Laban

Artistry on Eight Wheels

by Miryam Coppersmith

I learned to rollerblade as a young white Jewish kid in the '90s, puttering around suburban streets with my dad. Though I loved rollerblading, it always seemed to me like a niche thing that not many people did. But there is a deep history of roller skating and dance on skates in Black communities across America. That history, joy, and artistry was present in full force at *Can't Wait to Skate: Philly's Rollerskating Story*, a live show at the Fringe Arts theater presented as part of the [UMA SHOWS UP Festival](#).

Ricky "Glytch" Evans and India "Engine" Bernardino, instructors at [Great on Skates](#) and [Urban Movement Arts](#), kicked the show off without wheels in a duet that moved through house, locking, and other Black dance styles. Bernardino radiated joyful confidence, each step digging into the ground to push off with explosive energy. Evans played with the audience with suspenseful pauses, fluid and precise locking, and the occasional wink. After warming the audience up to shouting and clapping along, Bernardino and Evans drew the rest of the crew of seven performers out from the wings.

The first skaters to come out appeared larger than life, extra tall on their wheels and gliding so smoothly across the stage. And then, a documentary break.

The *Can't Wait to Skate* live show was also the premier of Bernardino's documentary about skating in Philadelphia, bearing the same title. The documentary was shown in sections interspersed with live numbers. Going back and forth between attentively watching footage and the skaters urging us to shout louder for the live performance felt jarring at times. However, the documentary gave me an understanding of the history and form that allowed me to see more details and nuance in the skating than I would have otherwise.

The film tells the story of Irvin Williams, a veteran skater and mentor to Great on Skates. Sitting in front of an image of Nelson Mandela, Williams describes all the crews in Philadelphia, the skaters he admired, and the regional differences he noticed going to national roller

skate parties. I learned that you can spot a Philly skater if they skate backwards, FAST, hug the wall, and have a rag (you always have to have a rag). The interview was augmented by an impressive collection of archival footage spanning decades, provided by Williams and Terry Gilmore, a former 6abc reporter and producer on the project.

One of the most compelling stories was the loss of the skaters' outdoor home at Penn's Landing due to development. The outdoor space, Williams says, "becomes a sanctuary for you— a place that's positive, that's free." While the documentary and show maintained an overall joyful attitude, it also highlighted some of the struggles the skate community faces. On the [Great on Skates website](#), Bernardino writes, "The up-tick in popularity in the general media of roller skating and roller dancing means new people are gaining interest in skating as a social, athletic, and artistic activity. However, in the black community, skating is often kept gated, because there's a fear of it being repackaged and sold away from its creators and communities." A good reminder to seek out and support the artists that foster the forms we come to know and love.

And the performers of the *Can't Wait to Skate* live show would be a great place to start, with their unique styles and impeccable technique. [Reginald "Juice" Dillon](#) brought the St. Louis flavor with him, diving into an incredible low split on his skates, spinning and hovering just inches above the ground. [Shamar "Miraculous Spinz " Cunningham](#) lived up to his name, spinning on one pair of wheels, his head snapping back and forth, for more rotations than I could possibly count, before landing into a graceful arc around the stage. [Kardale Holland](#) from LA stood out most to me off his skates. During a slow number dedicated to skaters who have passed away, he performed a moving lyrical solo, coming into a handstand and rolling onto his back, then spiraling up in a beautifully controlled turn.

It is often challenging to translate a form that is usually social and participatory into a concert dance setting, but in the last few songs the performers brought the rink to Fringe Arts. With slow R&B bumping, Bernardino glided through the solo skaters with Mr. Dre aka [Poppy](#), showcasing the smooth style of partner skating; the casual interplay between them and the music was delightful.

The cornerstone of the live show, like the documentary, was Williams himself, skating with the understated ease and control of a master. There was a sense of ambassadorship, that the performers (especially Bernardino, self-described "all around hype-woman") wanted to spread the form and its story throughout Philadelphia and beyond. With the live show, documentary, Williams' [Control Your Roll](#) videos on YouTube, and Great on Skate's live [classes](#), they're spreading their message far and wide: "If you ain't sweatin, you ain't workin'!"

[Can't Wait to Skate: Philly's Rollerskating Story](#), Great on Skates presented by Urban Movement Arts, Fringe Arts, May 15.

Image Descriptions:

1. Shamar Cunningham spins with his back to the audience on roller skates, hands clasped above his head in front of a projection that says "In Memoriam."
2. India Bernardino, in a purple shirt, crouches down on her skates, with her arms stretched out and a large smile.

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