

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Mike Hurwitz

59th exhale: A night of questions, answers optional.

by Xander Cobb

As a full moon rose Saturday, August 9th, a generous audience and the cast of performers gathered at CHI Movement Studio for the [59th Inhale Performance Series](#). [Kun-Yang Lin Dancers](#) quarterly performance series supports artists and the public to engage in creative exchange. Ten works of contemporary dance travel to video game realms, fairytale landscapes, outer planets, and fraught interiorities.

Lights cast soft peach on the upstage corners as Claud Debussy's musical composition sweeps in.

Yuki and Olivia Wood Ishiguro of Bucks County's Yu.S.Artistry punctuate the space with athletic pivots and ballet lifts in an excerpt from Echoes of Tranquility. The moments they witness one another dance are magnetic. In the next piece, There is Only Now, Kayla Faynor, a NJ-based dancer and recent graduate of Rider University, manipulates her own body, fighting an unseen opponent, maybe herself. Following Faynor's grappling solo, Body Memory by Caitlin Quinn Pittenger cascades from spring-like to something eerie. Dancers Abigail Bell, Abbey Butler, Kyle Kolmer, Saita Perkins, and Alyssa Todaro weave a quintet of undulating spines and warrior arms, reminding me of grass fronds.

We never see Sarah Messenger's face in her piece Hands Tied, a cyclical marionette of femininity.

She enters wearing a clown mask. She grasps her thin black bra straps and never lets go. Elbows notate, run, circle, and jab unendingly as Franz Schubert's classical composition twiddles and crescendoes. She leap-stumbles circles around the center, taps painted nails on her chest, roars, and crosses her bra straps in an X, nearly choking herself, or being choked? In a final gesture, her head dips and sways to one side like a wind-up stuffed animal the moment before it stops dancing—she's stuck (mostly) in center stage, stuck to her bra straps like they're puppet strings, stuck attempting to get a rise out of the audience with feminine flirtations she uses but resents.

Stuck without the power to get herself unstuck. I'm tired from watching it, but also deeply intrigued, left questioning – is this about sex work? Clowning? The ropes of patriarchy?

rece komorn's* lithographs excerpt begins with sounds of wind and static. Wearing earthy green and purple cotton skirts, jahnell boozier* and ally wilson* run. They cross diagonals. Wilson comes so close to the audience I could touch her, but she never sees me. Kneeling there, she presses fists deep into her eyes as boozier does the same upstage. kormon's original sound score transports me to a dusty, cold planet – the dancers gaze always skyward, groundward, or past the horizon. They round their spines forward and hover soft hands over the ground as if calming a spirit or sensing the pulse of water beneath rock. With repeating round kicks and arm whips, they cast spells – shake dice, slap the ground, bow their entire bodies over and over and over. Questing to some imagined destination beyond downstage left, they open. They reach their bellies, chests, arms, palms up, bend back and hold this shape as if a blazing sun is blinding them. In the final moments, they sprint in place toward this imaginary sun. The lights fall as wilson continues to pump her legs and arms, and boozier collapses to the ground. I imagine the quest continues towards another level in some extraterrestrial video game, but what they're conjuring and where they're going – if this even is what they're doing – remains a mystery.

Mirroring Wilson and boozier's spread-open shape near the end of lithographs, Amanda Rattigan begins an excerpt of Ally Wilson's *The Way the Light Hits the Puddle* like a sun crucified by her fingertips. Drone tones scored by Paula Matthusen evoke another chapter in the cosmic odyssey, marking a style that follows Wilson in both her own work and the work she performs in. In a chain of one-leg balances, she expands her limbs across XYZ planes that I imagine to be vast, unfolding landscapes. She rhythms between a slow, smearing approach and painful sputtering. From a sphinx, her shoulders slowly goo back, her spine ripples in a down dog snake, then she accelerates to toss, roll, and slam her side body to the ground. She shoots back to plank and repeats this cycle. I see her crushing giant bugs, or some internal shadow she can't shake off, no matter how many times she repeats this cycle of flinging and pounding her body. She gets quiet enough to pour what I imagine to be water from her rib cage into cupped palms, cascading palm over palm, as if a delicate potion. The stillness of this moment reminds me of her opening one-leg balances, and gives me the sense that sometimes, though not all the time, she accepts her internal shadow.

Having danced her own piece, *There is Only Now*, in the first half of the night, Faynor returns to the stage in Alli Fama's duet *Suppression*. Fama, performing, reveals a masked face as she turns around. They manipulate each other. In the moment I find most eerie, they inch toward embracing but never actually touch. During a final escalation of donkey-clown fighting, Fama takes off the mask and Faynor puts it on.

Solo for 4 by Anne-Marie Mulgrew & Dancers Company is a fairytale of conjuring butterflies and little birds – a quartet twinkling to piano. Next is *Fluctuating Asymmetry*, a completely different duet. I smile at Abby Donnenfeld's pink cutoff fishnets under 80s-style pink, yellow, and black color-blocked shorts. Her shorts sum up the energy of her duet with Niamh Birkett. They somersault and give Powerpuff Girl vibes.

The night's final work is *Speak*, a collaboration between married couple, Josh and Emily Culbreath*, and award-winning writer [Sabyn Javeri](#). Low lights fade in, and Javeri's voice filters through static. In opposite corners, Josh and Emily grab at their chests and slowly extract something. They pull it, and then, bursting open their hands, drop it. Is it their hearts? Their voices? We never know, air is the only thing that actually falls. But we can imagine from how they struggle that it's something powerful. They join in the center, standing so close they easily cradle one another's faces as they behold each other. They slide their tender hands from cheeks to mouth and turn their gaze to the audience. No sound escapes their covered mouths as they lunge together, advancing downright, eyes vigilant. At the piece's height, Josh torpedoes in breaking sequences while Emily witnesses. They switch roles, and Emily sparks her popping arms and chest as Josh takes in her sight. Both nearly fall, but are caught by the other. Throughout, Bilal's groovy sound crossfades with a mechanized reproduction of Javeri's words. There's one fall Josh takes that Emily doesn't catch. He lays, crumpled at her feet as if dead. But then he catapults up and collides backwards into Emily's embrace. With her chest to Josh's back, Emily wraps and extends her arms in front of him, taking hold of Josh's fists. They struggle together to return the extracted thing to his/their chests. Though I didn't pick up on Javeri's words throughout the piece, as they were often static, robotic, and layered with music, her words echo loudly

at the end. "After taste" repeats in a loop, and finally she proclaims, "English is mine" as the lights go black. Her concluding words bring up the immigrant experience, especially the power of claiming a language that isn't your native tongue, and shed light on the abstract thing Josh and Emily pull from and ultimately return to their chests. Whatever it is, it's related to their power to speak.

The 59th Inhale Performance series gave the stage to choreographers fresh from BAs, established companies, and independent artists from Philly and the surrounding region. The full moon in Aquarius shines light on our collective efforts, much like the series puts in conversation many artistic voices. At large, the works shared contemporary and ballet aesthetics with punctuations of street dance and physical theater. Classical compositions and DUNE-like sound scores framed most of the pieces, which wrestled with themselves, collided with unseen forces, and conjured lulling landscapes. Taken together, the night left me chewing on what contemporary concert dance can do and can't do, especially in ten minutes or less. Some of the works prompted me to sift through the cyclical turmoil of not knowing where we're going or if we'll endure. In others, I saw formations, gestures, and dance training that I found pretty but didn't evoke much feeling or thought in me. Need concert dance have utility? In a historic moment of genocide and governmental collapse, to what landscapes, through what battles, and into what interiorities can dance take us?

[59th Inhale Performance Series](#), Chi Movement Studio, August 9, 2025.

Links to shows to be presented at the Fringe Festival in September 2025:

[lithographs by rece komorn at The Fringe Festival](#)

[The Way the Light Hits the Puddle by Ally Wilson at The Fringe Festival](#)

[Fracture by Sarah Messenger at The Fringe Festival](#)

*All names are credited the way they appear in the program for each different performance.

*Emily Culbreath is a writer for thINKingDance

Home Page Image description: *Abby Donnenfeld appears to have just landed an arabesque leap. She stands on one bent leg, enwrapped in billows of white tool, her other leg abducted, knee bent and toes pointing backward. Her left arm extends to the side, wrist flexed, she holds the opposite end of the billowing tool between her lengthened fingers. Her right arm, extending behind her head, isn't visible. She looks definitely towards a spot just left of the camera, hair smoothed back, lips red, face relaxed and focused. The background is entirely white and nearly envelopes her white fabric.*

Article Page Image Description: *Swathed in warm yellow light, Amanda Rattigan stands on one leg, hinging deeply at her hips. She makes one long diagonal from her toes, that reach high behind her, to her eyes, that focus towards the ground. She extends her arms toward her standing foot, palms turned forward, fingers soft. She wears a sparkling, netted black long sleeve over a shimmering silver tank top with a black skirt that falls above her knees, her knee pads visible.*

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