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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: courtesy of Jim May

Jim May: A Beautiful Friendship with Philadelphia

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

Within a month of his move to Philadelphia's Art Museum neighborhood, [Jim May](#) graciously took the time to chat with Lynn Brooks about his life in dance and his upcoming plans and projects. With a career spanning modern dance (José Limón and Anna Sokolow lineages), ballet (Eliot Feld), and Broadway (Hair), and deep experience performing, choreographing, and teaching, May's relocation to tD territory promises new dimensions for engagement with Philly's dance and theater communities.

Lynn Brooks: You are well-known as the bearer of the Sokolow and the Limón mantles. How have these two pivotal artists shaped your world?

Jim May: Although I have danced in shows on Broadway, was an original member of the Eliot Feld Ballet, danced as soloist for Daniel Lewis for ten years, I am associated strongly with Limón and Sokolow. In 1997, I went to Mexico on a Fulbright grant to study these two mentors. Anna went to Mexico in 1939 and established a long-standing relationship with that country: she was given the [Aztec Eagle](#) award, the highest that country can give a foreigner. She is considered the "mother of modern dance" there. José was born and raised for eight years in Mexico, before his family moved to California. He then became one of the most famous Mexican-American artists. His movement connects to the Earth, to the struggles of humanity, to his roots. My Fulbright continued the artistic relationships they started, bridging to the next generation, strengthening the cross-border communication these artists established. Like Anna, I've continued to work in Mexico, recently through a cross-border summer program where dancers from Mexico came to San Antonio to work with the dance department, led by Jane King, at Northwest Vista College. They learned Sokolow works and performed in Texas and Mexico City. In Mexico, I discovered a lost Sokolow work, *Mural* (1976, music by Carlos Chavez), and was able to reconstruct it. While that exchange is no longer underway, I now work with the [School of Creative and Performing Arts](#) in San Diego, which has a large Latin American population.

LB: How do you see your life's choreography flowing among your roles as dancer, choreographer, teacher, family person, and eminent figure in the dance field?

JM: Many years ago, my daughter Jessica and I toured the world with Danny Lewis's company; she danced the role of my daughter in Doris Humphrey's *Day on Earth*. Of course, [Lorry May](#) and I created a duet evening that we performed for many years before becoming co-artistic directors of Anna Sokolow Players Project, which I now run as [Sokolow Theatre/Dance Ensemble](#). Anna was like a mother to me. In fact, I knew her longer than I did my real mother. The dance world has been and remains my family. My choreography always relates to my life, my heart. I try to reconcile through dance the climate of opposition in the country. My recent solo at the 92nd St. Y was about a preacher confronted by his desire to dance, which culminates in his spiritual soft shoe to Schumann *leider*.

LB: How has the dance field changed over the course of your life?

JM: I think there is a reawakening thirst for artistic expression beyond pure entertainment or academic exercise. One reason I travel so much is that Sokolow's work is understood, respected, [and] needed in parts of the world where the struggles of humanity are more immediate than in the U.S., which has had the artistic luxury to concentrate on 'pure' movement. Anna choreographed [Dreams](#), [The Unanswered Question](#), [Steps of Silence](#)—all masterpieces, but most Americans don't want to see them. Only recently have there been requests from American institutions—Sarah Lawrence College, Mills, Franklin & Marshall—to bring these works to their dancers. I have been asked back to the [Eliot School](#) in Boston to work with 8- to 11-year-olds on serious subjects for expression. Doris Humphrey said, "Dance was asleep for 1000 years before Isadora woke it up." Maybe it's time for another alarm bell.

LB: What are the differences in response to your work in different parts of the world?

JM: I've tried to put down seeds, like Johnny Appleseed, all over the world. I'm going back to Italy to teach at the [Academy](#) in Rome for two months this coming year. I worked in Taiwan as artistic director of [Dance Forum Taipei](#), and I'm still working in Mexico, and teaching in San Diego. I don't do just one teaching session, but return year after year to help the plant grow. My company members are from Mexico, Switzerland, Japan, [and] France. It's important to go beyond borders. That's one thing the arts can do.

LB: What is your take on Philadelphia as a place for the arts, particularly for dance, to flourish? What opportunities might this city offer you, or you to it?

JM: I've performed in many Philly venues, including with Limón at the Walnut St. Theater back in the '70's. I also choreographed and performed with Ann Vachon's Dance Conduit. I've worked in New York City for 52 years, but it's too ballet-oriented, too much "dancing with the stars." I want something more American, more my roots. Philadelphia reminds me of NYC 35 years ago, when young dancers were welcomed, encouraged, and had space to work. That no longer exists there. The Joyce Theater closed the DIA center for emerging choreographers; then it closed DANY space, one of the few places to rent for dance. I can no longer encourage my students to create in a city that doesn't want them. Philadelphia might be an alternative, and an expansion for my NY company. Kun Yang Lin danced with me in NYC for a while, and Gwendolyn Bye presents Mary Anthony's choreography. Mary danced for Anna and they were close friends. Maybe we can do a joint concert of their works? Might the National Museum of American Jewish History want to present Anna's *Kaddish* live? Also, I teach Movement for Actors. Can I teach that here? I'd like to teach a floor barre at the [retirement home](#) for gays. I still dance, and don't think I'll stop.

Each morning, I do my Tai-Chi practice on the hill just behind the Philadelphia Museum of Art, overlooking the Schuylkill River—Fairmount Park to my north, the sun rising in the east, the moon to the west, and all downtown Philly to the south. I feel so complete! I believe this is going to be, in the words of Humphrey Bogart at the end of *Casablanca*, "a beautiful friendship."

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