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Creative Isolation: Jackie Latendresse and dancing at a distance

Latendresse, the artistic director of Free Flow Dance Theatre Company in Saskatoon, quickly adjusted her company's 25th anniversary season.

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Mitchell Larsen, Rachel Saufert, Kyle Syverson, Laura Turnbull, and Erin Walton are all part of the Free Flow Dance Theatre Company in Saskatoon. The company was set to celebrate its 25th anniversary this year, but artistic director Jackie Latendresse said a lot of things had to change due to COVID-19. SUPPLIED / PHOTO BY KEN GREENHOR / jpg

We're checking in with a different Saskatchewan artist each week [to talk about their life and work during COVID-19](#). This week we hear from Free Flow Dance Theatre Company artistic director Jackie Latendresse, who has had to reorganize the company's celebratory 25th anniversary season in the wake of the global pandemic. Now that restrictions are slowly being lifted, Latendresse is overseeing a return to a new normal for the long-running Saskatoon dance company.

Q: What does your life look like right now in a COVID-19 world?

A: The first couple of months were kind of like stopping a galloping horse. We plan things so far in advance, it was literally like trying to stop a speeding train ... myself and my dancers, we actually spent a lot of time mourning the loss of things we had been preparing for. It was actually quite sad, a lot of sadness was happening in my life and in the dance company.

We had been working for several months for a very large production we were going to be doing with the symphony orchestra, and the disappointment when that date comes and goes and all of the hard work and dedication of the artists kind of goes by unnoticed ... So a lot of our life was just dealing with that, for the first couple of months, and coming to the realization that my art form is going to be completely different for quite some time to come.



Jackie Latendresse, the artistic director of the Free Flow Dance Theatre Company in Saskatoon, had a full summer of events planned to celebrate the company's 25th anniversary. Due to COVID-19, Latendresse said many plans had to change very quickly for the company. SUPPLIED / PHOTO BY KEN GREENHOR/jpg

Q: What do you mean when you say it's going to look completely different?

A: There may be permissions granted to artists and theatres, but we are notoriously over-thinkers, so we may or may not actually implement things because we have a moral compass that may indicate that the risk is too high.

So I think the nice thing about myself and other artists is that doesn't necessarily deter us from doing things. It just slows the process down and allows us to re-envision and reframe and rethink the direction that we're going in with our work and how we're going to do it safely and in a unique manner ... producing work is a great by-product of being a creative person. But as an artist I feel like my responsibility is to look and understand, try to understand and try to learn about the state of humanity in the world.

And to be able to make some sort of commentary that's relevant and intelligent and timely and sensitive to the issues that are happening that are surrounding us — artists have always had that job.

Q: When did you realize you were going to have to pivot away from your big 25th anniversary plans because of COVID-19?

A: I have a giant dance studio, and it's been empty for months. It's just starting to have a couple of people in it. And my world is usually inundated with human beings ... without dancers, I don't really have anything. So as soon as human beings were taken out of my world, I realized this was big. So it was instantaneous, almost, for the dance community. We always joke we have six wives and seven husbands because we're all together all the time, but really it immediately made a huge impact on our company.

For me, fortunately, I realized by the end of March that this was it. We had just started our season early in February, and I was able to take a step back and breathe after being sad and say 'I need to accept that these 700 things I have planned for this season ... are not going to happen in the way I envision them happening.'



Dancers with contemporary dance company Free Flow Dance Theatre rehearse for an upcoming show *The Journey* in October 2019. MATT OLSON / SASKATOON STARPHOEN/Saskatoon

Q: So what does the season look like now in a COVID-19 world? What are some of the projects still on the go?

A: The big one on our mind this month is *Back Alley Antics*, because all the pieces are created and we're going into the filming process ... previously, we would ask artists to create site-specific work in the back alleys and unusual places of Saskatoon.

We usually pick a specific grid area ... and the artists create their work and we set up a map and an order, and the audience is invited to gather. Usually a hundred people or so show up ... then we take them on a walking tour of the back alleys — they follow the giant carrot — and when the carrot stops, they spread out a little and watch something. And then they go to the next spot. It's kind of like a treasure hunt for art.

This year ... we will be doing three live performances, and during those performances we have exactly seven spots — so seven single people or a cohabiting couple in a spot — and those people will be given those instructions on where to meet, they have to wear their masks ... and they will go to their designated spots and have a very personal or intimate performance.

On top of that, our main mandate is to make dance accessible to everybody ... so we're working with Marcel Petit to do a film, and we're filming dance from all kinds of unusual angles. I think it's going to be a completely different feel and look from the performance you would see live.

Q: For you and your company, what does a “new normal” look like to you post-COVID-19?

A: Dancers historically have not had much personal space because we just share it all the time. It's part of our job ... there's sort of four levels of space: distant, which we're at right now. Social, which we can kind of almost get into that — social distancing, you're just outside of what would be considered normal. Once we get into personal space, that's prohibited right now. I don't know how long that will be ... I don't know how that's going to work with the dance community. And then as far as intimate space goes — touching and contact, improvisation and partner work — we are avoiding that completely unless people are cohabiting.

I don't personally think we should go back to normal. Things were seriously broken ... I think the new normal is going to be something that fluctuates and changes and needs to be more fluid in its adaptability ... for a long time it's going to have psychological repercussions on dancers. There's going to be a lot of fear because of the intimacy.

I think there's danger for sure. I hope that dancers are able to embrace technology in new ways. But there's something that only human-to-human contact has that's very special.

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Note to readers: We know the speed and volume of coronavirus-related news is overwhelming and a little frightening. To help with that, we have several reporters looking at different aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and are gathering all our stories, especially as they relate to life in Saskatoon and Saskatchewan, together on our website. All our coronavirus-related news can always be found here: thestarphoenix.com/tag/coronavirus.

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