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Norte Maar's "Fête de Danse" marks its return to the North Country with a bold mix of contemporary ballet, modern dance, and performance art — at the newly renovated Strand.

FREE
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DANCE

feast your eyes!

Norte Maar's "Fête de Danse" marks its return to the North Country with a bold mix of contemporary ballet, modern dance, and performance art — at the newly renovated Strand.

By Seth Thomas

Following a successful weekend showcasing visual artists at the Jay Invitational of Clay in the Adirondacks, the second half of Norte Maar's big return to the North Country continues with dance and performance art. "Fête de Danse," much like the Invitational, assembles creative minds from in and outside the region — all while incorporating different styles within the medium. This abrupt transition from one branch of the arts to another is nothing new for the group.

"As co-founders, Julia [Gleich] as a choreographer and I as a curator, we each brought our expertise to the organization," said Jason Andrew in an interview with the *Lake Champlain Weekly*. "But already as friends, we had found so many places of overlap in our interests and passion."

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Formed a decade ago in Rouses Point, Norte Maar advocates and fosters collaborations between art worlds. Dance had always been a major part of their mission. In the summer of 2004, they held the first "Fête de Danse," erecting a stage atop an ice rink at the Rouses Point Civic Center, where the dance concert became an ever-growing event for five years. On Friday and Saturday evening, August 1 and 2, "Fête de Danse" returns to the North Country — inaugurating dance performances for the general public at the newly renovated Strand Theater in downtown Plattsburgh.

Since its Rouses Point days, Norte Maar has moved to Bushwick, Brooklyn, and this year's "Fête" reflects that transition by bringing together a wide swath of talent from New York City's dance scene. "We can't wait for the audiences to experience Gleich Dances, which will offer contemporary ballet on pointe, the all-male dance troupe of MADBoots, and the highly edgy Rachel Cohen with her quirky and always unexpected creations," Andrew said.

Dance for Theater People and Theater for Dance People

While all of these groups are based in the city, Cohen's dance company, Racoco Productions, has a special spot on the bill as she is a Plattsburgh native. Since 2006, Cohen has worked various objects and materials into her performances. "I always liked working with props," she explained. "Then I started to get interested in textures and how they affected how we moved. Since then we've been looking for different ways to incorporate them."

The result is something she describes as theatrical storytelling. Cohen began in Plattsburgh as a ballerina and, although she feels she wasn't very good at it, she loved the way ballet crafted a narrative for the audience. In college, she learned that she preferred creating her own movement rather than trying to replicate the patterns of others. By creating something abstract, she feels she's engaging the audience in a different way than a rigidly structured story.

"Theater people think we do dance, and dance people think we do theater," she observed. "'Movement,' in some ways, is a better descriptor."

At the Strand, Racoco Productions will present "Paper Work," a collaboration between the dance company and artist Stephanie Beck. The giant paper rolls photographers use to create seamless blank backgrounds in photo shoots became the inspiration for the piece. "We like the idea of using a backdrop as the center of attention," Cohen explained. The dancers engage with the scenery, altering and destroying the landscape throughout the performance.

Perhaps what makes "Fête de Danse" so special is the way in which it invites the abstract with the technical. "People in general seem to be afraid of dance more than the other art forms," Cohen said. "With this program, it would be great if people saw that it encompasses many things."

The evening also includes contemporary ballet from Gleich Dances and the energetic, dynamic work of MADBoots, a company known for creating powerful movement by prominently displaying the male form and emphasizing athleticism. "MADBoots is definitely an exclusively male company," said co-founder Austin Diaz.

"Our work deals with masculine identity, so staying in that format is integral. Seeing the flesh and musculature of the body is important to us."

At the Strand, the company will perform "Blue," a piece co-founder Jonathan Campbell describes as a "sarcastic, somber, wild, and sentimental dance." The two founding members both came from conservatory training — Campbell graduated from Juilliard and Diaz from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts — but branched out on their own to explore the intersection of physical expression and art.

"It seems as if we both had an interest in highly physical movement and generating things that could elicit visceral responses," Campbell said.



Photo by Lucas Chilczuk

Being the Entertainment

Fête de Danse is returning to the area during a time of renewal for the Strand. In May, the theater officially merged with the North Country Cultural Center for the Arts, creating what Executive Director Jessica Dulle describes as a "campus of the arts" on Brinkerhoff Street, renamed the "Strand Center for the Arts." By year's end, the facility will have a weighted curtain installed — a two-and-a-half week process in itself — as well as a projector and surround-sound stereo system, transforming the space into an operational movie theater once again.

This will happen in time for the venue to host the Lake Champlain International Film Festival in November.

For now the Strand is delighted to fit shows in between its busy renovation schedule. "We're excited to be presenting an evening of contemporary dance as well as ballet and having the local connection with the North Country and an international dance group," said Dulle, adding that the opportunity to see such cutting-edge dance that doesn't require them to fly out of the area "is a great treat for Plattsburgh."

But it's possible that the greatest excitement is felt by those involved. "I grew up on Brinkerhoff Street, and I used to see movies at the Strand," said Cohen. "It's interesting being on the other side — to be the entertainment."

Jason Andrew says he was an early advocate and supporter of the renovations on Brinkerhoff Street. "We believe that art should be available everywhere and to everyone," he said. "While we love programming performances in alternative spaces, the Strand holds so much appeal as a kind of celebration of our past relationships in the North Country."

Now that Norte Maar has returned to upstate New York by way of their summer home in Jay, this could signal that more dance events will be coming to the area in the years ahead. If nothing else, this year's "Fête de Danse," as Andrew himself points out, "will certainly have better seats than the hockey rink!"

Tickets for "Fête de Danse" at the Strand Center for the Arts on Friday and Saturday, August 1-2, at 7:30 p.m., are \$25 for general admission and \$20 for members. For reservations or more information, please visit www.plattsburgharts.org or call (518) 563-1604.