

Anna Myer's 'Hoop Suite' merges dance with basketball


By **Karen Campbell** Globe Correspondent, June 8, 2012, 12:00 a.m.



"Hoop Suite" reinforces the perception of basketball courts as a place of sanctuary and unity, a person connected with the project said. ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

The performers pass, roll, bounce, and guard the orange spheres like Kevin Garnett in the lane. Athletic jostling melds into the smooth, weighted turns and lunges of modern dance, arms curling and angling into vivid semaphores.





Choreographer Anna Myer's rap opera fuses modern dance, basketball moves, and hip-hop. ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Choreographer Anna Myer is taking her latest project to the basketball court. "Hoop Suite," a new rap opera that fuses modern dance with basketball moves, hip-hop, rap, and spoken word, will be performed Saturday and again twice more this summer on basketball courts at public housing sites around Boston. This fall, it will travel to a more traditional setting, when World Music/CRASHarts presents the work at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

But just as notable as the venues for this ambitious piece are the collaborating artists. In addition to the classically trained company Anna Myer and Dancers, "Hoop Suite" involves young street dancers, poets, and rappers from some of Boston's toughest public housing developments.

"It's not just making art, but growing community," Myer says.

Billed as "creative exchange for social change," the work is the result of a partnership with the Youth Link division of the human services organization North American Family Institute.





Dancers Hemoch Spinola (left) of Lexington and Milly Flowers of Boston warm up before a rehearsal. ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

Youth Link director Jay Paris calls the basketball courts “the central artery” for public housing. “It’s where people meet — to blow off steam, to test themselves, to express joy and grief,” he says. He believes “Hoop Suite” can help reinforce the perception of basketball courts as places of sanctuary and unity, the connected circle of the hoop serving as a symbol of community and peace.

For Myer, “Hoop Suite” is deeply personal. “It’s a true collaboration about stepping out of your circle of comfort, pushing each other, helping each other, letting go,” she says. “People from all walks of life — different races, different ages, different backgrounds, different art forms — it shows how we’re all different yet all the same.”

“Hoop Suite” draws much of its tone and context from the original words of the young poets and rappers, who periodically take center stage to express thoughts on loss and anger, freedom and fate, change and growth. The movement of the piece reflects and elaborates on that sense of change, contributing its own emotional content.





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The music for “Hoop Suite” is an original contemporary score for string ensemble by Myer’s longtime collaborator, Jakov Jakoulov. It will be performed live by a string ensemble conducted by Susan Davenny Wyner. Jakoulov, a self-described “academic” modern composer, found the rap culture “terra incognita,” but was drawn to its intensity of emotion and message and the brutality of expression. “The goal was just to find a resonance of those two spheres and to make it work as a whole organic music fabric,” he says.

The resultant score is often stridently atonal, and for hip-hopper Milly Flowers, who recently turned 20, it has been a revelation.

“I sometimes break into tears. This is the first time I’ve ever danced to this type of music, and it’s so intense,” says Flowers, who grew up in Dorchester and is now homeless, bouncing among friends and family. “It’s a beautiful blend of different worlds. We all come to the table as experts of our own experience, and to be able to bend those lines and be flexible and respect each other is just beautiful.”





Anna Myer, director of "Hoop Suite." ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/ GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

“Hoop Suite” evolved from the success of Myer’s 2010 rap opera, “Street Talk, Suite Talk,” which also paired her company with rap and spoken-word artists. The partnership with Youth Link adds another dimension. Youth Link set up a teen center in an abandoned basement of Dorchester’s Franklin Field, which according to Paris was considered the most violent public housing complex in New England. “We started police-youth training, worked a lot on conflict resolution, homework help, job readiness,” he says. “We got some computers, and one thing led to another. Pretty soon we were able to keep kids in school and started getting kids scholarships to college.”

And Paris found that one of the most successful outlets for the young people was the arts. When a mutual acquaintance told him about Myer’s work in “Street Talk, Suite Talk,” it seemed like an ideal match. Out of a poetry workshop attended by about 30 teens, several strong poets emerged. Paris heard about talented rappers “trying to get on the straight and narrow,” as he puts it, at Bromley-Heath in Jamaica Plain. A dance competition at the Boys and Girls Club identified a cadre of skilled hip-hop dancers, who were integrated into the production. Myer recruited two young krumpers in Uphams Corner.

Myer is especially taken with the work of the krumpers. The street-dance style, which developed in the South Central neighborhood of Los Angeles, involves the whole body in explosive, aggressive moves to nonviolently express anger and frustration. Krumping, Myer says, is “very physical and passionate and beautiful. It really comes out of our culture right now.”

Rehearsals began in October, and Paris notes the peripheral benefits the teens have gained from that commitment to the work: responsibility, a strong work ethic, self-confidence. “Amazing things have happened,” he says. “They’ve become a community in

a very powerful way. When you do creative things and take chances with others, it's very strengthening.”

“It's also about finding your voice and legitimizing it, knowing that you have something to say that people want to hear,” he adds. “For many of these kids, it's a chance to talk about tough experiences, about what you dream and care about, and get some perspective. In those formative older teen years, [this] can help define your potential . . . the concept of going beyond the boundaries you thought you had. You can go for it and surprise yourself.”

The experience has also been transformative for the professional artists. Company member Karina Davis says “Hoop Suite” has helped the dancers stretch themselves as human beings. “It's great to grow as an artist, but to grow as a person is exceptional, and I think that's really happened for all of us, getting to know people we normally wouldn't come across in our day-to-day lives,” she says. “I'm not who I was when we started in October. It's been life-altering.”

Ultimately, “Hoop Suite” is as much about process as product — breaking down stereotypes, fostering an exchange of voices, building connections. “‘Hoop Suite’ became a place where kids could take their dreams out,” Paris says.

Myer and Paris see “Hoop Suite” as the first iteration of a larger initiative that takes the ideas of the project beyond Boston, involving young people from a wide range of backgrounds. Through a New England Foundation for the Arts touring grant, the piece will be performed in New Hampshire and Vermont, starting in the fall. The collaborators are also hoping to secure sponsorship for performances in New York. They're talking, too, about creating a play-like story arc for the piece and partnering with organizations in other cities to involve local street dancers, poets, and rappers in exploring the work's themes.

“The experience itself just keeps generating energy and new possibilities,” Paris says.

Pass the ball.

HOOP SUITE

At: Harambee Park, Franklin Field, Dorchester, June 9, 8 p.m. Boston Housing Authority
Corey Street Basketball Court, Charlestown, June 23, 8 p.m. Bromley-Heath, Jamaica
Plain, July 7, 8 p.m.

Tickets: Free. 617-513-9314, www.annamyerranddancers.org

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