



LIVING
Dance

Lean In: Kuntz and Company is back in action

Stories in dance

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Pam Kuntz, left, Alona Christman and Angela Sebastian rehearse for upcoming performances of "Lean In," which shows Oct. 20–23 at the FireHouse Arts and Events Center. The work by Kuntz and Company focuses on the stories the dancers' bodies tell. *(Photo courtesy of Linda Ost)*

By **AMY KEPFERLE**
Staff Reporter



Dancer and choreographer Pam Kuntz is well aware some people might show up to Kuntz and Company's latest performance piece, "Lean In," expecting to encounter a profound theme that will cause them to

experience a wide range of emotions.

“I might have a reputation for bringing people into the theater to cry,” Kuntz said, pointing to past projects she has spearheaded, such as 2011's “Prison Pieces,” which combined dance and music with interview excerpts from prisoners, prison workers and the child of imprisoned parents.

Since 2005, Kuntz and a rotating roster of professional dancers and community members have also worked together to tackle such heady topics as AIDS, aging, autism, living with disabilities, parenting, eating disorders and even a piece exploring people's personal history through the literal fabrics of their families — which was highlighted in 2017's “Threads.”

Kuntz said “Lean In,” which shows Oct. 20–23 at the FireHouse Arts and Events Center, is a departure from Kuntz and Company's typical fare, which often identifies a central theme and brings it to life by partnering with non-trained community members, who then share their life experiences surrounding that theme. Instead, “Lean In” has no dialogue and focuses on the dancers themselves and the stories contained within their bodies.



Brooke Evans, left, and Angela Sebastian rehearse while another “Lean In” cast member looks on. Loosely, the performance is about what it means to be a dancer at 25, 34, 45 or 52.

(Photo courtesy of Linda Ost)

“You won't have to confront death at this show,” Kuntz said, laughing. “When we get into the studio, we have followed many threads of hilarity. It's a lot of fun.”

The idea for “Lean In” came together in early spring, Kuntz said, when she finally felt confident enough in the health of the world to make a new piece. Kuntz and Company hadn't hosted a public performance since “Spokes” — which debuted in fall 2019, shortly before the pandemic shuttered performing arts venues around the world.

“I had a strong desire to work with dancers I'd worked with before, and dancers in different time periods in their life,” Kuntz said.

The eight women she asked to join her in the artistic journey had either performed with Kuntz and Company before, were past or present members of Bellingham Repertory Dance (BRD) or had taken part in Western Washington University dance concerts. The youngest, Naquoia Bautista, 25, was one of Kuntz's students at Western.

“Naquoia is a unique dancer,” Kuntz said. “She can do rehearsed choreography, but when you watch her in performance, it looks like she's figuring it out right then and there. There's a hair of danger.”

Kuntz has similar praise for all of the dancers who have been collaborating to make “Lean In” a standalone creation exploring what it means to show up and lean into possibility.

Alona Christman, a Kuntz and Company and BRD alumna, hadn't danced in a while, but Kuntz said you wouldn't know that from watching her.

“We freeze in our tracks seeing what she's capable of physically,” Kuntz said. “Her artistry in the physicality [of dance] seems to have grown for not doing — like an uncorked bottle of amazing champagne.”

Similarly, Kuntz said Brooke Evans “just lifts her arm and you sigh at her beauty,” and Ella Mahler is “an athletic beast” and it's “thrilling to go on a ride with her.” Angela Sebastian, a new faculty member at Western Washington University and the least-known dancer in the cast, stepped in and “it almost immediately felt like she'd been there all along,” Kuntz said.



Ella Mahler, left, and Pam Kuntz lift their limbs during a rehearsal. “When I lift my arm, there's a story in my arm and the qualities that come from that,” Kuntz said. “Those are the stories we're telling. You'll see the stories in our bones, in our person, not in our words.”

(Photo courtesy of Linda Ost)

Vanessa Daines, Caitlin Schafte and Kate Stevenson are also among the talented movement-makers who have been working behind the scenes to bring the almost-hourlong piece from rehearsal to stage.

Trust has been one of the most important parts of the process, Kuntz said, including when it came time to pick a title. They'd been brainstorming names for the piece, but nothing was sticking. They'd “grab” words from

sentences, such as “run faster” or “jump higher,” but it wasn't until someone said “lean in” that it clicked.

“Ella and Kate said that's something they actually say in life,” Kuntz said. “All of us said that's what we're doing in this process. We're leaning into ideas and showing up to be together in a creative process. We're leaning into having no idea what in the world is about to happen.”

Loosely, “Lean In” is also about what it means to be a dancer at 25, 26, 32, 34, 42, 44 or 52 — the latter of which is Kuntz's age, and the former the ages of the rest of the dancers. Who was older or younger wasn't a topic of conversation during rehearsals, Kuntz said. But how each dancer expressed themselves was.

“When I lift my arm, there's a story in my arm and the qualities that come from that,” Kuntz said. “Those are the stories we're telling. You'll see the stories in our bones, in our person, not in our words.”

“Lean In” shows at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 20–22, and 5 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 23 at the FireHouse Arts and Events Center, 1314 Harris Ave. Tickets are \$12–\$16. Info: kuntzandco.org.

Dancing is for everybody

Dance for PD: After a three-year break, Dance for People with Parkinson's Disease and Other Neurological Disorders will begin again at 1 p.m. Monday, Oct. 24 at the FireHouse Arts and Events Center. Pam Kuntz teaches the classes Mondays through Dec. 19. The fall session includes an Oct. 31 flamenco class led by Oscar Nieto, a professional flamenco artist and person with Parkinson's Disease. Attendees should arrive 15 minutes early; no pre-registration is necessary and the classes are free (donations accepted). Class structure follows that of a traditional modern dance class. Much of the class is seated work. Info: kuntzpam@gmail.com.

Documenting Grace: Pam Kuntz chose six films as part of a “Documenting Grace” series debuting with “Invitation to Dance” at 6 p.m. Nov. 13 at the FireHouse Arts and Events Center. The films cover everything from dancing while disabled to dancing back at dictatorship, 70 years of social art-making and more. Tickets are \$12. Info: firehouseperformingarts.com.

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