

Preview: Heinz Poll Summer Dance Series 6/25-26/10

Heinz Poll Summer Dance Series **Free and Cool Dance Fest**

Summer's here and it's time to start marking our calendar for **outdoor dance performances**. We'd scarcely begun reading the home page for the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival, <http://www.akrondancefestival.org>, when a familiar name caught our eye. Tom Ward, formerly DanceCleveland's executive director, was listed as Executive Director of the first company in the series, Doug Varone and Dancers.

We thought – who better to tell Clevelanders about the upcoming Varone concert? Although he was in Paris, finishing another job before starting with Varone, Ward answered some questions by email.

What have you been doing since you left DanceCleveland and what are you doing in Paris? Tom Ward:

Since leaving Cleveland, I've been affiliated with a number of dance and music artists, most notably Paul Taylor, Lar Lubovitch, and Mikhail Baryshnikov, with whom I am currently working in Paris. I also managed to find some time to earn my MBA in finance from the New York University Stern School of Business. It has been a great eight years.

I begin my post as Executive Director of Doug Varone and Dancers on July 5, so this first interview in my new post is actually happening before I begin.

Cleveland dance audiences have had numerous opportunities to see Varone's work since he started his company in 1986, but what should we tell those still unfamiliar with his work?

TW: The upcoming performances of Doug Varone and Dancers in Firestone Park on June 25 and 26 will be a fantastic summer treat for both avid dance fans as well as for those looking for something new and interesting to discover. Is there anything better than a great live performance in the open air, under the stars, amid the cool summer breeze?

Those unfamiliar with Doug Varone and Dancers have been missing out on a company that audiences in Akron and Cleveland have enjoyed repeatedly over the last 15 years. As you point out, the Repertory Project danced several Varone works over the years. But the Varone company itself has been featured on the DanceCleveland series in 1998, 2002 (during my tenure there), and most recently in 2008, and I can attest to the very strong reception that the company received, which speaks directly to why they return every few years.

We're longstanding admirers of Varone's work, but how would you describe what makes it worthwhile?

TW: I find Varone a compelling artist because, from my point of view, his work is what choreography ought to be – a composition of movement that is somehow more than just the movement. In his dances, Doug manages to create a unique world of circumstance, aspiration, and emotion that takes me away – I lose track of my presence in a theater and am whisked away, however briefly, to an imaginative place. Some of these worlds may be foreign to me and some may be very familiar. What they all share, though, is a point-of-view that somehow resonates with me (optimism? aspiration?), and I guess that is what critics and scholars mean when they cite the “humanism” of his work.

Another way that I think Varone is distinguished as a choreographer is in his versatility. He works in abstraction as well as in narrative form, or, most often, some mixture of the two. He masterfully creates such grand choreographic visions across the large canvas of the stage in operatic proportion, but is equally striking when he works in miniature, evoking the aching poignancy of the simplest of human interactions (tenderness, conflict) through gesture, and sometimes in relative silence and stillness. I find each of his dances to be very different from his others, but there is a certain quality—which I'm not quite sure how to name—that for me, marks it, unmistakably, as a Varone work.

(We were full of niggling questions about the repertoire – *Castles* (2004) set to Sergei Prokofiev’s *Waltz Suite, Opus 110, Lux* (2006) set to a Philip Glass composition, and a “sneak peek” of the unfinished *Chapters From a Broken Novel*, but Ward summed it up in a paragraph.)

TW: Rather than describing or de-coding the program that is to be performed in Firestone Park, I’d rather encourage your readers to jump in for the adventure of discovery. What I can say is that both *Castles* and *Lux* are very successful dances that have received plenty of critical and popular acclaim. And having seen most of the 22 chapters in *Chapters From a Broken Novel*, I can say that I expect it to be equally wonderful. Its score by David Van Tiegham has a very dynamic, cinematic quality to it. I am very excited about *Chapters*, and look forward to its premiere in Fairfield Connecticut this fall.

Ward had made a deeply felt case for the Varone concert. We phoned Jane Startzman, founding Festival Director of the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival to wrap up other loose ends.

We hear the Varone company is holding their 11th annual Summer Workshop at Akron University.

Jane Startzman: The Varone workshop is one of the most exciting things we’ve had happen in Akron for a long time. It’s a month-long residency. The University has 60 students from all over taking part. In addition to classes for the students, they’ve been live-streaming public events throughout the month, so it’s quite exciting for dance students and for the general public, learning how dances are created, how the Varone company works, and being able to interface with a world-renowned company.

This interview will come out on 6/23/10 and on that evening readers can catch the last of the live-stream public events, an open rehearsal showing of *Chapters*. Go to <http://learn.uakron.edu/dds/events/dtaa/> or <http://dougvaroneanddancers.org>, click on the “summer workshop,” and click on “events.”)

JS: Right. Then the Varone company finishes up their month with their concert, actually opening the HPSDF. Usually we don’t begin the Festival until the middle of July but this year we decided to open with the Varone performances on July 25 and 26, which are FREE.

So the Varone concerts are only the first of several free concerts in the Festival?

JS: Right. Then we’ll have 3 more companies on 3 consecutive weekends beginning with Verb Ballets at Hardesty Park on July 23 & 24, Ground Works Dance Theater on 7/30 & 31 at Glendale Cemetery, which is quite a unique venue, and Neos Dance Theatre 8/6 & 7 at Goodyear Metro Park. (Complete info at akrondancefestival.org.)

Three very good Northeast Ohio companies. I understand they’re doing some Heinz Poll repertoire.

JS: Of course, companies don’t have to do Heinz’ work, but this year Verb will be presenting Heinz Poll’s creation *Wings and Aires* and Neos will be presenting his *Summer Night* and excerpts from *Eight by Benny Goodman*, so that’s kind of fun. Another exciting thing, each of the companies will be presenting new work, at least one premiere.

Hopefully we’ll be previewing these concerts in greater detail when the time comes. The HPSDF was created to honor Poll’s legacy. How would you describe that legacy?

JS: There are different aspects to Heinz’ legacy. There was really no professional dance in Akron, Ohio before Heinz came and created Ohio Ballet, a jewel of a small company that performed all over the country.

The other part of his legacy connects with the city of Akron and the University, and that is Heinz’ creation of what he called “Summer Festival,” which we’ve done for 37 years now, presenting professional concert dance for free in neighborhood parks. It’s a crazy idea because of course somebody’s got to pay for it, but he really wanted to bring it to the masses for free, a gift of the performing arts to the community, and he did it at a time when nobody else was doing that.

After Heinz’ death in April, 2006 the city of Akron decided to continue that vision, the Summer Festival, and to expand it — which really says a lot.

Now we have all kinds of relationships going on. There's a teen summer camp with a dance component and they interface with the dance that's going on, so part of his legacy, which was to put Akron on the map as a destination for dance, is continuing and, I think, growing.

Just an aside, you were in Poll's Ohio Ballet for 20 years. You danced in some of those early Summer Festival performances, didn't you?

JS: I danced in the very first one. It happened at Cascade Plaza and because we didn't have very much money at all, the stage was built with wood borrowed from one of the stagehands, whose father owned a lumber company.

You didn't always have the theater-quality tech in those early days.

JS: Yes, and that's another part of the legacy. Everyone in the Festival, from our lighting designer and sound technician to people on our crew, goes way, way back to the very beginnings. They worked with Tom Skelton. We're very fortunate to have these people who know how to present dance in the outdoor festival setting. They know how to light dance outdoors. And of course you're dealing with weather – what to do when the floor is moist with dew – all these things they know perfectly how to handle. If they didn't, we really couldn't present this.

We've seen outdoor dance concerts in other cities including New York, San Francisco, and Seattle, and they're not always as well run as in Northeast Ohio. Right down to the parking and traffic control at the end of the concert, everything is really smooth in Akron.

JS: I don't think there's much that could happen that would be a surprise for them. They know how to handle it.

As part of the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Series, Doug Varone & Dancers will appear at Firestone Park on Fri 6/25 & Sat 6/26, <http://www.akrondancefestival.org>. And, dear readers, Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival isn't the only presenter of outdoor dance concerts. Go to <http://www.CainPark.com> for information about GroundWorks beginning 7/16 & 17 followed by Neos, Inlet Dance Theatre, and Verb. Yes, Verb will perform FREE at Tremont's Lincoln Park 8/20 & 21. Go to <http://www.OhioDance.org>. And don't forget Joffrey Ballet at Blossom Music Center with the Cleveland Orchestra 9/4 & 5. <http://www.dancecleveland.org>.

From Cool Cleveland contributors Elsa Johnson and Victor Lucas. Elsa and Vic are both longtime Clevelanders. Elsa is a landscape designer. She studied ballet as an avocation for 2 decades. Vic has been a dancer and dance teacher for most of his working life, performing in a number of dance companies in NYC and Cleveland. They write about dance as a way to learn more and keep in touch with the dance community. E-mail them at vicnelaATearthlink.net.

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This entry was posted on Monday, June 21st, 2010 at 6:31 pm and is filed under [Commentary](#), [Dance](#), [Elsa Johnson & Victor Lucas](#), [News](#), [Preview](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.