

Saskatoon Star Phoenix

Local Arts

Creative Isolation: Miki Mappin, Kyle Syverson, and dancing out in the cold

Mappin and Syverson, who run KSAMB Dance Company, had to reschedule their upcoming outdoor dance show because of the frigid weather.

Author of the article:

Matt Olson

Publishing date:

Feb 11, 2021 • 3 days ago • 6 minute read



KSAMB Dance Company co-directors Kyle Syverson, left, and Miki Mappin were going to have their outdoor show NUIT DE COULEURS on Feb. 5th, but due to cold weather moved it to Feb. 12. PHOTO BY MATT SMITH /Saskatoon StarPhoenix

Article content

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 Miki Mappin and Kyle Syverson, the co-directors of KSAMB Dance Company in Saskatoon.

Started in 2009, KSAMB was already putting on a wide variety of outdoor, site-specific shows before the pandemic started forcing venues to close. With a focus on improvisational dancing and welcoming to different ages and levels of experience, Mappin and Syverson have been running regular outdoor events — even into the frigid Saskatchewan winter.

Their upcoming show, titled Nuit De Couleurs, was rescheduled to Feb. 12 after extreme cold weather pushed the performance back a week. At the time of writing, Mappin and Syverson were considering the possibility of rescheduling once again.

The StarPhoenix spoke to both co-directors about continuing their dance through the pandemic.

Q: What does your life look like right now, because of COVID-19?

Syverson: It basically means, since mid-November, we are dancing pretty much exclusively outside. We've been dancing outside all the way through since March ... but since November, since restrictions tightened up, everything is outdoors — ballet is a little tricky outside. It also means, as a result of COVID, we have a pretty cohesive and motivated group for performance. And that's basically been a spinoff of COVID since we've been practising intensively outside. It's really gelled our group.

Mappin: Unlike most people that I meet, I have actually had an active social life, and as an artist a very creative and busy time in my life. All the organizing work involved in taking these events outdoors has taken quite a bit of time ... the social life has been seldom closer than four metres from other people. Kyle and I share a house, so we're a household, but otherwise all the people we work with we either contact through the internet ... but otherwise we meet for two community dance events every week outdoors.

Q: You did outdoor dancing before COVID ever hit . What was the inspiration behind that?

Mappin: I would say there's two main sides to that. One is a kind of personal preference, a predilection. Both of us love the outdoors. But the other side is kind of economic. Studio space is really expensive. And we have done that in the past ... but we've found for our own work, often we'll rehearse outdoors. Just because it's nice out, we have these beautiful public spaces we can use, the Saskatoon parks and the riverbank. And then just doing that we begin to find the outdoor spaces themselves are so suggestive.

The city hall square is like that. We'd begun using (it) a year and a half ago, at least, for our Friday night improv groups. So this is not something new — but at first it was not in the winter, we would do it in the summer months ... and taking on challenges like Back Alley Antics, but even more so for Nuit Blanche, as a group, we've really taken on challenges of working in the street, working in urban environments.

Q: What kind of challenges go into preparing a show taking place in a frigid Saskatchewan winter?

Syverson: As far as our bodies go, it's the same but different. You need to take care of your body and listen to your body ... in improvisational dance there's often slow time on the floor to warm up, but that doesn't work so well when it's anything below

zero. So there's the necessity to keep moving. But once you sort of adjust your mindset and your body set to it, it really is not a problem. You sort of adapt and it becomes relative as you go ... often it's been below -10, and we're not thinking about the cold, we're thinking about how we're acting together, and the art and the physicality of it.

Mappin: We have a lot of issues with the technical aspect that are really coming to the fore right now ... the problems are huge with (cold temperatures).

Q: Tell me about this upcoming show. How is it going to be different?

Syverson: It feels like sort of a culmination. Friday nights, we have been performing to quite small audiences since August. We practise with our group, it's dance improvisation so we practise awareness skills and working together and physical skills and just increasing our awareness of each other, and how to make art together in the moment ... we called that Wild Card Movement ... Nuit Blanche was going to have a big event over New Year's. We applied to that, and they did not accept it.

Mappin: We basically took that proposal and presented it to the city when they opened up a series of grants to take art outdoors this winter.

Syverson: So instead of Nuit Blanche, we were Nuit De Couleurs. So it's basically the practice we've been working on and honing, but magnified and mystified by this amazing light setup that is being designed. The lighting designer will actually improvise with our movers.

Mappin: This is an extension of our improvisation practice. We have been doing this kind of improvising where we take what we're learning within our group of movers, our dancers, and try to work with someone from a different discipline ... to try to work this way with J.J. Neufeld, the lighting designer for this show.

Q: Why make a point of putting this much effort into continuing through the pandemic?

Syverson: We have to dance. There's like, this compulsion to dance. So when studios are basically all closed, what else are you going to do? I can dance in my house with Miki, but bit by bit, this thing starts taking more shape and momentum. Even in the fall, we applied for a grant to dance outside ... and we realized no, the timing was wrong, so we shifted it into the winter months. And we thought "this is crazy" ... we didn't end up getting the grant, but as it turned out, the momentum that was gathered through the fall, and the cohesion and the excitement of our group, has really fuelled us. So the effort of dancing outside is kind of equal to what it would be for organizing a studio.

Mappin: And it has its own rewards. My two-word reply was going to be, it's awesome. We have people who are from Saskatchewan who say, "I never knew how much fun winter could be." We have one woman from Iran who had been here for around two years, and she's just loving every minute of it. It's quite exciting.

KSAMB Dance Company's show Nuit De Couleurs will take place on Friday, Feb. 12, at City Hall Square from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., but the date is subject to change due to extreme cold conditions.

maolson@postmedia.com