The Carletonian

Spring 2018 Issue 6 (May 11, 2018)

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Carleton Participates in Site-Specific Artistic Work

May 16, 2018

By Amelia Broman '21, Features & Arts Editor

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From May 3 to May 6, a group of over 250 performers, including Carleton students, St. Olaf students and Northfield residents, brought to life a site-specific artistic work entitled The Northfield Experience. The project, under the direction of award-winning choreographer Stephan Koplowitz, has been in the works for two years. Members of Semaphore and other Carleton dance groups participated along with the Carleton choir, while CAMS students and several Carleton faculty and staff produced artwork that was featured in the production.

The project was born in 2015 when Janice Roberts, a dance professor at St. Olaf College, invited Koplowitz to come to Northfield to create a project involving collaboration between St. Olaf and Carleton. "I was really struck by the beauty and the scale of Northfield and thought that Northfield would be a great place to stage performances, because that's the town—that's what Carleton and St. Olaf collaborate on every day," said Koplowitz. "I sort of came up with the whole concept right then and there."

Koplowitz specializes in site-specific art, or artwork whose concept draws heavily on the space in which it exists. He chose a range of sites in Northfield, both on and off the beaten path, in which to stage the production. Audience members traveled by bus and by foot between sites such as the Northfield public library, the Northfield Arts Guild Theater, the Grand Event Center, the Northfield depot, the law office, the bank and the cemetery. The Northfield Experience was funded by a variety of sources, including grants from the Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The six performances of The Northfield Experience were attended by a total of almost 850 people, said Koplowitz, with almost all of the performances selling out. Carleton and St. Olaf students could attend for free on Thursday night. Along with students and Northfield residents, alumni and Twin Cities residents also attended the show. Koplowitz said that many Northfield residents thanked him for putting on the production. "I was very gratified by the response," he said.

Carleton dancers performed a unique site-specific routine at the Northfield library. In one section of the routine, the dancers' movement was entirely contained within the large windows on the library's first floor. "I think it was just really cool to get to dance in a place that you never thought you would, like the library, and especially just in the window," said senior Semaphore member Erin Arntson. "It was weirdly taxing on our bodies because you moved in such a different way that you hadn't really before to stay confined in that window."

The group of seventeen dancers who performed in the library included eight Semaphore members and nine others who had auditioned to be part of the performance in the fall. Senior Lydia Symchych was one of those who auditioned. "I was glad I got to dance with Semaphore, because I'm in a couple different dance groups and dance spheres at Carleton," she said. "It was really cool for me to have a little bit of that experience working with the company."

Working with Koplowitz on a site-specific piece was a novel experience for the dancers.

"He does a different type of work than we'd ever experienced before in Semaphore," said Arntson. "It just kind of opened my mind to what kind of stuff you can do with dance."

Carleton Performing Activities Coordinator Holly Streekstra is a visual artist in addition to her position at Carleton. Along with Visiting Assistant Professor of Music Andrea Mazzariello, she designed the work featured at the law office downtown. "That is a pretty interesting site," said Streekstra. "It was built in 1910 on a very odd piece of property, like a pie-shaped lot, right on the river by Bridge Square." She and Mazzariello researched the history of the site stretching

from the pre-colonial era to the present and used this to create a layered audio recording that audience members listened to upon visiting the law office. “The whole intention was really to change your awareness of the space, to tap into your perception,” said Streekstra. “When you walked into the space, your perception of the space was different than when you left.” Streekstra said she enjoyed participating in The Northfield Experience. “It was fun, and it was rewarding, and it was also a little mysterious, because we were one part of this bigger art machine,” she said.

Participation in The Northfield Experience did present a challenge for some Carleton students, especially choir members who were simultaneously preparing for their own spring concert. “It was a lot. We had to drop a couple pieces from our spring concert,” said senior choir member Annmarie Delfino. Some students also struggled to become comfortable with the fact that the performance’s finale took place in a cemetery. “We were always worried that there were going to be people there who actually were there to visit their loved ones,” said senior choir member Laudie Porter. “That was always on my mind.”

When it comes to one of the project’s original goals––to forge collaboration between Carleton and St. Olaf––Carleton participants said that they saw The Northfield Experience as a foundation but wished they could have spent more time working with St. Olaf students. “We only had one rehearsal together before the actual performances,” said Delfino. “So there wasn’t really a lot of opportunity for connection or for music-making together.” Porter notes that, “At Carleton we just kind of felt like we were such a small choir in comparison to the St. Olaf choirs.” Still, she adds, “It was good to collaborate with St. Olaf, and that’s something that we’d all like to do more often.”

Carleton Choir Director Matthew Olson is himself a graduate of St. Olaf. As a student there, “I felt like a lot of us always wished that there was more interaction, in the arts in particular, between campuses,” said Olson. “As soon as students at Carleton found out I was an alumnus of St. Olaf, they mentioned how great it would be to make music together or to collaborate.” He described The Northfield Experience as a “first chance” to start working towards this. “One of the conductors that we worked with from St. Olaf has already breached the idea of future collaborations with some of our singers, which I think we would welcome eagerly,” Olson added.

When it came to the dance aspect of the project, the Carleton and St. Olaf dancers had to remain largely separate due to logistical challenges. “I would have loved to dance more with Olaf folk,” said Symchych. “I’ve talked to a couple senior Olaf dancers, and specifically they want the younger people to really keep trying to push a connection even if it is outside of our own dance projects.”

“I have a feeling that it will open a door,” added Arntson. “The dancers or the dance departments need to keep putting energy into it, because I think there’s momentum.”

The Northfield Experience does not end here. Koplowitz and others will spend the next few months editing the extensive footage of the performances, which will then be made available to the city and the colleges. There is talk about showing it as part of a film festival in Northfield next year. “The Northfield Experience through video will have another life,” said Koplowitz.

“I loved working with everyone,” said Koplowitz about the experience of collaborating with the colleges and the Northfield community. “The city itself really opened up their doors and their hearts. It was really inspiring.”

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