

‘Trolley Dances’: Moving displays of talent and energy

By **Marcia Manna**

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Dancers use their bodies to create a relationship with space.

And that relationship is never more precarious than in “Trolley Dances,” the annual, site-specific performances that are staged in stairwells, rooftops, fountains, balconies and other stops along the San Diego Trolley line.

This year, the “Trolley Dances” tour will travel from downtown to Balboa Park by way of a Rapid Express bus to celebrate the centennial of the Panama-California Exposition.

Six notable choreographers have created new works that will be presented over the next two weekends — Saturday and Sunday and Oct. 3-4 — including Stephan Koplowitz, Mark Haim, Liv Isaacs-Nollet, Anne Gehman, Suzanne Forbes-Vierling and Jean Isaacs, artistic director of San Diego Dance Theater.

“Trolley Dances” 2015: Catch the Rapid

When: Two weekends: Saturday and Sunday and Oct. 3-4. Tours leave every 45 minutes between 10 a.m. and 1:45 p.m. daily.

Where: Tours start at the County Administration Building, 1600 Pacific Highway, downtown

Tickets: \$35 general admission; \$25 seniors; \$15 students and military

Phone: (619) 225-1803

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The old proverb about necessity being the mother of invention applies to Isaacs, who founded “Trolley Dances” in 1999. The high cost of renting a theater thwarted her efforts to stage her work, so she partnered with the Metropolitan Transit System to establish a mutually beneficial arrangement that spotlights both her San Diego Dance Theater company and public transportation.

The event has grown exponentially, with presentations in three other California cities and tours that went from selling hundreds to thousands of tickets.

Every dance tells a story, and because it plays out in an unconventional setting, the choreographers and dancers are subject to unexpected plot twists.



Performers practice their "Trolley Dances" choreographed presentation in Balboa Park's Spanish Village, led by dancer and choreographer Mark Haim. "Trolley Dances" is held all over the region over two weekends, starting this weekend. *Nancee E. Lewis*

Isaacs and her dancers can remember plenty of tales over the event's history.

Uncooperative weather.

Getting locked out of a designated space on performance day.

Spectators who stroll into the middle of a finely tuned and well-rehearsed dance performance.

"It can have you tearing your hair out," said Isaacs, laughing.

"Once a homeless woman was drying out the pages of a newspaper so she could read it, right where we were going to perform. The way she did it was so precise, we could have used it in the dance."

Sometimes Isaacs introduces a segment of a work in "Trolley Dances" and then stages a longer version of the dance in a conventional setting.

A somber, swelling piece of music titled "Become Ocean" by John Luther Adams inspired her to choreograph a dance that reflects the impact of global warming on our waters. It will be staged in its entirety in January at the Mandell Weiss Theatre, but a shorter version will be featured at "Trolley Dances" in Balboa Park.

"It's a teaser," Isaacs said. "I wanted to create sequential movement that is oceanic."

One of the interesting parts of site-specific art is that, like a flower that blooms in the cracks of a sidewalk, it can change our perceptions of a common location.

Mark Haim — his internationally renowned “This Land Is Your Land” was a sold-out show here in April — choreographed a dance of lyrical duets for “Trolley Dances.”

“I think because we don’t see so much of dance in our culture, when you do see it, it becomes totally indelible to a site,” Haim said.

“We forget that dancers are so virtuosic and unusual. And the human body is so different from buildings that are stationary and geometric; it’s contrasting in a way that brings out our flesh and bones and muscles. The site becomes a stage, and you never forget that you saw a dance there.”

Choreographer Stephan Koplowitz, dean of the Sharon Disney Lund School of Dance at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, specializes in site-specific multimedia performance.

“Once I select my site, I treat it like that’s my script, like I was a movie director,” said Koplowitz, who will present his “Trolley Dances” work in a fountain that he admired for its “streamlined elegance.”

“The site can speak to me from a purely architectural design perspective, or it can speak to me from its history.”

Koplowitz embraces leaving the potential outcome of his work to chance.

“It’s what I signed up for,” he said. “Any artist who wants to do this can’t have the mindset of being controlling. Anything can happen.”