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Bessies Are Back After a Hiatus, Primed for a Major Makeover

By GIA KOURLAS

Last year the Bessies, otherwise known as the New York Dance and Performance Awards, took a breather. The hiatus was a temporary solution to a bigger problem: how to make the awards meaningful again.

Established in 1983 by David R. White and originally produced by Dance Theater Workshop, the Bessies, named after the dance educator and mentor Bessie Schonberg, were geared mainly toward experimental, noncommercial work and were in dire need of a makeover. After two of the awards' main proponents, Mr. White and Laurie Uprichard, executive director of Danspace, left New York, the committee handing out the Bessies lost steam. The financial crisis didn't help. And the voting process was perplexing to outsiders. What used to be a major event on the dance calendar had fizzled out.

When the choreographer Reggie Wilson had to decide between joining a new steering committee consisting mainly of producers and dance artists to address the situation and being eligible for an award, he chose the committee.

"It shouldn't be that way," he said. "It should be so valuable and important to get a Bessie that I would do anything for it."

Now the Bessies are in the midst of an overhaul that, while not yet complete, may restore their luster. Lucy Sexton, a performer, director, choreographer and co-founder of the dance and performance duo Dancenoise, is now their producer. Dance/NYC, an arts service and advocacy organization, will administer the awards, which signifies an important shift. In recent years Dance Theater Workshop, Danspace Project and the Joyce Theater have produced them, which struck many as a conflict of interest because they could present potential winners on their stages. (As a matter of disclosure, I served on the committee from 1996 to 2006.)

Major changes will be evident next year when Ms. Sexton's revisions are put into play. They include broadening the field to consider more types of dance (like ballet, Indian classical dance and Broadway); a departure from general categories to specific ones; and a new structure for nominating and voting.

In the meantime she has planned a ceremony to cover two seasons (2008-9 and 2009-10) next month at Symphony Space. Six productions will be honored from each year, along with six performers. Isaac Mizrahi, who has designed costumes for choreographers like Mark Morris and Twyla Tharp, will host the free event, and presenters will include the former City Ballet dancer Jock Soto; Ballet Hispanico's founder, Tina Ramirez; and the choreographer Yvonne Rainer.

The revamping resonates with another member of the steering committee, the choreographer Elizabeth Streb. "I want to have the entire United States care about this field," Ms. Streb said. "The award ceremonies have to reach another set of ears and eyes."

Ms. Sexton is on the same page. "I'm committed to the idea that you should always take the time to acknowledge someone's work," she said. "Dance is so ephemeral, and performances happen in such a short period of time — someone's at Performance Space 122 for five nights, and that might be the only show they do for two years. If you don't make it to any of those five nights, how does it exist?"

A passionate advocate of the awards — she won a Bessie in 1989 — Ms. Sexton is overseeing the steering committee and has held several community meetings to test out her ideas.

"I'm psycho," she said, laughing. "I like the challenge of it, and I like grass-roots organizing, and that's what the job is: it's getting people to invest and have ownership of it."

Ms. Sexton's plans make those who would prefer that the Bessies remain largely focused on downtown dance somewhat hesitant. Ishmael Houston-Jones, a member of the standing Bessie committee, said he was torn. "I think the effectiveness is diluted if it gets too broad," he said.

After the awards were put on hiatus, Mr. Houston-Jones created his own list of recipients called My Messies, which he posted online. He may do so again.

"There's something really valuable in recognizing experimentation and exploration," he said.

But it is not Ms. Sexton's aim to sacrifice experimentation or a rigorous selection process by considering other forms of dance. Rather, she said, she is more intent on having the awards recognize the dance world's breadth.

Next year nominations will be made public. The new categories will include those for a work that stretches the boundaries of a traditional form; outstanding production in a site under 400 seats and one in a site over that number; emerging choreographer; lifetime achievement; young dancer (under 30); work not made in New York; and the tentatively named wild-card award, for a production not easily categorized as dance.

Subcommittees are also part of Ms. Sexton's master plan, in which experts will be charged with looking at a specific area of dance and coming up with a list of finalists, with a winner chosen after discussion among all the committee members.

"Not everybody can see everything," she said. "But there is a real value to getting in a room and talking about work."

Ms. Sexton is also adding two juried awards. One involves the creation of a Bessie membership, which she likens to an academy. Members from the dance world will pay a \$10 annual fee and be eligible to vote for one of three shows nominated by the entire Bessie committee.

The winner of the other juried award will be chosen by three prominent artists and three dance presenters and granted two months of rehearsal and development time at Symphony Space, as well as a season at the theater and at two others elsewhere in the United States.

"In my dream of dreams, this will one day be a commissioned award," Ms. Sexton said, referring to funds to create a dance. "That particular nature of an award does everything I want it to accomplish in terms of giving more value and more support to artists. And it can be done."

But for Ms. Sexton, awards are not only a way to honor artists, but also a reason to gather. In other words, she likes a good party.

"I think if there is going to be any cross-pollination and people talking and dancing with each other, that happens at the party afterward," she said. "No matter how informal it is — even if we just go to an Irish bar down the block, we will do it because the party is a big part of the ritual."

FOR MORE ON THE BESSIE AWARDS, [CLICK HERE](#).

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