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## **Stilts Crazy: Island Readies for Creative Free for All**

By KATE BRANNEN

When the drum circle begins at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, people will wander up Circuit avenue, being drawn to Union Chapel like children to the pied piper. With the crowd gathers inside the inner sanctum of the chapel, the Built on Stilts dance festival, now in its eleventh year, will get under way. What began in 1997 as a one-night concert, Built on Stilts has grown into a week-long extravaganza, eight nights of free performances, featuring 60-plus groups doing everything from modern dance to hip hop to improvisational comedy.

“People just come,” said Abby Bender, Built on Stilts co-founder, executive director, costume-maker, dancer and choreographer. “It’s magic.”

The Built on Stilts nerve center and Ms. Bender’s office is her front porch. With the window boxes overflowing with red flowers, weeds growing up in between the stairs and a garden of Black-eyed Susans and bright purple flowers out front, the porch seems like the perfect home and birthplace for the unwieldy and bursting-at-the-seams festival. It is welcoming, casual, cluttered and infused with Vineyard charm. It was there that Ms. Bender and Built on Stilts co-creator, Anna Luckey, brainstormed a location for their newly conceived dance concert. Looking across the street at the green doors and gray shingles of the chapel, they had an aha moment.

Built on Stilts found its home there and it’s difficult to imagine it anywhere else other than the honky tonk, friendly and raucous environment of Oak Bluffs.

More than a decade later, Ms. Bender is now alone at the helm of Built on Stilts and the responsibility is huge. Managing rehearsal and tech times for 60 groups, half of whom are coming from off-Island, is only part of her job. She also has her own piece to think about, costumes to sew, parents to placate, a choreography workshop to run, all the while saving enough energy to perform as a dancer.

Sitting on a porch rocking chair, taking calls on her cell phone, answering neighbors’ questions and welcoming people who wander by to wish her good luck, she relies on her good humor to make it all seem easy.

“There are lots of eleven-hour days,” she said, resting her feet in red Crocs on the porch railing. Inside on her kitchen table is a chicken costume and super hero panties, still out from the sewing party the night before.

For the past 11 years the festival has been about growth, she said. This year, it has expanded to eight days, and Ms. Bender said she thinks it might have reached maximum capacity.

“Eight days is a lot,” she said. “I don’t know that the town or I can stomach much more.”

She said that the original grassroots nature of it is still there, but the festival has grown so big that she needs a lot of help to pull it off.

“I’d like an office, an assistant, an advertising budget,” she said, laughing.

She said 90 per cent of the money needed to make it happen comes from donations at the door. T-shirts are also for sale and this year, Ms. Bender hired a professional to make DVDs of the shows, which will be available to buy at the door.

“There’s such a sense of pride that I feel,” she said, describing herself as the event’s glue, but saying the performers bring the crowds. “It’s a real cooperative effort.”

Looking down from the porch, Ms. Bender spotted a lost-looking soul.

“Hey, are you looking for us?” she called. It turned out the young man was from the improv comedy group Imp and he came by to drop off his CD for the show. Ms. Bender put it in the floral, metal wastebasket that serves as the drop-off for performers’ music.

There is a method to the madness, and Ms. Bender, who runs a dance company and theatre space in New York during the year, coordinates it while squeezing in time to rehearse.

On Tuesday afternoon, days before opening night, the dancers in Laura Sargent Hall’s piece rehearsed. They wore long pink sleeves that resembled wings. Like giant flamingos, they strutted and flapped their wings.

“You have three full eights to do your preening,” instructed Ms. Sargent Hall, whom Ms. Bender described as her Jill of all trades, lending a helping hand wherever needed. Along with Ms. Bender, she’s running Stiltshop and Advancesshop, choreography workshops for children.

“All right guys,” shouted Ms. Bender when Ms. Sargent Hall’s rehearsal was over. “Let’s get suited up. I want to run mine and see what the heck happens.”

Her piece, which involves a chicken, a spider and a bit of espionage, is like Raggedy Anne meets Zoro meets Charlie’s Angels. It is the invention of an active, whimsical, somewhat twisted imagination.

“It’s definitely the most bizarre piece I’ve made for Built on Stilts,” said Ms. Bender, but added. “It’s kid-friendly.”

After they rehearse, Ms. Bender asked jokingly, “Did you get the deep meaning of the piece?”

In addition to modern dance, the festival will feature theatre, slam poetry, live music and

comedy, creating an eclectic smorgasbord of entertainment.

It will be the last Built on Stilts for hip hop choreographer Kelly Peters, who closed his Vineyard dance studio in October 2005. Since then he has been commuting from New York to Boston to the Cape, creating a hectic schedule that he said could not be sustained.

“I’m very sad about this being the last year,” he said.

He teaches at Dean College in Boston and at a number of top dance schools in New York city, including Alvin Ailey, Broadway Dance Center and Steps on Broadway. He also works for Scene Interactive, a company which provides workshops and tools to emerging artists. He can also be seen this fall on ESPN’s First Take where he’ll be critiquing football players’ touchdown celebrations. In addition to these many projects, he’s making a commercial for the release of his instructional DVD, which he said should air in November before the holiday season.

For his final piece Mr. Peters is tapping both old and new talent for what he calls a reunion piece. Some of his dancers that performed as kids in the first Built On Stilts will be returning to the stage. Over the years, some of them have come back with their own choreography.

“My dancers have grown so much,” he said. “I’m really excited for the audience to see that.”

His group will perform on August 19, 21 and 22. They can also be seen at the Agricultural Fair on August 16 and 19.

Ms. Bender described Mr. Peters as the festival’s big guns, because of the large audience his group attracts. She said he has been a real asset to the Island and she is sad to see him go.

But each year new performers and artists get involved. Over half of this year’s performances will be by guest artists.

The moments for reflection are rare, but when the festival is in full swing, Ms. Bender loves to step back, watch and think to herself, this is fantastic.