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Coming right up, the mysteries of Burrows and Fargion



Performance artists Jonathan Burrows (left) and Matteo Fargion bring a retrospective of their work to Neighborhood House. (Motion Bank)



GALLERY: Performance artists Jonathan Burrows (left) and Matteo... (Motion Bank)

By [A.D. Amorosi](#), [For The Inquirer](#)

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When *Facing Front*, a retrospective of work by the team of Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, opens Friday at Neighborhood House, audiences might not be sure what they're seeing.

Is it movement theater? Dance/music performance art? Something else, louche yet formal?

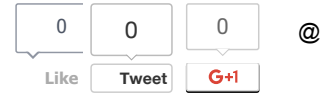
Fargion, a composer, often uses no music while moving throughout a piece. Burrows, a choreographer, hums and sings while not moving much at all.

"We're at the tentative start of a new project," Burrows says, "and I'm painfully reminded how difficult and un-useful it is to try and delineate what you do. Because as soon as you think you know what it is, it becomes only a poor representation of yourself. We often talk about working with empty hands, and I suppose that's what it means, that you don't take hold too strong."

Fargion cites examples of their art - which the Guardian has called both perfectly clear and utterly brain-scrambling - to explain, sort of, their method. "Often one of us will start the next piece without even telling the other, as in the case of *Cheap Lecture*, where Jonathan wrote most of the text before sending it to me, or *One Flute Note*, which I wrote a good chunk of - based on an idea of Jonathan's, which he had forgotten he'd had."

He says that several of their bits (*The Cow Piece*, *Body Not Fit for Purpose*) ultimately are solos, and that *Both Sitting Duet* is just that. "We generally don't need concepts or big ideas to get started, and often the subject of a piece will reveal itself as we go along."

Their work is random, but with rigid ritual decorum; improvisational, with planned accidents; more twitch than dance; more oohs, bleeps,



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and singsongy words than a score. They cross their own borders. They even vaguely resemble each other.

Dustin Hurt of Thirdbird, their presenter here, says it's a mistake to call Burrows the choreographer and Fargion the composer, because "they create a third genre between music and dance." Hurt's Thirdbird partner, Anna Drozdowski, sees them as a solid fit for Philly's cross-disciplinary community - "longtime collaborators, generous teachers, and smart performers at the edge of a new field who aren't afraid to have fun."

The two met in 1987 after Fargion settled in London, aspiring to become a lion of concert music. Burrows was a well-known soloist with the Royal Ballet, classical forms ingrained in his bones. Looking for a way to work that "didn't pretend those currents and forces didn't exist within me," Burrows found it in Fargion.

"Matteo comes from classical music, and we both wanted a way forward without feeling the need to arbitrarily throw ourselves away to prove our contemporaneity."

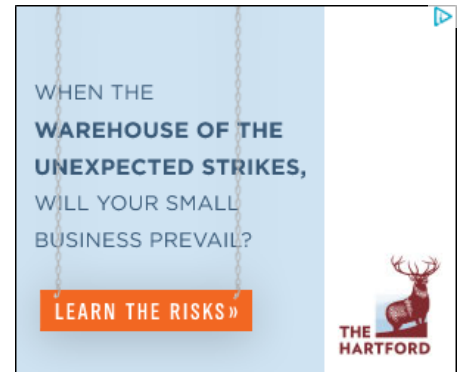
Fargion, disillusioned with the New Music world, saw the dance scene as more glamorous, better funded, and much less conservative. "I realized that collaborative work suited me more than the lonely existence of a composer, plus Jonathan loves Haydn, English folk music, and punk dub reggae, all of which, for better or for worse, rubbed off on me."

Eventually, they became involved and influential in all aspects of each other's work and in 2002 paired on stage for the quietly dynamic, downright silly *Both Sitting Duet*.

"Nobody got it at first," Fargion says, "and we certainly had no big ideas of continuing to make duets, but I guess we'll carry on until we, or the public, gets bored."

"That's the hard thing about being a performance artist," Burrows says. "You have to be fairly courageous to do that walk of shame."

"At the same time, you must never forget that it can all evaporate in an instant. It's about a certain enforced humility, because an audience can quickly make you feel smaller than you thought you were - and at the same time there are frequent-enough moments of utter flight when 200 people give you brief permission to rise."



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