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Coming to the Table for 9/11

More than 150 Dancers Are Part of Annual Public Art Piece



By [PIA CATTON](#)

As an annual piece of public art honoring lives lost, "The Table of Silence Project 9/11" has been drawing a crowd ever since its 2011 premiere. But what has struck even its choreographer, Jacquelyn Buglisi, is how intensely dancers—of all ages and experience levels, as well as some international arrivals—have flocked to it.

At 8:15 a.m. Wednesday, more than 150 dancers emerge along the edges of Lincoln Center's plaza to recreate the performance. They spiral around the fountain, turning the moment into a symbolic banquet with white ceramic plates, by the visual artist Rossella Vasta, in their hands as an offering.

They're not doing it for the pay (there is none), and the 9 p.m. rehearsals are not optimal for professional dancers, most of whom are winding down from classes and rehearsals by that hour. But they have been drawn to the work of Ms. Buglisi, a Martha Graham protegee who served as a principal dancer in her company for 12 years.

"She's carrying on an important legacy," said Jody Gottfried Arnhold, a dance educator and one of Ms. Buglisi's supporters.

But taking part in this legacy is no cakewalk. About 250 dancers auditioned this year, up from roughly 100 in 2011. During a recent rehearsal, Ms. Buglisi bellowed at the dancers, who were trying to rise from the floor gracefully: "You are young people. I saw you get up like you were Methuselah!"

Their reasons for showing up are as varied as their experience. Sydney Pelletier-Martinelli, 13 years old, of Riverside, Conn., signed on to honor her father, who died in the attacks. Her round, ruddy cheeks and braces held with ballerina-pink elastics are not the stuff of the typical modern dancer, but she's learning. "Each movement is symbolic. The plate symbolizes the soul," she said.

Alicia Alva, 25, recently moved to New York from Iowa and decided to make the unpaid gig her first audition. "I was in eighth grade. I never really felt connected to this part of history," she said. "It was a way to show solidarity with New York," said Ingrid Nachstern, 59, a dancer and choreographer who traveled from Dublin to audition after reading about the project on [Facebook](#).

Carol Walker, 75, was for more than 20 years the dean of the dance department at Purchase College-SUNY. Out of town during previous performances, she had long wanted to take part. So she phoned Ms. Buglisi to ask: "Could this old lady do that?"

The challenges of choreographing upward of 150 dancers are considerable and rare—even a big ballet rarely calls for more than 40 people. So Ms. Buglisi has had help in rehearsals from the watchful eyes of her peers, Terese Capucilli and Christine Dakin, who were also stars with the Martha Graham Dance Company. (To put this in perspective, it's as if the 1992 Olympic basketball "Dream Team" got together to coach a free camp.)

Additionally, current and former members of Ms. Buglisi's own company, Buglisi Dance Theatre, were roaming around to correct the placement of limbs and facial expressions. Ari Mayzick, who teaches Graham technique at the Ailey School and had performed "Table of Silence" before, said he was helping dancers absorb the "feeling of the Graham essence."

That does require a certain willingness to plumb the depths of one's soul—without giggling, which was proving difficult for some newcomers. This type of work attempts to embody the human condition through stationary poses as much as movement. "In stillness, Martha talked about the beating of the heart, the vibration," Ms. Buglisi said.

Dancers at most levels of training can be taught the steps. In 2011, Ms. Buglisi's company conducted a three-week residency at Syracuse University in which they taught the work to high-school students, resulting in a performance in remembrance of the Syracuse students killed in the 1988 Pan Am crash in Lockerbie, Scotland.

"The theme of what we do is a ritual. It's a ceremony for peace," said Ms. Buglisi, adding that the work is based on a pattern but can be adapted to different spaces.

To create an effective performance, one that calls forth a shared moment of public reflection, dancers do benefit from her pointers. "You must feel like you have hundreds of thousands of people on the plate. Hold the plate with respect," she said. "And don't break the plates!"

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