

Our Cultural Incubator

Written by Anne Tschida, BT Arts Editor
May 2016

For 21 years, Miami Light Project's Here & Now festival has cultivated great work



In 1995 South Beach had risen like a phoenix from the ashes, a hot spot for nightclubs and models. But national headlines still labeled Miami as a crime capital mired in corruption, and a cultural backwater.

It was also then, however, that Miami Light Project (MLP), along with the Rhythm Foundation and Tigertail Productions, was also making waves, revealing a different, vibrant sign of activity. At various nomadic locations on South Beach, these groups were presenting an array of international dance, music, and performance -- and highlighting local talent. That year Miami Light's Here & Now festival made its debut, a commissioned project that allowed artists to develop and present their works.

A few years later, in 1999, Miami Light moved to the Miami side, and the Here & Now program started its official yearly run.

"So much has changed since the first Here and Now -- the neighborhoods, the city, the world!" recalls Beth Boone, Miami Light Project's director. "We'd just moved from our Miami Beach location on Lincoln Road, and had opened our first studio on Biscayne Boulevard and 30th Street.

"We were still building out and equipping the studio at the time that Here and Now was to open," she adds. "So we looked around the neighborhood for a temporary alternative. Two blocks

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south, we found an otherwise empty two-floor warehouse-style building, where...a kind of pop-up club called Timba [had opened]. It was very underground, and very raw, so we decided it was the perfect place for Here and Now.”



In those early years, people like Ricky J. Martinez were commissioned. Now the artistic director of the New Theatre for more than a decade, Martinez was the recipient in March 2016 of the prestigious national Margo Jones Award, which honors individuals involved in the theater for their significant contributions, and has gone to such luminaries as Jane Alexander, Al Hirschfeld, Edward Albee, and Joseph Papp, among other actors, directors, producers, playwrights, critics, and academics.

Playwright, choreographer, and actor Teo Castellanos, who developed the one-man show *NE 2nd Avenue*

, won the Fringe First Award from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2003, the first for a Miami artist. Later, in 2009, Rosie Herrera’s

Various Stages of Drowning: A Cabaret

, produced for Here & Now, attracted the attention of the director of the American Dance Festival, which debuted the work in 2010. Another first.

Other standouts who have created artistic productions for both local and international audiences include dancers and musicians Natasha Tsakos, Ana Mendez, Rudi Goblen, Ivonne Batanero,

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Elizabeth Doud, Diane Lozano, Andrew Yeomanson (a.k.a. DJ Le Spam), and Helena Thevenot.

“From its inception, Here and Now has lived out a very simple premise,” says Boone. “Provide space and money to community-based artists, and they’ll develop a community for artists. I consider this my most important work, and something in which I take enormous pride.”



The latest installment of Here & Now takes place from May 12 to 21, in its permanent home at the Light Box at Goldman Warehouse in Wynwood. It’s an intriguing mix of artists from various fields.

In the first week, Carla Forte is featured. She’s a filmmaker and director of the avant-garde group Bistoury Physical Theatre. She will present *Emotional O*, a combination of video and performance about emotions and memories. Also on that week’s lineup:

For: Shame From:_____

, a piece from Sandra Portal-Andreu that explores the cultural norms to which women must adhere, from clothing to body shape. The last act will come from the truly experimental musician, Slovenian-born Juraj Kojs, who will bring 30 musicians, banging on various percussive instruments both in and outside the Light Box.

The second week includes a performance/video story about a lake, from Jenny Larsson. The main character is indeed a lake, and water is the fluid movement that helps tell the story. Natalia Lassalle-Morillo’s featured work, Irma, is also a mix of cinema and performance, delving into

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three stages of life. It all culminates with *The Miami Flyers*, from well-known artist Charo Oquet; the Dominican Republic native will ask for audience interaction in her take on the diverse communities of Miami, especially those from the islands of Hispaniola and Cuba.



Varied locations have also been part of Here & Now, from its start at places such as the Colony Theater on South Beach to the now-defunct Timba nightclub, and for several years at the Carnival Studio at the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.

“The various homes for Here and Now have been a reflection of MLP at that moment in time,” says Boone. “As the years passed, we continued to evolve organizationally and made the decision to create a permanent home for all of our programs in the Wynwood Arts District, which, at the time, was a quiet place relatively unknown to Miami at large. That was 2010, and we’ve produced all our work in the Light Box since then. Our space is now synonymous with our identity.”

That permanent move and grounding coincided with a shift in the cultural landscape, says Boone. “Over the last 18 years, Miami has experienced cataclysmic change,” she notes, “and our performance and visual arts community have played a huge role in the transformation. Here and Now was and remains a forward-thinking idea. No one was commissioning new work from Miami-based artists at that time, and the program was like a lightning bolt -- it immediately became a magnetic force. Over time, and relatively quickly, Miami artists who had moved away began to notice that things were happening, and I believe the program has been a factor in many of those artists’ decisions to move back to Miami and make it their artistic home.”

As disparate as the programming has become, the core of the event remains the same, according to Boone. “Research and development are essential,” she explains. “It works in art

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and culture just like it does in science, business, and education. Resources stimulate creativity and production, which in turn changes a place. In some instances, like Miami, the transformation is radical. I believe that this is the promise and the legacy of Here and Now.”

Here & Now, weekend 1, May 12-14: Carla Forte, Sandra Portal-Andreu, Juraj Kojs, 8:00 p.m., \$15-\$25. Week 2, May 19-21: Jenny Larsson, Natalia Lassalle-Morrilo, Charo Oquet, 8:00 p.m., \$15-\$25; www.miamilightproject.com.

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