

Local Artists Give the Earth a Voice

Environmental Activism Gets Creative

By Diane Eaton

Atlanta is home to an abundance of creative artists seeking to make a difference. Among them, Sue Schroeder, Angela Bennett and Viva Vuvuzela use the power of their artistry in dance, theater, and music, respectively, to kindle activism and to build engagement in issues relating to the health of the planet.



Dance For Connection

As co-founder of Core Dance, an Atlanta-based professional dance organization in its 39th season, Sue Schroeder has been on a mission to use dance as a catalyst for change for a long time.

Her current project, *If: A Memoir*, is a multimedia production designed to draw its audience into the beauty and magnificence of the earth, and to bring about an empathic and even activist response.

With live dance in the foreground and original video from Iceland as backdrop, the production creates a uniquely immersive experience to radically shift and deepen each audience member's relationship to the earth.

"I believe we're at a tipping point in our relationship to the environment," says Schroeder. "We might have 25 years, if that, before the damage we do is irreversible. So *If: A Memoir* is a love song. It's a vehicle for

humanity to fall in love with the earth and be inspired to take care of it like never before.

"One goal for the show is to help awaken people to the fact that we're all connected. The more we feel our connection, the more we are freed to act to benefit the greater good."

Schroeder herself is an example of that. She has earned the Goethe-Institut's Haldeman Award for Merit, numerous local arts grants and fellowships and, most recently, Emory University's 2017 Center for Creativity & Arts Community's Impact Arts Administrator award.

"Art has tremendous capacity to create empathy," says Schroeder. "At Core Dance, we design inspiring, energizing and visceral experiences that can't help but register within the bodies, minds and hearts of our audiences."

Schroeder recently flew to Iceland with the visual designer and photographer Simon Gentry for a new production, *Water About Us*. It is a dance performance and a literally "immersive" one at that: The dancers, the musicians and even some of the audience are placed in and around an Olympic-size swimming pool. Audiences can expect to experience a deeper appreciation for the interplay of water and life on the planet than ever before.

If: A Memoir will premier in Atlanta in the fall of 2019 in celebration of Core Dance's 40th season of creating and performing original dance that "ignites the creative spirit and encourages participation and conversation by and with the community," according to company members. They'll then take the show to Houston, Texas, and then tour it around the country, and perhaps the world.

For more information, visit CoreDance.org.



The cast of *Guardians of Gaia*

Theater for Wisdom and Balance

When Angela Bennett was sitting on a theatrical set a few years ago, reading a book and waiting for her next scene, she realized she wanted—no, *needed*—to redefine the trajectory of her career.

Her acting livelihood had been going just fine, actually. Winner of numerous awards, including Actress of the Year, Best Actress in a Comedy, and Best Actress in a Drama for consecutive years

I'm a believer that the arts are one of the most powerful ways to inspire people to do something that makes a difference.

by *Creative Loafing* of Charlotte, North Carolina, she had been expanding her creative efforts into writing, directing and producing a show that won Best Musical of the Year.

But something inside her tugged at her. "I woke up to the sense that I want to

David Callahan

help awaken people's connection to the natural world. For years, I had been noticing a great imbalance in our culture between feminine and masculine—yin and yang. Women have by default taken on a lot of the masculine yang energy—intellectual, linear, analytical, forceful—in order to step up to more power.

"But our yin side is equally as important and equally powerful," says Bennett. "Our creative, intuitive and holistic instincts help us revere our connections and see solutions outside of the box. Without our yin connection," says Bennett, "we see the earth as a commodity to be used without a sense of reverence, sacredness or gratitude. Yet that is exactly what we need to heal"

Bennett's latest project, *Guardians of Gaia*, evokes three goddesses associated with three ancient indigenous cultures—Hawaiian, West African and Native American—to nurture connection and understanding between aspects of the natural world and ourselves.

"Indigenous cultures around the world enjoyed a deep connection with the earth. They considered it holy and to be revered," says Bennett, "and we can learn from their example. So we went to great lengths to research and connect with the elders from these traditions to learn about their dance, music, rhythms and vision for these images to express themselves."

Conceived, co-written, directed and produced by Bennett, *Guardians of Gaia* integrates sets, music, dance, video and other media to bring people into an experience of profound gratitude for and connection with the natural world.

Now Bennett is refashioning the show slightly to speak directly to an important emerging audience: middle-school kids.

"We started to see that kids are the ones who will light the fire and lead the way in healing our relationship with Mother Earth," says Bennett. Among other tweaks to the production, young people will be able to take action through web-based prompts that earn them the title "Guardian of Gaia."

For more information, visit RootsProductions.org.

Raymond Kessler



Music for Activism

As a musician, Aviva Vuvuzela is an activist. And as an activist, she's a musician.

"Music is a language," she says. "It's like planting a garden. You can plant any seed you want."

For Aviva, lead singer of the band *Aviva and the Flying Penguins*, music has been a powerful vehicle to generate activism to legalize hemp for medicinal and practical purposes.

Her first album, *Painted Truth*, featured the song *Cannabis Car*, about a car that runs on hemp fuel. The album charted in the Top 100 New Releases on iTunes and won her

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Best Folk Artist of 2017 and Album of the Month from Akademia Music.

Aviva performs at hemp conferences all over the country, including that of the Hemp Industries Association. "The second time I went to the conference, they had invited me. But the first time, I crashed it!" she admits. In 2017, Raw Revolution sponsored Aviva and the band's *Hemp Tour*.

To be clear, Aviva isn't working to legalize marijuana; her goal is the legalization of hemp as a medicine, fabric, fuel and food source.

"Ever since I was a kid watching stories about devastating oil spills on TV, I just couldn't shut up about it. Years later, I found out that we can actually use hemp to fuel our cars if we want to. You know, the Ford Company ran 40,000 vehicles on hemp ethanol without any carbon emissions. But nobody told us about it. It all felt like an intense violation to me. That's when I wrote *Cannabis Car*."

Aviva sings about a lot of things, but her hemp activism has put her on the map. She's performed songs to support the Standing Rock Sioux's demonstrating to halt an oil pipeline across their land; She's performed songs about the floods in Texas. Every week, she uploads new songs about current events on her YouTube channel.

Music is at the core of her activism. "I don't know if I could be an activist without my music. It drives me, it grounds me, and it would be too painful to do it any other way. I'm not an angry activist. I want to inspire people in a loving way.

"This has been a fight worth fighting," she continues, "and it just might be a fight that's almost won. It's been an amazing 20 years, and we've come a long way. Nowadays, you can visit hemp fields in Hawaii, Kentucky, Tennessee, Colorado, Michigan—and just eat it if you want.

"2019 might be the year that Georgia legalizes hemp," she continues. "I've been meeting with Georgia legislators at the state level, and we're getting heard."

For more information, visit AvivaAndTheFlyingPenguins.com