


By Kelli McElhinny



Michele de la Reza is clearly enamored with her modern dance company's new digs. As she gives a tour of the space and highlights its many amenities, her enthusiasm shines through. She even backtracks to point out the flexible ductwork that expands with an audible rush of air when the heating or air conditioning comes on. It is a pretty cool feature, after all.

In July, Attack Theatre, which de la Reza co-founded with husband Peter Kope, relocated to the Strip District building that has been home to the Pittsburgh Opera since last summer. The structure once served as an air brake factory for Westinghouse. Finding a home in a converted industrial site is nothing new to Attack Theatre. Its first studio, which was downtown at 937 Liberty Avenue, was a former bathhouse; the space it just vacated, on Penn Avenue in Garfield, used to be an industrial laundry facility.

*Continued on next page*

Peter Kope and Michele de la Reza, founders of Attack Theatre

Photography: John Altlander



Photography: Matthew Kleinrock

Attack Theatre's latest edifice achieves a comfortable co-existence between honoring its history and incorporating modern features. For example, the exposed brick interior walls are original, as are the safes that remain in place. Legend says that they stored the factory's paperwork each night. And the windows are described as "historically accurate" by the opera as well.

Yet, despite these touches of history, modern features greet visitors as soon as they step through the sleek glass doors. Stainless steel fixtures abound, and cubicles are clustered throughout the open second floor. The conference room even closes off with a garage door.

In another nod to the building's 21st century iteration, the opera intends to apply for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification as well.



Photography: John Alderfer

Having a roommate is a new experience for Attack Theatre, but the group has adjusted accordingly. "You can nest and settle in your own space," says de la Reza, "but you have to be fluid in sharing."

The space that is perhaps most conducive to that nesting is the rehearsal room, which is dubbed an "area of refuge" on a sign at its entrance. Although it has roughly twice as much square footage devoted to rehearsals as in the Garfield location, it still fills up quickly. "Somehow you always max out your space," she says, noting that performers still dance off the Marley floor surface that makes it safe for them to go barefoot.

Additionally, the rehearsal room is conveniently close to a secondary space where dancers rest between rehearsals or de la Reza's and Kope's one-year-old son, Xander, can play with his sitter while the couple rehearses with the rest of the company.

The building also includes a cozy black-box theatre-style space that will accommodate public performances. With its exposed brick walls and its iron-railed balcony, it sets the perfect tone for an intimate dance experience for audiences and will allow Attack Theatre to put together shows with longer runs and feature more performances for smaller houses.

The company is also planning other events in the space, such as the Game Nights, featuring board games, playground diversions, and short performances that proved so popular in Garfield. The first Game Night is slated for October 10. A combination Dinner and a Dance concert event is in the works as well. "We always like to enliven our studio with programming," says de la Reza, who has been enlivening the Pittsburgh dance scene through Attack Theatre for 15 years.



Photography: Dave Garson

de la Reza, who hails from Houston, and Kope, a Cleveland native, met in 1991 when they separately moved to Pittsburgh to work with Mark Taylor at Dance Alloy. The couple started Attack Theatre three years later.

*Continued on next page*





Photography: Dave Garson

Now married for a decade, de la Reza and Kope act both as performers and artistic directors for the theatre. The group also has three other core performers—Liz Chang, Dane Toney, and Ashley Williams—and can expand to include as many as six additional dancers. The core team of performers also includes four musicians.

de la Reza and Kope found Pittsburgh to be an ideal location for establishing a modern dance troupe. "Pittsburgh had an unbelievable openness in physical space and mental space," says de la Reza, explaining that they not only found ample possibilities to house their rehearsals and performances but also an open-minded group of patrons who could truly appreciate their work.

Pittsburgh's audiences have responded in-kind, and, as a result, Attack Theatre has become one of the longest tenured modern dance companies in Pittsburgh. "They take dance and make it so accessible and fun," says Jane Vranish, former *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* dance critic.

Attack Theatre's approach to the art is unlike most other companies, which can

be attractive to patrons who might not otherwise attend dance concerts. "We tend not to limit ourselves," says Kope. "We do what's needed to tell a story. We always do a purposeful work."

They also focus on engaging audiences in their performances. The upcoming season, for example, will include an artistically challenging process piece dubbed "Some Assembly Required" that



Photography: Matthew Kleinrock



Photography: Matthew Kleinrock



Photography: Dave Garson



Photography: Matthew Kleinrock

will be performed in nine different galleries throughout the city. What better way to involve audiences than to ask them to travel along a performance route?

Even using the word "theatre" in its moniker rather than "dance company" attests to the group's unique approach. Creating a theatrical experience expands what they can do in their performances. "The name actually is very appropriate to our style," says Kope.

Having a musician as accomplished as Music Director Dave Eggar—a widely respected solo cellist and pianist—on board is a testament to the theatre's commitment to integrating high quality musical accompaniment into its performances. In fact, one of Japan's most renowned contemporary composers, Somei Satoh, contributed a score specifically commissioned by Attack Theatre for its 2008 performance "Preserve and Pursue." That was quite a coup for the group, according to Vranish.

The group's reputation reaches far beyond Pittsburgh. Attack Theatre tours throughout the United States as well as internationally. They've performed in locales as diverse as St. Louis and Jakarta, Indonesia.

In addition to reaching out to audience members, Attack Theatre has made strides in outreach and collaboration within Pittsburgh's arts community. "Attack Theatre, with its work ethic and its energy, is a glue that holds arts groups together and makes firm connections," says Vranish.

The group's current living arrangements evolved from one of those connections. When the decision was made to relocate, de la Reza and Kope were interested in identifying shared space opportunities. So they approached the Pittsburgh Opera, which had been a partner for the past decade. "It's a tribute to Attack Theatre that the Pittsburgh Opera is opening its doors to this



dance group and welcoming it to the fold," says Vranish. She adds that she couldn't imagine an opera company in another city extending such an invitation.

As a community resource, the group does work outside of the building that is just as important as the rehearsals and performances that take place inside of it. Attack Theatre is active in local arts education, conducting residencies and performances in schools, and leading professional development workshops that show teachers how to incorporate dance into their lesson plans.

Where does dance intersect with, say, grammar? One activity asks students to insert adverbs and adjectives in a paragraph then create a dance from the resulting text. This is just one example of Attack Theatre's innovative work in the classroom.

During the 2008-09 school year, the group interacted with some 8,000 students in 170 workshops. They travel throughout the region for these outreach activities as well.

Lisa Hoitsma has been executive director of Gateway to the Arts for the past nine years. Her first encounter with de la Reza and Kope came in a seven-day professional development course for K-12 teachers. "As a teacher, I was completely awed by their work," she says. "I immediately became one of their biggest fans." She also notes that they have the ability to get people to move and almost dance without their even realizing it. "They're an incredible team."

Hoitsma says that Attack Theatre is a tremendous resource for her. Without them, she would have minimal dance offerings in her program. "It would be a huge void," says Hoitsma. "I would have to bring people in from out of town. I want to support local artists."

She emphasizes that dance is a central component of an arts education. "Being able to find meaning in dance gives us appreciation for what our bodies are capable of," she says. "I think it's very important for our children to have a sense for that."

By bringing their art to students and teachers, Attack Theatre is contributing to a broader appreciation for dance. They do the same for Pittsburgh's arts scene. "I can't say strongly enough just how important Attack Theatre is, yes, to our education community, but also to our cultural community," says Hoitsma.

Vranish underscored the group's evolution. "They don't have to attack anymore," she says. "The audiences come to them. They're like a magnet now."

The performance schedule for Attack Theatre's 2009-10 season will be announced in late August. For more information on the group, please visit its Web site: [www.attacktheatre.com](http://www.attacktheatre.com) ♦