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Choreographer developing new work during Krannert Center residency

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Dancers with Dance Heginbotham rehearse a scene for a new production. Choreographer John Heginbotham just finished a two-week residency at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, joining visual artist Maira Kalman and Heginbotham's dance company in developing the new piece. Photo provided by Dance Heginbotham

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Choreographer John Heginbotham is no stranger to [Krannert Center for the Performing Arts](#). He danced there many times as a member of the [Mark Morris Dance Group](#), which has made Krannert Center its Midwest home.

Heginbotham was back at Krannert Center recently for a two-week residency with his New York-based company [Dance Heginbotham](#), during which he was developing a new production that will integrate dance with the work of visual artist [Maira Kalman](#).

“I haven’t done that much work that involves the type of technology that is used in this performance,” which includes set design and projection design, Heginbotham said. “(The Krannert Center staff) is very kind and incredibly supportive, and they’re pretty adventurous with their programming.”

“This type of residency has allowed us to take creative risks because the resources are so plentiful here. That’s why this is special.”

The residency is part of Krannert Center’s Intensive Development Lab, which is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and provides both emerging and established artists space and creative resources to move a new work from conception to production over a three-year period. The residency program is in its seventh year. Grant funds also allow students in the Illinois theatre department’s design, technology and management program to work with Dance Heginbotham and the Krannert Center staff to build sets and work on lighting and sound.



An actor provides weather reports during a new production by Dance Heginbotham. The giant piece of embroidery on stage is inspired by visual artist Maira Kalman’s interest in embroidery. Kalman is collaborating with Dance Heginbotham on the new work.

Photo provided by Dance Heginbotham

The work Heginbotham is creating with Kalman – an illustrator, writer, artist and set designer – is inspired by her book “The Principles of Uncertainty,” the title of which is also the working title of the production. The book resembles a graphic novel in form, organized by absurd weather reports. Kalman illustrated the book with paintings, photographs and pictures of embroidery she has done.

“The mixed media she uses to tell her story is heavily influencing the work,” Heginbotham said.

The story will be told in vignettes, and it is “about time and how we observe and deal with and experience time, knowing we have limited time,” he said. “There is room for humor, heartbreak and great absurdity.”

Heginbotham is interspersing dance with an actor delivering weather reports; projections of video, still photographs and text onto the walls and the reflective gray-white floor surface; and set pieces designed by Kalman and being built by the Krannert Center staff. The choreography will be stylistically similar to Heginbotham’s previous works – balletic, fast-moving and athletic – but the addition of the other elements will make the piece quite different overall from anything he’s done before.

“(Kalman) has had a huge impact on the visual look of the piece,” Heginbotham said. “There are a couple of set pieces she’s designed that are almost Dr. Seussian to me, not in the way they look but in their lack of practicality.”



Dancers rehearse a scene during their residency at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts.

Photo provided by Dance Heginbotham

He said the production will include odd juxtapositions of the real and the fanciful, and non sequiturs. He is experimenting with the size of various objects. Kalman’s embroidery inspired an “experiment in giant embroidery.” One of the set pieces is a huge piece of white fabric embroidered with black yarn. Another is a large facsimile of a tiny painting by Edouard Manet, the image of which has been enlarged to many times its original size. Images of large items will be projected into the small, confined space of a fish tank.

An image of a volcano erupting is projected onto an armoire. And Kalman appears in one scene, seated inside a large, lit box at a table set with tea and cake, while the weatherman reads to her.

The production will use both live and recorded music, a mix of classical (Beethoven and Bach) and contemporary.

The goal of the Krannert Center residency is experimentation and creativity, not a finished production by the end, Heginbotham said. He and his collaborators are in the early stages of creating the piece and trying to figure out what belongs in it and how the text portions will fit with the dance. Kalman, Heginbotham and his company will continue to work on the piece in the coming months, and they hope to premiere it in summer 2017.

Editor's note: For more information about the residency program at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, contact Bridget Lee-Calfas at bklee@illinois.edu.

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