

# CULTURE

## DANCE

# Beyond the porch to the city

Porch View Dances returns and casts an even wider net for its real people dancing ethos

MICHAEL CRABB  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Meetings have a way of prompting daydreams. That's what happened to Karen Kaeja one morning in 2011.

She and husband Allen, co-founder/co-artistic director with Karen of their company Kaeja d'Dance, were meeting with staff in the living room of their Euclid Avenue home. As she gazed distractedly out the front window Kaeja began wondering what went on inside the houses opposite. What stories did they contain?

"Then I suddenly thought, 'What if we bring choreographers in to get the stories out onto the street?'" explained Kaeja, who has a long-held belief in the importance of community engagement.

And so, with one imaginative leap, Porch View Dances: Real People Dancing in Real Spaces, was born.

The concept was boldly unconventional. The response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Find professional choreographers willing to work with non-professional everyday folk interested in telling their personal stories through movement, with their own houses serving as site-specific stages.

A "tour guide" — Allen Kaeja's stovepipe-hatted alter ego "Maurycy" performed this role for many years — would lead audiences to the different houses and there would be pop-up "vignettes" to amuse them along the way.

When it launched in July 2012 there wasn't a long-term plan. The initial intent was simply to animate and forge community connections among the denizens of Seaton Village, a West Annex neighbourhood roughly bounded by Bloor, Christie, Dupont and Bathurst streets. It worked so well the Kaejas soon realized they had to cast the net wider.

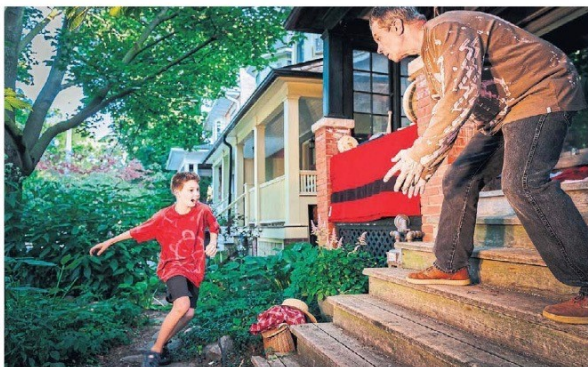
"By year three," Allen Kaeja explained, "we had so many people writing us, calling us, even knocking on our door saying how much they loved the concept and was there any way they could become involved?"

Over the years, Porch View Dances has evolved in response to changing needs. Non-Seaton Village residents sometimes collaborated with the locals. Other times they might borrow someone's porch or front yard to perform. The concept of hiring choreographers to help the non-professionals remained.

The choreographers' job was not to impose their own ideas but to draw out the participants' stories using whatever mode of physical expression they had to offer.

"Seaton Village is now the venue," Allen Kaeja said.

"The porches are the stages," added Karen. "It's really no longer a neighbourhood festival. It's become citywide."



The festival went from strength to strength. It began spawning satellite events under the Kaejas' guidance in Ottawa, Kitchener and, closer to home, with Lakeshore Arts in Etobicoke.

In 2016 it even headed east with a Porch View Dances-inspired festival in Moncton, N.B., called Downtown Dances. People from local businesses and even the mayor and city council members performed on sidewalks, in storefronts and a variety of downtown gathering spaces. The Kaejas will head to Moncton again in September for Downtown Dances' fourth edition.

In Moncton, as in all the iterations of Porch View Dances, the event winds up with a "Flock Landing," an open-to-everyone community dance animated by professional performers. In Seaton Village, as always, it will take place at Vermont Park Square.

The pandemic, inevitably, as with all live performance events, presented an almost existential challenge, but the Kaejas quickly pivoted in 2020 to a virtual festival featuring filmed contributions from past Porch View Dances choreographers, a chance for them to bring their own personal stories alive.

There was also a virtual event in 2021, presenting films of commissioned works. It was the first time

are completing an unusual four-season residency with Porch View Dances, all the choreographers chosen jointly by Gudiño and Eilers are new to the festival, and the participants all hail from beyond Seaton Village.

"Porch View Dances is very clearly Karen Kaeja's baby," said Gudiño. "She knows what works, but the actual program is very much mine and Sid's for sure."

"They've worked incredibly hard to make sure they were bringing artists who'd not been associated with Porch View Dances in the past in order to expand on the potential of what this city is and to bring it to this neighbourhood," said Karen. "A festival like this in this city, in order for it to grow and expand and be current with where the arts are moving, it's important to have other voices in there."

"It was important for us to make the call for choreographers as wide as possible," Eilers added, adding that he and Gudiño also tapped into their local artist networks for recommendations. The task of recruiting participants was left to the choreographers, although Gudiño has an additional role as artistic producer to make sure all the different threads come together for a smooth-running festival.

Stepping into the wings this year is something the Kaejas believe has big benefits.

"It's an exploration, working within a horizontal structure where we're not always at the top of a pyramid making the final decisions," Karen Kaeja said. "And there's no turning back. It's a way forward because other people bring such incredible new ideas to the table."

With the Kaejas' agreement, they have chosen to make this summer's Porch View Dances exclusively a showcase for "racialized and Indigenous creators." With the exception of Indigenous father-and-son team Jim and Owen Adams who

A Porch View Dances performance from 2017 with choreography by Karen and Allen Kaeja. Everyday people living in the Seaton Village area of Toronto collaborate with professional dancers and choreographers to create dances on their own front porches.

EDWIN L. PHOTOS  
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Karen and Allen Kaeja, seen rehearsing a dance routine in January, are the founders of Porch View Dances, an annual summer event that lets ordinary people do the dancing.

PAIGE TAYLOR  
WHITE  
TORONTO STAR  
FILE PHOTO

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KAREN KAEJA  
KAEJA D'DANCE  
CO-FOUNDER

PORCH VIEW DANCES RUNS WEDNESDAY TO SATURDAY AT 7 P.M., AND AT 2 SUNDAY. THE STARTING LOCATION IS ON LONDON STREET BETWEEN EUCLID AND PALMERSTON AVENUES. PAYMENT IS GIVE WHAT YOU CAN. SEE KAEJA.ORG FOR INFORMATION.