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## Ghost Factory: Project brings local history to life with dance, cinema and narrative

Performance artists partner with University faculty and students for a special event at LUMA on Sept. 7



Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer of Bridgman|Packer Dance perform "Ghost Factory," inspired by the factories in Johnson City, NY. Image Credit: Peter Borrow.

By Jennifer Micale

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Behind the boarded-up and vast sweeps of a factory floor, human stories emerge: connections between friends and lovers, the old country and a new possibility and disappointment.

Bridgman|Packer Dance's "Ghost Factory" will bring those stories to life during the 2024 Projection Arts Festival at 7 p.m. Sept. 7. The feature, which takes place at the Forum Theatre at 236 Washington St. in Binghamton, combines experimental light projection, video and a live performance by Bridgman|Packer Dance, based on local narratives of Johnson City history.

The indoor performance will be accompanied by the installation *Places with Hidden Stories* in the Forum's Reception Hall, created in collaboration with Binghamton University's Environmental Studies, Cinema and Anthropology programs and the Center for Civic Engagement.

This is the first time that *Ghost Factory*, which premiered in June 2021 in Scottsdale, Arizona, will be performed in the region that inspired its creation. In 2018, Guggenheim Fellows Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer were performing their work *TRUCK* in the parking lot of

Johnson City's Firehouse Stage; as the name implies, the performance takes place inside a vehicle.

“That’s when we saw these huge, deserted factories, and we started asking questions,” Packer said. “We were curious about the history behind all of them, and that was the seed of *Ghost Factory*.”

The two worked on the piece throughout the pandemic, interviewing around 30 people from the village whose voices form part of the soundtrack. They also obtained permission to film inside the factories for the video projection portion of the performance.

Local stories are fragmented and distilled in the stage work, which Packer and Bridgman perform in and among projected images.

“It’s almost like a dream sequence, as if these voices are coming out of the walls of these former factories,” Packer said. “In the installation, the stories are more linear and more like an oral history.”

## **Local stories**

Binghamton undergraduates, graduate students and faculty added to the accompanying installation, part of classes this past spring in environmental studies and cinema. Each station in the exhibition

features a projector with a looping video, which plays excerpts from oral histories along with images.

In an environmental studies course entitled “Ruins: Abandoned, Remembered,” Research Assistant Professor David Mixter encourages students to think about the ways that people engage with the past through the surrounding landscape. His class interviewed nine more Johnson City residents for *Places with Hidden Stories*; graduate students in Associate Professor of Cinema Tomonari Nishikawa’s class then filmed additional locations throughout the village to accompany the interviews.



**Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer of Bridgman|Packer Dance perform "Ghost Factory," inspired by the factories in Johnson City, NY. Image Credit: Provided photo.**

“Some of them were children at that time, and they spoke about being a kid amongst the factories. Others talking about working in the factories, the gender relationships in the factories and the social context,” Mixer said. “Some of the students were very taken by the people who they interviewed and developed relationships that lasted beyond the class.”

Residents shared memories of other places, too, such as a long-ago public pool, the Goodwill Theatre back in its heyday and former bars. People now in their 20s and 30s remembered a different Johnson City in the throes of a depressed economy, where vacant factories sprang to life as illicit teen party venues. There are other voices, too, such as Imam Anas Shaikh, who spoke of his community at the local mosque and the growing Muslim population.

Senior Katharine Stirber, an environmental science major, interviewed long-time village resident Corinna Johnson, whose house was built by the Endicott-Johnson corporation. In fact, her basement cabinets are made from old EJ crates, a unique piece of local history, Stirber said. Deeply committed to community service, Johnson loves her hometown and reminisced about people she once knew and the simple joys of childhood.

“From hanging out at the bus stop under a neighbor’s apple tree to exploring abandoned buildings for boy-band gigs, her stories brought Johnson City’s past to life,” Stirber said. “She also shared her thoughts on the transformation of local schools into apartment buildings and the current struggles of the real estate market in a town with a shrinking population.”

Stirber and her project partner were deeply moved; they sat silently for long stretches while Johnson spoke. A place’s history plays an important role in forging community ties and creates a sense of belonging, Stirber learned.

Before taking Mixer’s class, Stirber had only visited the village once or twice. Now, she wishes she had spent more time there learning about its history and its people, and enjoying its diverse shops.

“There’s this one café that stays open later during finals week, which is perfect for those late-night study sessions or when you just need a change of scenery,” she said. “Exploring Johnson City can be a great way to unwind, grab a delicious coffee or find some unique items you won’t get at big chain stores. Plus, supporting these local businesses helps keep the town vibrant and thriving.”

Packer was moved by the intergenerational bonds forged during the course of the project, she said; ultimately, it comes down to human lives touching and being touched by other human lives.

“Our mission in creating this project was to amplify these individual human stories rather than present a generic history of Endicott-Johnson or Johnson City,” Packer said. “In a metaphorical sense, the voices of the people who spent significant time there live in those walls. In the stage work, we’re evoking those stories, those lives and those voices.”

## **About Ghost Factory**

*Ghost Factory* will be performed at 7 p.m. Sept. 7 on stage at The Forum. The installation *Places with Hidden Stories* is open to the public in The Forum’s reception hall from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Sept. 6 and 7.

Admission to the installation is free. Tickets to *Ghost Factory* are \$5; they can be purchased at the door the night of the event, or [online at this link](#).



**Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer of Bridgman|Packer Dance perform "Ghost Factory," inspired by the factories in Johnson City, NY. Image Credit: Provided photo.**

The event is co-presented by LUMA, Binghamton University and American Dance Asylum. In addition to choreography and performance by Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer, the creative team includes filmmaker Peter Bobrow, lighting designer Frank DenDanto III and composer/sound designer Ansel Bobrow.

The creation of *Ghost Factory* was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a National Dance Project Finalist Grant Award; commissioning support from the American Dance Asylum; and the New England Foundation for the Arts, with additional funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and



the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Support during creation also came from Firehouse Stage and the Spool Contemporary Art Space.

University sponsors include the Center for Civic Engagement, the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), Harpur College of Arts and Sciences, the School of the Arts, Binghamton 2 Degrees, the Anthropology Department, the Art History Department, the Cinema Department, Environmental Studies, the History Department, the Sociology Department and the Theatre Department.

Known for their stunning combination of live performance and videography, Bridgman|Packer has received 12 grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and many other awards and has toured the United States, Asia, Europe, Central America and the Middle East.

View the full article here:

<https://www.binghamton.edu/news/story/5094/ghost-factory-project-brings-local-history-to-life-with-dance-cinema-and-narrative>