

Bridgman|Packer Dance unearths a neighborhood's past.

The hidden stories of Joseph Avenue

ARTS

BY SYDNEY BURROWS

In 2018, Myrna Packer stood in what was once her grandmother's kitchen on Joseph Avenue for the first time in almost 50 years.

"It was surreal, to be in that place in Rochester with my own hidden story written in its walls," she said. Almost a century earlier, Packer's grandparents Jacob and Fanny Diner, Jewish immigrants from Austria, moved to Rochester from New York City.

As part of an upcoming performance and visual installation at the University of Rochester, Guggenheim Fellows in Choreography and 2017 Bessie Awardees Myrna Packer and Art Bridgman of Bridgman|Packer Dance began researching and interviewing current inhabitants of Joseph Avenue.

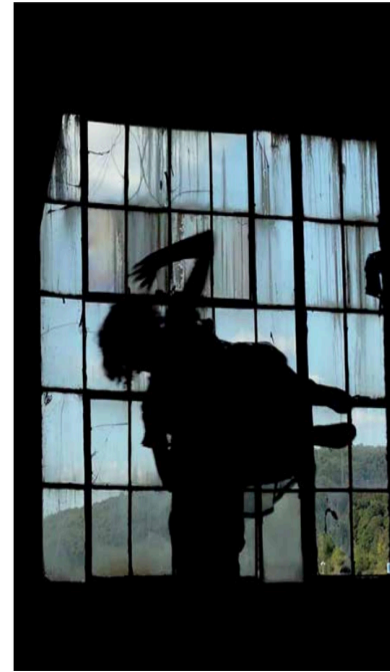
Though it is no longer the center of Rochester's Jewish immigrant community, Packer found that those who live on Joseph Avenue now, like Local Motion store owner Jaime Rivera, have stories that mirror her family's.

Rivera also came to Rochester by way of New York City. He found opportunities in Rochester that were not available in NYC, like real estate investments and a job at the Castle Sybron factory.



Local Motion owner Jaime Rivera in the Joseph Avenue neighborhood.

PHOTO BY RAFAEL RODRIGUEZ



Scenes from past productions of "Ghost Factory."
PHOTO PROVIDED BY BRIDGMANPACKER DANCE

Rivera purchased several buildings on Joseph Avenue in 1986, which had already lived many lives, including acting as a welcoming home for Packer's grandparents. He's grateful for his neighborhood for giving his family the chance to open a store that brings meaning and connection to the community.

"You're going to have pockets of violence no matter where you live, but people here help each other," Rivera said. "If they see you're in need, they help you. It's a family. If you're Black, Puerto Rican, from Venezuela and Ecuador, or other countries, you're welcomed here."

Packer and Bridgman will include Rivera's and other community members' stories in their visual installation "Places With Hidden Stories" alongside a multidisciplinary performance of "Ghost Factory" in October.

Since 1978, the couple has collaborated on dance projects: 20 years ago, they began integrating videography into their work as technology changed and advanced. Packer and Bridgman have expanded their artistic projects to include recorded video projected onstage as well

as live camera work.

"We're choreographers first, so we use technology as an added element of our choreographic artistic palette," Bridgman explained. "We choose the technological ideas that best support our choreographic themes and concepts, that can help us say what we want to say onstage."

"Ghost Factory" uses both dance and videography to portray a piece inspired by the people of Johnson City, in the Southern Tier, and the abandoned factories of the Endicott Johnson Shoe Company that are still standing.

The live camera work captures the performance and mixes it with pre-recorded content, helping project imagery of factory manufacturing assembly lines and conveyor belts. Although Bridgman and Packer are the only performers, the video technology replicates their images.

"We call it 'video partnering' because the video plays a very active role in the performance dynamic," said Packer. "It's not that the video is a set piece. The video becomes a metaphor for these ghostlike entities."

The layering of images and sounds contributes to a dream-like feel.

"Onstage we try to create a world where reality and imagination mix," Packer continued.

The setting of the recorded film adds to the spooky, ghostlike ambiance. They filmed in the massive abandoned factories with puddles of water, stalactites and broken windows as their set. In a space that was created by people for people, nature and time have taken over the storytelling of the space.

In conjunction with the Joseph Ave Arts and Culture Alliance (JAACA), Packer and Bridgman will present "Ghost Factory" and a Rochester-based iteration of "Places With Hidden Stories" on October 25 at Sloan Performing Arts Center.

"It's a view into specific people's stories," said Packer. "But there's so much that's universal, about our relationship to family, work, community, culture, immigration and migration." events.rochester.edu/event/bridgmanpacker-dance

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