

TU Dance

# Stages of Equity Festival CULTIVATE + The School - Level 4/5



North Hennepin Community College  
Minneapolis, MN  
March 22, 2024

# TU DANCE

Founder & Artistic Director: Toni Pierce-Sands  
Executive Director: Abdo Sayegh Rodríguez

Artistic Associate: Laurel Keen

Production Manager/Lighting Designer: Alice Endo

## ABOUT TU DANCE

TU Dance is known for its diverse artistic performances tackling important questions around gender, race, social justice, history, human resilience and more. Founded in 2004, TU Dance has received dozens of accolades and awards while touring nationwide. Under the artistic direction of Toni Pierce-Sands, TU Dance continues to be a leading dance company in the Twin Cities. Through celebrated performances of the professional company and accessible dance education at TU Dance Center, TU Dance provides opportunities for everyone to experience the connective power of dance.

The School at TU Dance Center was formed in 2011, realizing the vision for an educational program committed to access and excellence. The School shares TU Dance Center with the professional company and CULTIVATE, A Trainee Program, providing unparalleled opportunities for students of all ages to learn from working dancers, seasoned faculty, and distinguished guest artists who are frequently in residence with the company. The School is organized in three divisions: the Children & Teen Program introduces the joy of creative movement and beginning dance technique; the Pre-Professional Program trains aspiring dancers up to age 23 who are considering dance careers; and the Adult/Open Program welcomes everyone to join individual classes in a range of techniques including ballet, modern and African dance.

The School at TU Dance Center has proudly served nearly 4,000 students through programming at TU Dance Center and partner schools, and has provided \$734,000 in scholarships through the TU Dance Access Fund and various grants.

In 2022, TU Dance launched a trainee program entitled CUL-TI-VATE designed as a bridge for dancers with advanced training between their educational perspective and envisioning themselves in the professional field.

For more information go to [www.tudance.org](http://www.tudance.org).

# TU DANCE

EXCELLENCE | BELONGING | CREATIVITY | TRANSFORMATION

## PROGRAM



### Songbird

Level 4/5

Choreographed by Gabrielle Abram

Music: Barbatuques; André 300

*Indira Abdullah, Cailyn Harris, Cam Wang*

### Cerebral Invitation

Choreographed & Danced by Gabrielle Abram

Music: Barbatuques

### [INI] TRANSITION

Choreographed & Danced by Samantha Meryhew

Music: Clem Leek

### Trek 1: Climb

CULTIVATE + Level 4/5

Choreographed by Laurel Keen

Music: Floating Points and Pharoah Sanders (featuring London Symphony Orchestra)

*Indira Abdullah, Gabrielle Abram, Olivia Geffre, Cailyn Harris, Jillian Kramschuster,  
Samantha Meryhew, Heaven Sha'Rae, Cam Wang*

Meditation on Self and Sound

Choreographed & Danced by Jillian Kramschuster

Music: Spirit of Mother Earth; Dreaming Sound

Confidently Lost

Choreographed & Danced by Heaven Sha'Rae

Music: pluggonthatrack with poetry by Heaven Sha'Rae

Trek 2: Summit

Level 4/5

Choreographed by Laurel Keen

Music: Floating Points and Pharoah Sanders (featuring London Symphony Orchestra)

*Indira Abdullah, Cailyn Harris, Cam Wang*

A Voyage in 4

CULTIVATE

Choreographed by Christopher Ralph

Music: Eskmo, Brendan Angelides, Kira Kira; Cristobal Tapia De Veer;

Andrey Dergatchev; Richie Hawtin, Plastikman, Chilly Gonzales

Costumes by Stephanie Karr Smith

*Gabrielle Abram, Jillian Kramschuster, Samantha Meryhew, Heaven Sha'Rae*

Trek 3: Shift

Level 4/5

Choreographed by Laurel Keen

Music: Floating Points and Pharoah Sanders (featuring London Symphony Orchestra)

*Indira Abdullah, Olivia Geffre, Cailyn Harris, Cam Wang*

Anthem for You and I

CULTIVATE

Choreographed by Anna Pinault

Music: The Wesseltoft Schwarz Duo; Altered Natives

*Gabrielle Abram, Jillian Kramschuster, Samantha Meryhew, Heaven Sha'Rae*

*\*Unless noted above, costumes were sourced from the TU Dance costume archives and looks were created in collaboration between choreographers and Toni Pierce-Sands*



**Toni Pierce-Sands (Founder & Artistic Director)** Prior to co-founding TU Dance, Minnesota native Toni Pierce-Sands performed with Minnesota Dance Theatre, Tanz Forum in Germany, Rick Odums in Paris, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where she was a featured soloist in such signature pieces as *Revelations*, *Cry* and *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*. Her command of the Horton Technique has led to teaching posts throughout the United States and Europe. Toni directs programming and teaches classes at TU Dance Center in Saint Paul. She was a full-time core faculty member at the University of

Minnesota for twenty years and also served as Director of University Dance Theatre. Toni has been featured in COSMOPOLITAN Germany and GQ publications, the American Express Alvin Ailey commercial and the Lester Horton Technique instructional DVD series. She has written columns for Dance Studio Life magazine on a variety of pedagogical approaches for modern dance. Toni was awarded a 2004 McKnight Artist Fellowship in Dance, named the Sage Awards' "2011 Outstanding Dance Educator" and recognized with a 2013 Links Emerald Service Award for service in the arts. She was named as a 2015 USA Fellow, receiving the Knight Fellowship in Dance together with TU Dance co-founder Uri Sands. Toni was selected as a mentor for the 2018 Dance/USA Institute for Leadership Training and as a panelist for the 2018 Dance Miami Choreographers' Program. She is currently a visiting artist at the Theater and Dance department at Macalester College and serves on the University of Minnesota's Northrop Advisory Board.



**Laurel Keen (Artistic Associate/Choreographer)** grew up in Minneapolis studying at Minnesota Dance Theatre. She also received training from School of American Ballet, Dance Aspen and Pacific Northwest Ballet School (PNBS). She stayed on at PNBS as a professional division student and was able to perform and tour several Balanchine works with the company. Returning to Minnesota Dance Theatre as a company member, she performed works by Antony Tudor, Dwight Rhoden, Loyce Houlton and Wynn Fricke. She then spent nearly a decade as a company member of Alonzo King's LINES Ballet in San

Francisco, during which she received a Princess Grace Award and an Isadora Duncan Award. It was also during her time with LINES that she was able to tour extensively nationally and internationally. She returned to the Twin Cities in 2011 and taught at several dance schools in the area while earning her degree as a physical therapist assistant from St. Catherine University, working at Reynolds Rehab Physical Therapy and Orthology Physical Therapy. She was the Director of the school at TU Dance Center, and currently has been appointed as TU Dance's Artistic Associate.



**Gabrielle Abram (Choreographer)** Gabrielle Abram, better known As "Gabby TheBaddie" is a Gary, Indiana native, and a 2020 Momentum New Dance Works Fellow. Abram is a self-taught, multi-lingual Hip Hop artist and has received training in Ballet, Modern, West African, and Jazz at The Perpich Center for Arts and Education, and TU Dance Center. Gabrielle is a core company member of STRONGmovement, directed by Darrius Strong, and Atlantis13 Dance Collective, directed by Peace Madimutsa and Johnathan Van Arman.

In 2018 Abram co-produced Listen., at The Lab Theater--a collective of 9 choreographers sharing Pan-African perspectives and personal stories of black identity. In November of 2021, Abram made her choreographic debut with "Release" set on The Threads Dance Project as A Tapestries 5.0 Choreographer. Gabrielle along with business partner Rayna Howard created BGC Productions; a Film and Media Production company dedicated to creating, collaborating, and producing art that elevates and inspires black and POC artists. Abram continues to produce, dance, and create work in the Twin Cities.



**Anna Pinault (Choreographer)** Raised in Minnesota, Anna worked as a dance artist and educator in New York City for nearly a decade. In 2022, she landed back in the Twin Cities once again to pursue the next season of her creative work. Anna's most recent work includes Ashwini Ramaswamy's *Invisible Cities*, TU Dance Company's *The Three Women Project*, and projects with Joe Chvala's Flying Foot Forum, Rovaco Dance Company, and the Des Moines Metro Opera. Her work as an educator has included Dance Theatre of Harlem, The Neighborhood Playhouse, Daya Yoga Studio, the NYC Public School System, Zenon Dance School, Hothouse Minneapolis, and the TU Dance Center, among others. Anna also practices Thai Bodywork, and is studying for her MS in Human Movement Science. Her passion for bodily education spills into both her teaching and artistic work. Her current choreographic creations explore the creation of imagery and architecture by transposing rhythm and other musical languages onto the body. Her powerful energy is unique in its ability to quickly morph from style to style, all while maintaining a supple articulation and water-like quality. Website: [www.annapinault.com](http://www.annapinault.com) Instagram: @anna\_pinault



**Christopher Ralph (Choreographer)** was born and raised in Long Island, N.Y. He began his dance training at Holy Trinity High School, where he was accepted into the theater/dance program led by Cathy Murphy and James Whore. While training at school he simultaneously attended classes at Broadway dance center and Steps on Broadway with teachers such as Dorrit Koppel, Frank Hatchett and Shelia Barker. In 2005 he attended SUNY Purchase College to complete his B.F.A. in dance. Christopher has performed with choreographers and companies such as Gregory Dolbashian (The Dash Ensemble), Loni Landon dance projects, Azure Barton and Artists, Janis Brenner, Doug Varone, The Metropolitan Opera, Rebecca Lazier, Patrick Corbin, Netta Yerushalmy, Jenn Freeman and Sonya Tayeh. Christopher worked with the recording artist FKA Twigs on a video project. And will be seen in the upcoming Hulu series Up Here. He currently teaches contemporary and Heels classes at Peridance Capezio Center in New York City. Also has taught and created works for New York University, Princeton university and The Hartt school of dance.

**Alice Endo (Production Manager & Lighting Designer)** is an artist and technician working in the Twin Cities theater and dance communities. She is most often a lighting designer, though she also stage manages, designs and builds scenery, and works in a variety of other technical capacities. She has worked with groups including Threads Dance Project, Theater Mu, Artistry Theater, Exposed Brick Theatre, Stages Theatre Company, and Theater Latté Da. She is grateful to be taking part in her first production with TU Dance.

**Stephanie Karr Smith (Costume Designer)** is a former professional dancer with Minnesota Dance Theater and Ballet of the Dolls. She is a recipient of the McKnight Dancer Achievement Award in 1999. Soon after she started costume collaborations, construction and design for the Dolls, Avada, Glamorama, James Sewell Ballet and now happy to collaborate with Toni Pierce-Sands for TU Dance.

### Dancers



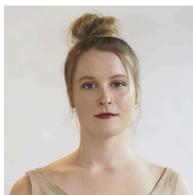
**Gabrielle Abram (CULTIVATE Trainee)** better known As "Gabby TheBaddie" is a Gary, Indiana native, and a 2020 Momentum New Dance Works Fellow. Abram is a self-taught, multi-lingual Hip Hop artist and has received training in Ballet, Modern, West African, and Jazz at The Perpich Center for Arts and Education, and TU Dance Center. Gabrielle is a core company member of STRONGmovement, directed by Darrius Strong, and Atlantis13 Dance Collective, directed by Peace Madimutsa and Johnathan Van Arman. In 2018 Abram co-produced Listen., at The Lab Theater--a collective of 9 choreographers sharing Pan-African perspectives and personal stories of black identity. In

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Olivia Geffre (*CULTIVATE Trainee*) is a dancer and choreographer based in the twin cities. She began her training by attending classes at many different dance studios, eventually diving deeper into the art of dance when she attended the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists. In the summer of 2022, she became a certified yoga teacher, furthering her kinesthetic knowledge and fascination with movement. She is currently teaching dance at Emerge Performing Arts, hoping to inspire the next generation to see the beauty and importance of art. She recently performed in

*Migration Stories* by danceprojectsbyME at the Southern Theater. She is now a CULTIVATE trainee with TU Dance. She is exploring shifting focus from the appearance of movement to the sensation of movement, along with the use of the breath throughout movement.



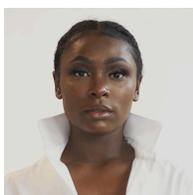
Jillian Kramschuster (*CULTIVATE Trainee*) is from Kansas City, MO and recently moved to the Twin Cities to be a part of CULTIVATE this season. She graduated last May from the University of Missouri-Kansas City where she obtained her BFA in Dance Performance and Choreography. During school she performed in *Parallel Lives* by Gary Abbott and *Madonna Anno Domini* by Nicole Clark-Springer as well as pieces choreographed by Micheal Blake, Tobin James, Deanna Heitt, and Ronn Tice. Outside of school she was a part of Tristian Griffin Dance Company's Mosaic as well as Comedy

of Darkness with Alexis Borth performed at the Charlotte Street Foundation. She also danced with Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey in *Setting the Stage* with Tyrone Aiken and *TheDynamitExperience* with Latra Wilson and Winston Brown in their film/dance festival *Bridges*. In addition to dancing she has also taught dance classes in KC and was a group leader for Ailey Camp this past summer. This is her first year with CULTIVATE and she is excited about the journey and discovery ahead.



Samantha Meryhew (*CULTIVATE Trainee*) a Saint Paul native, began her dance journey In 2011, where she started her training towards her professional career as part of the first generation of The School at TU Dance Center. After Graduating in 2019 from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, with a Bachelor of Art in Dance and Art, Samantha joined TU Dance as an Apprentice. She danced with the company in renowned works such as *Night Creature*, choreographed by Alvin Ailey, which was re-estaged by Ronni Favors for TU Dance. She has also been a guest artist with

Shapiro & Smith Dance performing in their production of *Bolero* in the Spring of 2017 and 2018, and later joined the company in 2021 performing in the works *Ferdougandal*, *Moonlight*, and *Burning Air*. In the spring of 2022, she returned to TU Dance as a dancer in *Sensible Existence*, choreographed by Marcus Jarrell Willis. She also has performed in works by Garth Fagan, Brian Brooks, and Kjara Staric Wurst. She is proficient in classical and contemporary ballet, modern, and African dance. Noted often as a hard worker and a quick learner, she strives to delve deep into the physicality and emotional nuances of the movement presented to her.



Heaven Sha'Rae (*CULTIVATE Trainee*) a Minnesota/Twin Cities native, has been consumed with her love for dance since the early age of 2. Sha'Rae started dancing as a praise dancer at her family's church, River of Life, in St. Paul, Minnesota. She then started a life of competition dance in 2011 at Art Of Dance studio. Sha'Rae grew as a dancer there for about 4 years then transitioned to TU Dance in 2015. Sha'Rae grew through TU Dance's Pre-Professional Program until the middle of 2019 when she

decided to dedicate time to explore all of her artistic abilities. Sha'Rae then started a modeling and spoken word career and gained a dance mentor, Erin Brown, who brought Sha'Rae into Southwest High School in 2022 to set her first professional piece on dancers as well as some workshop classes. This experience resulted in Sha'Rae being admitted into Southwest's Dance Hall of Fame in the beginning of 2023.

#### Level 4 & 5 Students from the School at TU Dance Center



Indira Abdullah



Cailyn Harris



Cam Wang

Learn more about TU Dance's CULTIVATE Trainee Program:

<https://www.tudance.org/cultivate/about-cultivate/>

Learn more about The School at TU Dance Center:

<https://www.tudance.org/programs/>

## [DANCE TRANSFORMS LIVES](#)

(click the text above to watch the video)

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### TU DANCE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Andrew Troup (Chair), Neeraj Mehta (Vice Chair), Joseph Zachmann (Secretary), Rafina Larsen (Treasurer), Colette Hawkins, Sara McGrane, Toni Pierce-Sands (Founding Member & Ex-Officio), Abdo Sayegh Rodríguez (Ex-Officio)

### TU DANCE STAFF

Founder & Artistic Director: Toni Pierce-Sands

Executive Director: Abdo Sayegh Rodríguez

Artistic Associate: Laurel Keen

Project Coordinator & Board Liaison: Maxine Yamazaki

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Administrative Associate: Mia Johnson

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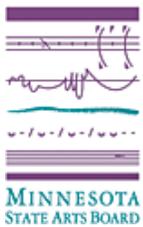
## ADVISORS TO THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Judith Jamison, Ronald K. Brown, Arcell Cabuag, Gregory Dolbashian, Sharon Luckman, Silvia Waters

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TU Dance is a member of The International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD) and Dance/USA.



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TU Dance Center ▪ 2121 University Avenue West, Saint Paul MN 55114

## PHOTO CREDITS

*All Movement/Performance Photos* by Canaan Mattson

*Toni Pierce-Sands* by Michael Slobodian

*Laurel Keen* by Mark Buenaflor

*Gabrielle Abram* by Canaan Mattson

*Anna Pinault* by Canaan Mattson

*Christopher Ralph* by Mike Esperanza

*Indira Abdullah* by Camille Wang

*Cailyn Harris* by Elle Halls

*Cam Wang* by Alexis Lund