

Art sustains an Elkins Park jewel

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Even on a bright Sunday afternoon, I feel spooked driving through Elkins Park, a grassy suburb just beyond the city border. Here looms the massive, haunted-looking shell of the old Widener estate, its ragged lawn overgrown with vines. Nearby lies the abandoned hulk of the old Tyler Art School campus, empty since 2009.

On Ashbourne Road, I come upon the Elkins Estate, a 42-acre white elephant boasting a pair of ornate mansions that, like their derelict neighbors, were designed by the 19th-century architect Horace Trumbauer.

But what a buzz of human activity I find here today. Families with little kids in soccer shorts, elderly couples, tattooed young hipsters — everyone is streaming into the 1898 Italian Renaissance-style palace Elstowe Manor, with its elaborate caryatids and ceiling fresco.

I grab a seat in the capacious hall, where a gigantic, angular aluminum structure rests, hung with bright-colored trapezes, hoops, and silks. Muscular young members of Tangle Movement Arts are demonstrating their innovative crossover of aerial acrobatics, spoken word, and modern dance.

This unusual performance space is the brainchild of Benjamin Lloyd, the driving force behind the nonprofit White Pines Productions. In the previous week alone, White Pines has produced five diverse events on the Elkins Estate, including play readings, a full production of *Our Town*, a symposium on the economics of art, and a jazz concert.

Lloyd, an actor from Elkins Park, is on a mission to develop a new type of cultural center for Philadelphia, where theater artists, dancers, and musicians will be supported in their work and connected to one another and the community. He wants art to be free for audiences who visit the estate, which was built as the summer home of the 19th-century oil tycoon and arts philanthropist William Lukens Elkins, whose collection helped to found the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

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The idea of collaboration is essential to Lloyd's vision. This summer, White Pines is sponsoring residencies for three performing-arts ensembles who use a collaborative process — as distinct from, say, a dance company led by a single choreographer. I learned of White Pines through Tangle's founder, my 25-year-old daughter, Lauren Rile Smith, when her postmodern feminist circus troupe won a weeklong residency. This opportunity, says Lauren, has been invaluable for Tangle, whose spatial and technical requirements make practice and rehearsal time precious. Its new piece, *You Don't Say*, will feature strongly developed characters and a narrative arc, a breakthrough in aerial acrobatic performance.

During their residency, Tangle members accomplished more in one week than they could have in months on their regular schedule. This afternoon, they share excerpts from their work-in-progress, which will premiere this fall at the Fringe Festival.

Tangle's new work has been influenced by the estate's architectural and domestic setting. During the demo, Sarah Nicolazzo dances midair on a trapeze with a wooden dining room chair. A humble coffee table becomes a vehicle for handstands in an ensemble segment. In an acrobatic routine using aerial rope, Sarah ascends toward the ceiling fresco, twists, and is suddenly upside down. Then she drops precipitously, only to be caught midair by the rope. A toddler in the audience roars in astonished joy, and the audience bursts into applause.

The problem with Lloyd's vision for an artists' haven in Cheltenham Township is that the Elkins Estate is currently "tangled" in a complex legal knot. White Pines Productions is a tenant of the Land Conservancy of Elkins Park, a nonprofit in mortgage default to the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de' Ricci, who bought the estate during the Great Depression. The conservancy uses it as a yoga retreat and rents it out for weddings and other events (currently, a three-week photo shoot for the Victoria's Secret winter lingerie catalog). Now bankrupt, the conservancy owes more than \$800,000 in taxes to Cheltenham Township and is under a court-mandated eviction. Lloyd writes rent checks to an escrow account for the nuns. A bystander in this struggle, White Pines faces an uncertain future.

Lloyd has sought foundation support to commission a feasibility report by Culture Works of Greater Philadelphia. Now two months into the six-month study, he hopes to discover strategies to help realize his vision of a utopian artistic commons while satisfying the mortgage and paying the tax obligation.

It's a tall task, finishing the 2012 season while planning for the future. But Lloyd is resolved to continue for as long as he can, pointing out that White Pines, the nuns, and the conservancy all share the same goal of conserving the buildings and gardens while going forward with a viable plan.

A performance is just a moment in time, as fleeting as memories of the storied Elkins family, whose grand excesses brought this place into existence. Or of the generations of nuns who lived and died within its many chambers. Or of the gaunt lingerie models whose catalog photos will soon enough be stuffed in recycling bins and carted away. The estate, so rich in marble, murals, and grand vistas — and yet so precarious — is kept alive for now by art, which provides purpose, and community, and a reason to go forward.

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