



**WASHINGTON
PERFORMING ARTS**
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**WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS ANNOUNCES
2024 POLA NIRENSKA DANCE AWARDS RECIPIENTS**

The annual awards recognize members of the dance community who have made outstanding contributions to the art form, with special consideration to those based in the D.C. region

(Washington, D.C.) – **Washington Performing Arts**, in association with the Pola Nirenska Dance Awards Committee, announced today the recipients of the **2024 Pola Nirenska Dance Awards**. Continuing a years-long tradition that celebrates trailblazing members of the dance community, the 2024 awards are being bestowed upon **Sarah Beth Oppenheim for Outstanding Achievements in Dance** and **Sylvia Soumah for Lifetime Achievement in Dance**.

The Pola Nirenska Dance Awards Committee includes co-chairs Jane Raleigh and Stephen Clapp and members Jenny Bilfield President/CEO of Washington Performing Arts, Rima Faber, Vincent Thomas Honorary Member: Douglas H. Wheeler, Sali Ann Kriegsman.

“As co-chairs, we are honored to continue the legacy of the Pola Nirenska Dance Awards. These awards celebrate outstanding achievement in dance and underscore the profound impact that dance can have in enriching our communities. We are proud to recognize and support the incredible contributions of our awardees, who inspire and uplift us all,” said Co-Chairs Jane Raleigh and Stephen Clapp.

Named after the illustrious D.C. modern dance teacher and choreographer and supported by her late husband Dr. Jan Karski—a Holocaust witness and World War II hero—the Pola Nirenska Dance Awards honor individuals who have made an impact on the field of dance locally and oftentimes nationally. Each year, award recipients are chosen by a committee of arts professionals and granted by Washington Performing Arts, reflecting the organization’s commitment to sustain and nurture performing artists.

“Coming by opportunities, conferred titles, or recognition in the dance world is, for me, really about a touchpoint to gather and celebrate with my community,” said Sarah Beth Oppenheim. “My first thought is always: how can I leverage this to benefit my dancers, our sister companies, and the DMV dance scene at large? I want to shout from the theater rooftops to the marley floors endless thanks to the people and places who make this dance life viable, meaningful, joyful! The spirit of Pola Nirenska and the endowment of her late husband are part of a thrive and share mentality here that I aim to honor and pay forward with this reward. It's a tender-loving and responsible-laden embrace to be in the company of those who have paved the way for us and whom I so admire! I am filled with gratitude; so deeply thankful to the WPA for the support in continuing to do the work I love.”

“This is truly an honor, and I am so grateful to be seen in the community. As a long-time artist in the DMV, it is hard to know sometime how much your work has impacted the DMV. I want to thank everyone for thinking of me for this award. I am looking forward to celebrating this award with my community and company,” said Mama Sylvia Soumah.

ABOUT THE 2024 POLA NIRENSKA DANCE AWARDS RECIPIENTS

For Outstanding Achievements in Dance: Sarah Beth Oppenheim

Silver Spring-based Sarah Beth Oppenheim’s (she/her) varied history includes 38 dance studios and trampoline sidewalks of Berlin. She likes to use scraps, abandoned tools, and painters tape to create site-specific choreography, believes in deepest plie to bend traditions, and dance as an everything salve. As a teaching artist mom, she mines, swaps, and alchemically mixes choreographic research, antiracist pedagogy, and arts and crafts between stage, studio, classroom, and nursery. Oppenheimer’s company Heart Stück Bernie makes site-specific and proscenium extravaganza works in museums, theaters, stairwells, back rooms, and other places she can convince the public to engage with dance.

Her educational letters include BFA SUNY Purchase and MFA University of Maryland. She is a Teaching Artist at Dance Place, Professorial Lecturer at American University, Education Coordinator at BlackLight Summit, and Artistic Director of Heart Stück Bernie.

Oppenhiem was a founding member of and danced for 10 years in Nelly van Bommel’s nøa dance in New York City. She also danced in Sam Bassett and Noah Baumbach films before relocation introduced her to the DMV dance community, where she has worked with Tzveta Kassabova, Stephanie Miracle, Sharon Mansur, Robin Neveu Brown, Orange Grove Dance, Candace Scarborough, and Kendra Portier’s BAND|kp. Paul Taylor, Nicholas Leichter, Kevin Wynn, Mark Morris, Clint Lutes, alex/xan: the median movement, Janessa Clark/KILTERBOX, and Nora Petrolunas are inspirations.

As an inaugural Artist in Residence at Dance Place from 2018-2020, she programmed and facilitated community events for students and choreographers, created new works exploring hyper-magical realism, politics, and systemic deconstruction experiments, and established a research practice of

land, music, and movement acknowledgements. Current research includes site-specific meaning-making, social justice community engagement, and subversive and durational studio pedagogy.

For Lifetime Achievement in Dance Sylvia Soumah

Mama Sylvia Soumah is the founder and Artistic Director of Coyaba Dance Theater. She has studied, performed, and taught throughout the D.C. Metro area and abroad. She has studied in Conakry, Guinea with Les Ballets Africains, and Senegal under the direction of Bouly Sonko, Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Senegal. She also performs with Erika Thimey Dance Theater and Carla and Company. Born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, she moved to Washington, D.C. in 1985. Sylvia began her extensive study of West African Dance under the tutelage of Aidoo Holmes, Founder/Artistic Director of Wose Dance Theater, where she learned the importance of African Dance technique and solo performance, and how to drum and sing. Sylvia has collaborated with Daniel Burkholder (*My Ocean is Never Blue*), StepAfrika, Kingsman Island Festival (DC), Usuthu Arts Productions (South Africa), Salamata from Ghana, West Africa, Jessica Phillips Silver: *Finding Rhythm! The Journey Through The Musical Brain* (2020), Inspired Child Educational Music Video: *A to Z, This is MY DC*. She was also a Co-Choreographer/Performer with *What's Going On* touring company under the direction of Vincent Thomas.

Additionally, Sylvia Soumah is the Director of Dance Place's African Dance Program. She also serves as Artistic Director and Griot of the *DanceAfrica DC* festival and has been since 2017 after the passing of the previous Griot Baba Chuck Davis in 2017. DC is one of the longest-running arms of this nationwide phenomenon, celebrating over 30 years of education, artistry, and advocacy for African culture in our nation's capital.

ABOUT POLA NIRENSKA



Pola Nirenska was a matriarch of modern dance in Washington, D.C. She helped elevate the art form as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher at a time when it was scarcely known by the general public. Born in Warsaw, Poland in 1910, Pola Nirenska trained at the Mary Wigman School in Dresden and toured the United States in 1932 with the Mary Wigman Dance Company. Ms. Nirenska moved to Vienna for further study with Rosalia Chladek, and then taught and performed in Italy. With fascism dominating continental Europe, she fled to Britain, where she danced for the troops while enduring the Blitz in London. She lost siblings and dozens of other

family members in the Holocaust.

Ms. Nirenska moved to the United States in 1949 and was "discovered" by the pioneering American modern dancer and choreographer Ted Shawn. On the advice of choreographer Doris Humphrey, she moved from New York to Washington, D.C. She met Patrick Hayes, founder of Washington Performing Arts before her retirement in 1969. When she resumed choreographing in 1980, Washington Performing Arts presented her at the Hartke Theater at Catholic University and on May 19, 1988 at the Terrace Theater as part of the City Dance Festival, under the leadership of Doug Wheeler, President Emeritus.

Following her death, the annual Pola Nirenska Dance Awards were established in 1993 by her husband, Dr. Jan Karski. The annual awards are presented by the Pola Nirenska Dance Awards Committee and Washington Performing Arts.

ABOUT DR. JAN KARSKI

Jan Karski was born Jan Koziielewski in Poland, in 1914. He received a degree in Law and Diplomacy in 1935 and served as a liaison officer of the Polish Underground during World War II. Among the first to relate accounts of the Holocaust to the world, he met with President Roosevelt in 1943 to plead for Allied intervention. His memoir, *Story of a Secret State*, was published in 1944 and became a best-seller. After the war, he earned a Ph.D. at Georgetown University and served on the faculty of its School of Foreign Service for 40 years. He died in Washington, D.C. in 2000. He was recognized with many honors, including Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded to him posthumously in 2012. He is also the subject of the play *Remember This: The Lesson of Jan Karski*, currently running at D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre.

ABOUT WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS

One of the most established and honored performing arts institutions in America, **Washington Performing Arts** has engaged for more than half a century with artists, audiences, students, and civic life. The city is truly our stage: for decades, in venues ranging from concert halls and clubs to public parks, we have presented a tremendous range of artists and art forms, from the most distinguished symphony orchestras to both renowned and emerging artists in classical music, jazz, international genres, and more. We also have an ever-expanding artistic and educational presence on the internet, envisioning ongoing opportunities for online connection and community.

Washington Performing Arts deeply values its partnerships with local organizations and other arts institutions. Through events online and in myriad performance venues and neighborhoods, we engage international visiting artists in community programs and introduce local artists to wider audiences. We place a premium on establishing artists as a continuing presence in the lives of both young people and adults through residencies and education programs.

Our achievements have been recognized with a National Medal of Arts and with three Mayor's Arts Awards from the DC Government. We have now embarked upon our second half-century, ever inspired by the motto of our founder, Patrick Hayes: "Everybody in, nobody out."

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