

# Lehigh News



Bandaloop dancers sway and shift rhythmically to live music on the exterior walls of the Fairchild-Martindale Library.

## **Bandaloop Wows at Outdoor Performance at FML**

As Zoellner Arts Center Celebrates its 25th anniversary, it collaborates with Lehigh University Libraries to bring the aerial dance company to campus for an outside performance and workshops for school-aged children.

All eyes were looking *way up* Thursday—to the top floors of Fairchild-Martindale Library. Dancers wearing bright red and bathed in brilliant sunlight, swayed and shifted rhythmically to live music, expression oozing from every part of their bodies—their legs, arms, torsos, heads, hands and all the way to their fingertips.

Their “floor” was the brick exterior library wall, and the dancers, hanging from heavy-duty nylon ropes like mountain climbers, moved gracefully in unison or in sequence, toward each other or away, sometimes entwined, sometimes using the wall to leap forward. They rappelled down, then back up.

Combining artistry and athleticism, the performance by [Bandaloop](#) was an awe-inspiring spectacle. But it also was much more. The Oakland, Calif.-based company’s visit to Lehigh was a special component of the celebration of [Zoellner Arts Center’s 25th anniversary](#)—a manifestation of a desire to bring adventurous and stimulating artistic experiences outside the walls of the center and to connect directly with students and the surrounding community.

It was an exercise in collaboration, with [Zoellner](#), [Lehigh University Libraries](#), the [National Museum of Industrial History](#) and local schools teaming up to make the biggest impact. And it was an opportunity for several hundred middle school students to visit campus, experience an extraordinary event and learn about the history of the textile industry in the Lehigh Valley—an industry examined in the piece presented by Bandaloop, called “LOOM: Field.”



Bandaloop presented a piece called “LOOM: Field,” which is designed to “deepen and challenge our perspective on the art and industry of textiles.”

“For me, it’s all about collaboration. I wanted to show how we could collaborate both externally and



internally, on campus and in the community,” said Mark Wilson, Zoellner executive director. “As we look forward, our vision for the next 25 years is to activate spaces on campus and infuse the community with art, build an air of excitement with outdoor performances and connect with more campus and community partners to develop creative energy.”

Said University Librarian Boaz Nadav-Manes, “We want to bring people into our spaces in a way that is welcoming and adventurous, in a way that makes them curious and that shows them the ways libraries can support them.”

The central space around the library was electric. Many staff members and volunteers from the library and Zoellner, wearing purple “Arts Impact” T-shirts celebrating Zoellner’s anniversary year, directed the crowd, helping to wrangle the middle school students and answer questions from Lehigh students and people attending from the community.

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—MARK WILSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ZOELLNER ARTS CENTER

In addition to several performances on Thursday—and another one Saturday night (April 15) at Zoellner Arts Center preceding its anniversary gala with the Philadelphia Orchestra—Bandaloop is presenting two residencies. On Monday (April 17), Bandaloop will teach the Lehigh University Dance Team about its technique and give members the opportunity to practice wall dancing. On Tuesday (April 18), it will do the same with students from the Muhlenberg College acrobatics class.

## **A Vertical Dance Company**

Bandaloop calls itself a “vertical dance company” that “celebrates the human spirit, nature and communities through dance that uses climbing technology to expand and challenge what is possible.”

Wilson said he has long admired the “world class” company, which has presented its gravity-defying artistry and messages of social and environmental responsibility since 1991.

The company arrived at Lehigh on Monday, with eight performers, three riggers and two technical staff. The week was spent “rigging and rehearsing,” said Bandaloop Artistic Director Melecia Estrella. Dancers

drew attention all week as they practiced rappelling on the library walls. Estrella noted that it takes a while to “learn the building.”

Learn it, they did.

Featured were four dances in a truncated version of “LOOM: Field.” “LOOM” is a three-part series designed to “deepen and challenge our perspective on the art and industry of textiles.” “Field” is the middle piece; the first, “Flood,” premiered in February 2020, and the third, “Flock,” is a work in progress.

Introducing the performance, Estrella explained that “one thing all of you have in common is you are all wearing clothes. The cotton on your skin came from a field. The silk came from a cocoon. The polyester came from oil extraction. This show is dedicated to the soil and the cocoons and the great workers who make our clothes possible. And to our grandmothers who made your clothes and created a world for you to live in.”

From a stage near the library entrance, singer Chibueze Crouch, guitarist/pianist/composer Ben Juodvalkis and Estrella, presented powerful original music and spoken words that inspired the dancers’ movements. The music varied from urgent, thumping rhythms, to soulful jazz to ethereal. One dance was a solo, with Crouch singing while suspended and wrapping herself in a giant quilt dropped from the roof. Another was a duet, and the performance opened and closed with group dances. The choreography was intricate and compelling. In essence, according to Estrella, “LOOM: Field” was designed to turn a building’s façade into a giant loom, “where stories and dances interlace.”

Bandaloop describes “LOOM” this way: LOOM blends ancestral weaving mythologies, traditional techniques of fabric creation, expressions of the ecological and social impacts of a globalized textile industry and the influence of technological fibers that connect and divide lives into a dynamic performance. As vertical dance is a form that relies on state-of-the science woven nylon climbing ropes, LOOM locates Bandaloop’s core technical framework in a textile lineage.

“As one of the largest polluting industries in the world, fraught with devastating globalized labor and farming practices, the impact of clothing and fashion is often overlooked in our modern consumer lifestyles. The fallout of our textile consumption will be dealt with for generations to come. ‘LOOM juxtaposes this large-scale ecological crisis with the timeless cross-cultural power of fabric to hold, comfort, adorn and sanctify the human experience. Fabric stories are drawn from the swaddling blanket, the altar cloth, the death shroud and the fishing net. LOOM also weaves in the community building and therapeutic aspects of handmaking techniques; the focused rhythms of stitching, knitting, spinning and weaving of fiber onto cloth.”

The theme of ‘LOOM’ created a huge opportunity for an educational experience because at the turn of the 20th century, the Lehigh Valley was a huge textile hub—the second largest producer of silk in the world.



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## A Learning Experience

Students from Broughal Middle School and the Arts Academy Charter Middle School and homeschoolers attended three short workshops in the library to illuminate the themes in the performance.

In one workshop in the lobby, students wove colorful fabric through a loom in a Community Weaving Project prepared by the National Museum of Industrial History. They discussed the idea of “Community” with museum staff, writing about what makes a community on a white board. They learned how workers in textile factories lived a hard life but banded together to fight for their rights and make their lives better. They pulled and twisted a piece of fiber to discover how yarn is made.

In another workshop in the new LTS Circle—Community and Inclusion Resource Center, librarians talked with students about the Lehigh Valley’s silk industry and how silk is made.

And in a third workshop on the library’s sixth floor, sitting in a circle surrounded by an exhibit of photographs of Bandaloon performances over the years on bridges, mountaintops, high rises, stadiums

<https://www2.lehigh.edu/news/bandaloon-wows-at-outdoor-performance-at-fml>



Throughout Bandaloop performances over the city, from bridges, mountain tops, high rises, stadiums and historical sites around the world, students discussed the influence of fashion and how it is used to express culture and individuality.

“Zoellner has gone above and beyond in how they are integrating this educational element into the themes of the performance,” said Estrella. “The thematic alignment with the history of the silk industry and of labor aligns here more than anywhere else. After these experiences, the audience will see the work differently than any other audience.”

After the performance, members of Bandaloop came down to Earth for a Q&A. Students asked about their costumes (designed by ninth generation Nigerian weaver IB Bayo), their ropes (state-of the art climbing equipment) and their “biggest” show (the 2017 American Music Awards with the pop star Pink.) Bandaloop was asked about the inspiration for the show, with Estrella explaining it came from his grandmother, who he said crocheted to pass the time while incarcerated in a concentration camp in the Philippines during World War II before she was killed.

Interviewed after the performance, the middle school students said it was “cool.” Lauren, a Broughal seventh grader, said: “I liked how they were jumping off the wall and dancing.”

Wilson said there might be “multiple on-ramps” in their learning. “The hope is they hop on to continue their journey.”

*Story by Jodi Duckett*



Students asked about their costumes, which were designed by ninth generation Nigerian weaver IB Bayo.

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