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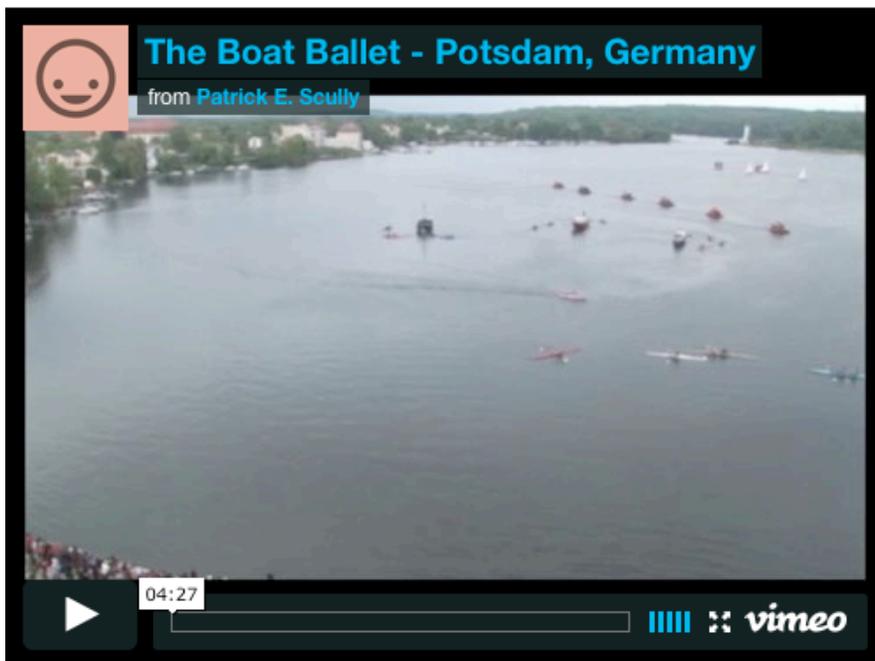
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Mississippi River boat ballet gives new meaning to 'dancing waters'

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[The Boat Ballet - Potsdam, Germany](#) from [Patrick E. Scully](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Patrick Scully wants to stage a ballet this summer in the Twin Cities that takes place on a body of water, but the setting won't be Swan Lake and the performers won't have tutus.

Instead, the dance will take place on the Mississippi River, and the dancers will have propellers and paddles.

Scully, a local dancer, choreographer and founder of Patrick's Cabaret in Minneapolis, plans something called the Mississippi River Boat Ballet, a performance on the water in which dozens of vessels will be the stars.

The idea might seem a bit far-fetched, except that Scully has pulled off a boat ballet before.

About five years ago, he was asked to create a performance for a festival at the fabrik Potsdam, an international center for dance and movement art in Germany.



The center is in a renovated warehouse on the Havel River, and Scully asked the dance center's artistic co-director, "Has anyone ever used the river here as a performance sphere, like a ballet with boats?"

"You mean dancers dancing on boats?" the artistic co-director replied.

"No, the boats are the dancers," Scully said.

Sailboats and kayaks were among the 45 boats Patrick Scully used in his boat ballet on the Havel River at Potsdam, Germany in 2010. (Photo Hannes Häfele)

Scully created a one-hour dance accompanied by music after spending two months in rehearsals, standing on the shore with a megaphone herding 45 boats crewed by volunteers.

The boats included kayaks, racing sculls, vintage yachts and "huckleberries," a floating rental camping cabin mounted on pontoons.

There also were sailboats, which Scully found are limited by wind speed and direction and crewed by sailors typically interested in racing, not artistic movement.

"Now you get into the heart of the choreography challenge," Scully said. "You can't teach a sailboat to do a cartwheel."

Scully, who doesn't own a boat himself, also learned that it's difficult to get different kayaks to move at the same speed with the same paddle rhythm.

"I was doing something I had never done before, which was orchestrating boats in a dance," he said.

During the May 2010 performance, Scully relayed time cues to the boats every 30 seconds by walkie-talkie.

Happily, many of the boaters were actual dancers, used to memorizing sequences of movement that needed to be performed in unison and on cue.

On Scully's website, a video of the performance shows the boats weaving around each other, rotating in a circle like square dancers or moving across the water in a V-formation like geese.

Scully said he sought to use natural shapes and patterns to create a meditative feel to the dance.

"My idea was to have people just see the river in new ways," he said.

No boats collided, and no one fell into the water, he said. He estimates about 4,000 to 5,000 people saw the free performance. "It was extremely well received," he said.

Scully said his plans to repeat the project in the Twin Cities are more ambitious and more challenging.



The current is more of an issue on the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities than the lake-like Havel in Potsdam. And Scully wants to get 100 boats involved in the Twin Cities event with an even wider range of vessels from paddleboards to motor boats.

About 5,000 people attended the boat ballet that choreographer Patrick Scully created in Potsdam as part of a dance festival. (Photo Hannes Häfele)

At Potsdam, Scully wanted to get a water taxi in the boat ballet. On the Mississippi, he would like to see the passage of a river barge in the dance if a barge company can be persuaded to cooperate.

He wants to hold the event in August in St. Paul or Minneapolis. Once he decides on a date and location, he said, he'll work with government entities, including municipal, park and sheriff's department water safety officials and the Army Corp of Engineers.

"I have an idea of the kind of permissions we'll need," Scully said.

"I think it's entirely possible, and I think we'll make it happen," said Kalen Kier, a local musician, kayak instructor and kayak guide enlisted by Scully to help with the ballet.

"It's always going to be contingent on conditions," said Kier. But Kier said in August, "the river is a pretty slow-moving body of water, and a ballet of boats is a slow-moving event."

Scully received a \$10,000 Artist Initiative grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board in November for the project, and he said he is open to having local businesses and organizations as partners or sponsors.

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Kayaks paddle in a V during Patrick Scully's boat ballet on the Havel River at Potsdam, Germany in 2010. His work was accompanied by music played over loudspeakers to the audience on the shore. (Photo Hannes Häfele)

LEARN MORE

Boat ballet organizer Patrick Scully plans an informational meeting for anyone interested in participating or sponsoring the event at 1 to 2:30 p.m. Saturday at Mississippi Watershed Management Organization, 2522 Marshall St. NE, Minneapolis. For information, email patrick@patrickscully.org.

SEE FOR YOURSELF

View video of Scully's 2010 boat ballet in Germany online at patrickscully.org/touring/#section-works.