

Media Contact:

Mariclare Hulbert, Publicist

585.278.2302

mariclare.hulbert@gmail.com

**THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHOREOGRAPHY-AKRON SUPPORTS
MINNESOTA-BASED ARTISTS THROUGH MCKNIGHT FELLOWSHIPS**



Left to right: Megan Mayer (photo Dale Dong), Kristin Van Loon and Arwen Wilder of HIJACK (photo Dale Dong), and Ashwini Ramaswamy [jumping] with Alanna Morris and Berit Ahlgren (photo W. Tanner Young)

AKRON, Ohio (February 1, 2023) — **The National Center for Choreography - Akron (NCCAkron)** shares updates on recent collaborative residencies with MN-based dance artists, funded by the McKnight Fellowship Program for Choreographers. As part of this strategic initiative, NCCAkron aggregates resources with the McKnight Fellowship Program to offer development opportunities to mid-career artists awarded the Fellowship. The most recent recipients include **Paula Mann (Time Track Productions), Megan Mayer, Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy (Ragamala Dance Company), Ashwini Ramaswamy, Kaz K Sherman, Kristin Van Loon and Arwen Wilder (HIJACK), and Taja Will.**

McKnight Fellowships for Choreographers provides fellowship awards to mid-career choreographers in Minnesota. The McKnight Fellowships for Choreographers are designed to enrich and strengthen the Minnesota arts community by acknowledging the accomplishments of individual choreographers and providing for their artistic growth. The Fellowships annually awards three \$25,000 fellowships to Minnesota choreographers. The awards are unrestricted and can help an artist set aside periods of time for study, reflection, experimentation, and exploration; take advantage of an opportunity; or work on a new project. The Fellowship Program is housed at the Cowles Center and funded by the McKnight Foundation.

In addition to the unrestricted monetary award, McKnight also connects recent fellows with different kinds of residency partners. The invitation includes an additional \$7,500 from McKnight with the expectation of a match from the residency partner. NCCAkron has been a residency partner since 2019.

“Working with and the input we’ve received from McKnight Choreographers has helped us create adaptive opportunities and facilitated reciprocal experiences to inform all of our other programs. Both artist and organization are changed,” **NCCAkron Executive/Artistic Director Christy Bolingbroke** remarked. “NCCAkron curatorial values commit to operate from abundance and to center experimentation. Practicing the aggregation of resources to ask not only ‘what do you want to do?’ but ‘what can we realize together?’ has further grounded these values.”

McKnight Fellowship Program Director Dana Kassel agrees, “The Choreography Fellows have diverse needs for their work, and the most productive support can be found in flexible and creative thinking from a residency host site. NCCAkron has been beautifully responsive to these needs, and often helps the choreographer envision and create entirely new paths forward for their work.”

The McKnight Fellowships for Choreographers program partnership with NCCAkron comes to a close in 2023-24. “We can’t overstate our gratitude for the McKnight Fellowship Program’s investment and collaboration,” shared **NCCAkron Board Member and Development Committee Chair DeMarcus Akeem Suggs** (Minneapolis, MN). “NCCAkron is committed to both learning from and building on the success of this collaborative investment. As wonderful as it has been to witness the Twin Cities dance community receive support and amplification, I’m excited that NCCAkron has this model to guide the cultivation of new partnerships that will benefit even more artists and dance communities throughout the country.”

Residencies & Artist Activities (in the order of appearance at NCCAkron)

Megan Mayer (2016 McKnight Choreography Fellow) came to NCCAkron in July 2019 to develop *(FW) Redux*, a dance for four performers, including Mayer, Charles Campbell, Matt Regan, and Greg Waletski, with additional sound design by Matt Regan. *(FW) Redux* asked: How best to deal with anxiety in such a troubled time? How do we persist when we’re all broken? What can we contribute during this time of racial/political/artistic unease? Who gets to claim and define gender? During the residency, NCCAkron organized a national focus group with McKnight representative (at the time) Mary Ellen Childs, dance writer Lauren Warnecke, artist/administrator Sara Juli, and presenter Brian Rogers to explore and discuss shifting contexts for Mayer’s work.

Taja Will (2018 McKnight Choreography Fellow) was initially slated to be in creative residence for *Blood Language* in April 2020. Due to COVID-19, Will instead collaborated and worked with NCCAkron in many different forms. Activities included virtual guest teaching as part of the 21st Century Dance Practices survey series, speaking as a podcast guest on an episode of [Inside the Dancer’s Studio](#), and designing choreographic prompts for NCCAkron’s *Residency in a Box* in August 2020. Will also created and developed their feature-length film *LÍNEAS de SANGRE*, with the filmmaker Sequoia Hauck, over three phases in five months during a Satellite Residency in early 2021.

Paula Mann (2019 McKnight Choreography Fellow) taught University of Akron students as part of 21st Century Dance Practices and was also interviewed by Christy Bolingbroke for the [Inside the Dancer's Studio](#) conversation series in 2021. In May 2022, Mann brought five artists to Akron, including Leila Awadallah, Erika Martin, Carmen Lucia Lincoln, Johnathan Surber, and Roxanne Wallace. While in residence, they developed *Towards Utopia*, a contemporary dance performance exploring the desire to create a more perfect world, charting the emotional struggles of individualism versus the group dynamic and seeking a common purpose toward an equitable future.

Kristin Van Loon and Arwen Wilder of HIJACK (2020 McKnight Choreography Fellows) were in residence at NCCAkron in August 2022. The artists developed their new work *SWAY*, collaborating with dancer Jules G. Bither and visual artist Rachel Youn. In an auditorium theater, they explored self-directed light and interacted with 24 animated artificial plant sculptures. They dedicated a day to video documenting the work with video artist Kevin Obsatz. At the residency's close, they shared excerpts of *SWAY* in a public work-in-process showing, followed by an ice cream social at Chill Artisan Ice Cream with their very own featured flavor.

Ashwini Ramaswamy (2019 McKnight Choreography Fellow) originally came to NCCAkron in October 2019 for a National Dance Project-funded technical residency in support of her work *Let the Crows Come*. Ramaswamy then chose to return to NCCAkron as part of her McKnight Fellowship, to continue this choreographic inquiry and develop her next dance work, *Invisible Cities*. In 2021-22, Ramaswamy hosted an early investigative session as a Satellite Residency in the Twin Cities and also participated in 21st Century Dance Practices. She translated Bharatanatyam principles to contemporary dance students at UA and professional company Groundworks Dance Theatre (Cleveland, OH) and contributed to [Inside the Dancer's Studio](#). In September 2022, Ramaswamy brought her lead collaborating artists Kevork Mourad (visual artist), Berit Ahlgren (dancer/choreographer), Alanna Morris (dancer/choreographer), Joseph Tran (dancer/choreographer), and Gemma Isaacson (dancer) to work all together in Akron.

Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy of Ragamala Dance Company (2020 McKnight Choreography Fellows) are the collaborative leadership duo behind Ragamala Dance Company. They are working with NCCAkron to convene domestic and international presenters around the question, "what constitutes American dance?" These focus group conversations will be facilitated by NCCAkron and take place alongside their upcoming tour of *Fires of Varanasi* in February and March 2023.

Kaz K Sherman (2020 McKnight Choreography Fellow) is working towards an upcoming creative residency in summer/fall 2023, exploring hospital workplace culture and the hospicing of people, animals, and careers.

About the McKnight Foundation Artist Fellowship Program

Founded on the belief that Minnesota thrives when its artists thrive, the McKnight Foundation's arts program is one of the oldest and largest of its kind in the country. Support for individual working Minnesota artists has been a cornerstone of the program since it began in 1982. The

McKnight Artist Fellowships Program provides annual, unrestricted cash awards to outstanding mid-career Minnesota artists in 15 different creative disciplines. Program partner organizations administer the fellowships and structure them to respond to the unique challenges of different disciplines. Currently the foundation contributes about \$2.8 million per year to its statewide fellowships. For more information, visit mcknight.org/artistfellowships.

About NCCAkron

The National Center for Choreography at The University of Akron supports the research and development of new work in dance by exploring the full potential of the creative process. In addition to offering studio and technical residencies to make new work, activities focus on catalyzing dialogue and experimentation; creating proximity among artists and dance thinkers; and aggregating resources around dance making. For more information, visit nccakron.org.

The establishment and general operation of NCCAkron is made possible by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

###

Artist Bios

HIJACK is the Minneapolis-based choreographic collaboration of Kristin Van Loon and Arwen Wilder. HIJACK is the confluence and clash of two independent compositional/kinesthetic impulses. Their dances embrace juxtaposition. Their dances house unlikely intimates and question “who is the enemy?” Over the last 29 years, they have created over 100 dances and performed in venues ranging from proscenium to barely legal. HIJACK has performed in New York (at DTW, PS122, HERE ArtCenter, Catch/Movement Research Festival, La Mama, Dixon Place, Chocolate Factory, Brooklyn Studios for Dance, 9 Herkimer), Japan, Russia, Ottawa, Chicago, Colorado, New Orleans, Seattle, Philadelphia, San Francisco, at Fuse Box Festival in Austin Texas, and Bates Dance Festival in Maine and Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation. HIJACK has enjoyed long relationships with Bryant Lake Bowl Theater (where their 1996 *Take Me To Cuba* was the theater’s first-ever dance concert), Zenon Dance School (where they have taught every Wednesday morning for 22 years), and Walker Art Center (which commissioned *redundant, ready, reading, radish, Red Eye* to celebrate twenty years of HIJACK). In 2014, *Contact Quarterly* published the chapbook *Passing for Dance: A HIJACK Reader*, edited and instigated by Lisa Nelson. The Star Tribune selected *Jealousy* (HIJACK’s 2019 installation/performance collaboration with Ryan Fontaine and Heidi Eckwall) as one of the “Best of 2019” shows.

Paula Mann’s journey took her from Appalachian roots to Detroit teenage runaway, through Kent State in the 1970s, to NYU and the downtown dance scene of the 1980s. She studied Humphrey/Limon technique with Ruth Currier and members of the Limon company, Hawkins technique with Eric Hawkins, and Cunningham with Merce Cunningham. Her first concert of choreography was produced at the Merce Cunningham Studio in 1980, and later that year she co-founded Dudek/Mann + Dancers with partner Tina Dudek. Mann moved to the Twin Cities in

1987, armed with a BA and MFA in Dance from NYU, and following seven years as co-director of Dudek/Mann + Dancers. Since her arrival in the Twin Cities, Mann has created 50 new works and is co-artistic director of TIME TRACK PRODUCTIONS with visual artist Steve Paul. She has been a driving force in Contemporary Dance and Performance based out of Minneapolis for the past 30 years; challenging, educating, and engaging artists, audiences, and communities with passion, inventiveness, and rigor. She was full-time faculty at the University of Minnesota Department of Theater and Dance from 1993-2013 and a 2019 McKnight Choreography Fellow. www.timetrackdance.org

Megan Mayer is an award-winning Minneapolis-based artist working with choreography, dance, experimental video, and photography. Their work pulls from minimalism, transposition, mimicry, grief, tenderness, wry humor, loneliness, social anxiety, fake bad timing, and exacting musicality. By exposing tiny emotional undercurrents, Mayer finds virtuosity through vulnerability and gesture. Drawn to the edges of the experience of performing: the anticipatory rapid heartbeat before going onstage, and the regretful relief after exiting, the work often reveals where that switch lives in the body. Mayer makes deeply personal dances that celebrate the people performing them.

For 35+ years Mayer has always held a full-time job in addition to being an artist, noting that their job and dancemaking are so intertwined that they can't consider one without the demands of the other. Mayer makes art work amidst the inequities and confines of late-stage capitalism and tries to use their privilege to advocate for fellow artists and employees. Mayer's work has been generously supported by two McKnight Choreographic Fellowships, residencies at the National Center for Choreography--Akron (Ohio), Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (Florida), and several local arts organizations, grants from Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, Minnesota State Arts Board, and Jerome Foundation, a Sage Dance Award, and numerous choreographic commissions. www.meganmayer.com

Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy are Artistic Directors of Ragamala Dance Company, founded by Ranee in 1992. As dancemakers, performers, and culture bearers, Ranee and Aparna's work is strongly influenced by their diasporic experience. Merging the rich traditions and deep philosophical roots of their South Indian heritage with their hybrid perspective as first-generation Americans, their intent is to evolve ancestral and cultural knowledge in the diaspora, underscoring its potential to activate contemporary human thought.

Described by *The New York Times* as "soulful, imaginative and rhythmically contagious... Ragamala shows how Indian forms can be some of the most transcendent experiences that dance has to offer," Ranee and Aparna's choreographic work has been commissioned by the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, Joyce Theater, Northrop, American Dance Festival, and Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi, among many others. Most recently, they were selected to open the Kennedy Center's 50th Anniversary celebration with an outdoor, site-specific performance of their newest work, *Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim*.

Ranee and Aparna's recent honors and awards include Guggenheim Fellowships, Doris Duke Performing Artist Awards, Bogliasco Foundation Fellowships (Italy), and Rockefeller Foundation

Bellagio Center Research Fellowships (Italy). Individually, Ranees has been awarded a United States Artist Fellowship, a McKnight Distinguished Artist Award, Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and 14 McKnight Fellowships for Choreography and Interdisciplinary Art in recognition of her pioneering work; Aparna is the recipient of a Joyce Award, four McKnight Fellowships for Dance and Choreography, a Bush Fellowship for Choreography, and a Distinguished Achievement Award from Carleton College, and her solo work has been commissioned by the American Dance Festival and Silk Road Ensemble. Ranees serves on the National Council on the Arts, appointed by President Barack Obama. www.ragamaladance.org

Ashwini Ramaswamy has spent over 30 years studying Bharatanatyam from award-winning Bharatanatyam choreographers Ranees Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy (her mother and sister), and their guru, the legendary Smt. Alarmél Valli of Chennai, India since 2011. As a founding member of Ragamala Dance Company, she has toured extensively nationally and internationally. As an independent choreographer, Ashwini has received commissions from the Liquid Music Series, the Great Northern Festival, Bates Dance Festival, and the Perelman Center for the Arts, among others; residencies at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, UNC Chapel Hill, Kohler Arts Center, the National Center for Choreography, the Bogliasco Foundation (Italy), and The Camargo Foundation (France); support from the National Dance Project, MAP Fund, USArtists International, a Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship, and McKnight Fellowships for Dance and Choreography. Her choreography was a 2021 'Best of the Year' in *The Washington Post* and a 2022 critics pick in *The New York Times*. Ashwini is a recipient of grants from the McKnight Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, and Jerome Foundation, including a recent inaugural Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship. Ashwini's work is supported by USArtists International, National Endowment for the Arts, and New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project. A recent piece was commissioned by The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra's Liquid Music Series, and her work has been developed in residence at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) and the Baryshnikov Arts Center (New York, NY). www.ashwiniramaswamy.com

Kaz K Sherman's work incorporates her background in dance, writing, theater, music, and the handyman arts. Hands-on in all aspects of her work, she choreographs and performs, builds sets and props, designs sound and video, and writes text. Her investigations in craft and visual art, including glassblowing, woodworking, and sculpture, illuminate how the body extends to and through other materials, culminating in an interdependent world where objects elucidate bodies, choreography is language, and words become tools. Her work has been presented by Walker Art Center, P.S. 122, CAP UCLA, PICA/TBA Festival, Fusebox Festival, The Chocolate Factory Theater, Hair+Nails Gallery, Roman Susan, American Realness, The Southern Theater, Diverseworks, Movement Research, Highways Performance Space, ODC, and many others. Honors include the 2020 Herb Alpert Award in Dance; a 2016-2017 Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University; McKnight Foundation Fellowships in Choreography and Dance; a NY Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award; multiple MacDowell Fellowships; and residencies with Vermont Performance Lab, Movement Research, ADI/Lumberyard, and the Bogliasco Foundation program in Liguria, Italy. She's been a freelance stage technician, technical director, and production manager for over 25 years. In conjunction with her show *Soft Goods* (2016), which explored work, death, loss, and the occupational self-obliteration of stagehands, she

partnered with Behind the Scenes to create a mental health/chemical dependency counseling fund specifically for technical production workers. Since 2020, she's been working in COVID healthcare support, helping to run testing and vaccination sites across MN.

Taja Will (they/them) is a non-binary, chronically ill, queer, Latinx (Chilean) adoptee. They are a performer, choreographer, somatic therapist, consultant, and Healing Justice practitioner based in Mni Sota Makoce, on the ancestral lands of the Dakota and Anishinaabe. Taja's approach integrates improvisation, somatic modalities, text, and vocals in contemporary performance. Their aesthetic is one of spontaneity, bold choice-making, sonic and kinetic partnership, and the ability to move in relationship to risk and intimacy. Will's artistic work explores visceral connections to current socio-cultural realities through a blend of ritual, dense multi-layered worldbuilding, and everyday magic. Taja initiates solo projects and teaching ventures and is a recent recipient of the Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship, in the dance field, awarded in 2021. Their work has been presented throughout the Twin Cities and across the United States. Including local performances at the Walker Art Center Choreographer's Evening, the Red Eye Theater's New Works 4 Weeks, the Radical Recess series, Right Here Showcase, and the Candy Box Dance Festival. They were the recipient of a 2018-'19 McKnight Choreography Fellowship, administered by the Cowles Center and funded by The McKnight Foundation. Will has recently received support from the National Association of Latinx Arts & Culture, the Minnesota State Arts Board, and the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council. Taja maintains a dynamic Healing Justice practice that includes consulting with individuals, organizations, and communities in the context of workshops, conflict mediation, one-on-one somatic healing sessions, nervous system triage, disability justice and access training, board development and organizational cultural competency, and individual coaching on unwinding from white body supremacy culture. They ground their work in indigenous solidarity and decolonization as a means to undo white and able body supremacy and its pervasive relationship to capitalism. Taja is committed to working for healing and liberation of Black, Indigenous, and people of color and radical care work for folks with chronic illness and disabilities. www.tajawillartist.com

###