

THE ART OF LIVING

From in the studio to on the stage, Philadelphia's creative class is as dynamic as it is diverse. Here, the six names to know right now.

BY ANTONIA DEPACE,
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THE music maker

Marcus John Bryant, better known as A.R.T., has worked with John Legend and Ludacris.

A.R.T.

One of music's most in-demand collaborators steps out of the shadows for his first solo effort.

Just like his songs, there's heartfelt meaning behind A.R.T.'s name. The acronym stands for "Another Reason To," which the singer, songwriter and producer—born Marcus John Bryant—defines as discovering new ways "to dream, to believe and to grow." His dreams were one step closer to reality when he moved to Philadelphia from Virginia in 2002. "Around that time, Philly was the mecca of music," he says. "I love the city's energy." A self-taught artist who plays four instruments, A.R.T. has worked with Jermaine Dupri, Ludacris and John Legend. In 2008, A.R.T. co-produced "If You Are Out There" for Legend's third studio album, *Evolver*. Inspired by Barack Obama's run for president, Legend went on to perform the song live that same year during the Democratic National Convention. A.R.T. tapped into that same sense of passion for his newest EP, *Urban Tragedy*, inspired by the tension in the nation's urban communities. "The songs mention some of the most important and historical moments of our time," he says. "I don't write or sing about anything that I don't feel."

THE painter

Baltzell has taught at PAFA for more than 30 years.



JAN BALTZELL

The veteran painter and PAFA professor finds creative solace inside her studio.

Jan Baltzell's South Philly studio is filled with art and poetry books, postcards and other favorite images tacked up on the wall, rocks from the beaches of Cape Cod and large philodendrons (the ones Matisse loved). It's a place of solace for this artist who has made her reputation with gestural-abstract paintings that play with light, movement and the brilliant manipulation of color. "My work is denser than in the past," says Baltzell whose paintings appeared last month at Schmidt Dean Gallery, and who is also within art collections in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. "There's aggravation and a lack of air in the work that I'm feeling in society and politics now," Baltzell, a Philadelphian and daughter of painter Jane Piper and Penn sociologist Digby Baltzell, has taught at PAFA for 33 years. As much as she loves the energy from her students, Baltzell looks forward to her studio time, "When I'm not there, I start going a little crazy," she confesses. "It's a place where I have the adventure and struggle of finding out what my works will be—that is my lifeblood."

ZECHENG LIANG

A high-flying soloist leaps into his latest role in *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker*.

You might've seen Zecheng Liang zipping around town on his new red scooter. The Pennsylvania Ballet's artistic director, Angel Corella, a Vespa enthusiast, clued him in on where to buy one. But it's onstage where Liang soars. "With his extraordinary technique, he can fly," says Corella. "It's unusual to see that kind of freedom. He never holds back." The 25-year-old from Jimo, China, is in his second year with the company, having previously danced with the Houston Ballet, and is dazzling patrons with his charisma, artistic confidence, musicality, superb technique and the height on his jumps. But more than his gaspworthy athletic tricks, Liang has won fans with his full commitment to the entirety of the roles he performs. "If you only do the trick, you're just a trick dancer," says Liang, who next dances the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy's cavalier in *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker*. "There's no artistry there. For example, with *Romeo and Juliet*, I had to feel like Romeo and dance like Romeo. Audiences want to see the whole ballet, not just that one cool move. I want to make the whole ballet unforgettable."

THE
soloist

Liang in Christopher
Wheeldon's *For Four*





ALANNA J. SMITH

This Philadelphia actress is a fixture on the Walnut Street Theatre's historic stage.

If you were wondering where Alanna J. Smith will be on Christmas Eve, you'll find her onstage at the Walnut Street Theatre for rehearsals. The Philadelphia actress is preparing for her upcoming role in *The Comedy of Tenors*, a farce set in a 1930s opera house in Paris. She doesn't have to look very far for inspiration to play the part of Mimi, an aspiring actress. Smith, who grew up in North Jersey, about an hour away from New York City's Great White Way, studied musical theater at Ithaca College. After graduation, she turned to Philly for an apprenticeship and soon landed a spot at Walnut Street's "musical theatre boot camp," as she calls it. Since then, Smith has been in hundreds of performances and played memorable roles like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. But her favorite show so far? *Noises Off*, in which she played the role of Brooke Ashton. "I want to do all kinds of shows for as long as I can," says Smith, who moonlights as a yoga instructor and plays the ukulele. "Philadelphia's [theater industry] is an avenue that keeps those horizons open for me."

THE shooting star



PHOTO BY DANIELLE NOWAK

Smith is readying for
her next role *The
Comedy of Tenors*.

THE
wordsmith



Rucker received
a Pew Fellowship
earlier this year.

THE powerhouse



URSULA RUCKER

The pen has always been mightier than the sword for Philadelphia's first lady of poetry.

Ursula Rucker fearlessly tells it like it is. The poet/activist/recording artist delivers the truth about life's complexities, emotional punches and moments of grace. "Art is a lifesaver," says the velvet-voiced Rucker. "It keeps us from going insane with all this trauma and drama that we're all experiencing right now." The Germantown artist's creativity has always been marked by a certain cool vulnerability—in her poetry, music and activism. Particularly noteworthy was her 2015 epic performance poem, "My Father's Daughter," where she delivered the raw autobiographical story of her own family's troubles. Rucker received a prestigious Pew Fellowship this spring that salutes her myriad creative work. And Rucker is a staple on the Philly performance scene, from her early days performing at Zanzibar Blue and Silk City to her musical collaborations with The Roots, King Britt and Wax Tailor to kicking off the Barnes Foundation's *Barnes Takeover* performance series. Rucker's calling to promote positive change fuels her creative drive. "Most assuredly my art is a superpower," says Rucker. "It enables me to help so many people."

JARRETT OTT

Opera Philadelphia's most commanding voice takes his talents around the world this winter.

Growing up in rural Pen Argyl, Penn., Jarrett Ott never fully felt comfortable with himself until a music teacher encouraged his vocal abilities—and changed his life forever. Today, he is a rising star in the world of opera. Ott, who attended Curtis Institute of Music, had his breakout lead role as W.P. Inman in Opera Philadelphia's 2016 production of *Cold Mountain*. He had been workshopping the opera from the beginning and stepped into the role only days before the premiere. His upcoming performances with the LA Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic and the Santa Fe Opera, plus various operas with Staatsoper Stuttgart in Germany, including *La Bohème* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, will take Ott far beyond Philly, but Opera Philadelphia will always be home. "They are like family, always pushing the boundaries of opera, drawing in a vivacious crowd of young fans who come with a fresh excitement for the art form," he says. This past September, Ott stepped into his most important role yet, when Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg officiated his wedding to Adam Franklin.