

ARTS GENIUS DANCE The Seventh Annual Stranger Genius Awards
POSTED BY **BRENDAN KILEY** ON WED, SEP 30, 2009 AT 12:11 PM

You know what today is?

Genius Cake Day. Today, four artists and one institution will win Genius Awards—one in film, one in literature, one in theater, one in visual art, and one arts organization. (See winners from previous years [here](#).)

All morning, *The Stranger's* arts editors have been ambushing artists in cafes and offices, handing them cakes that read "**You're a Frickin' Genius.**" Some have laughed, some have cried, some have sat in stunned silence.

It's been fun.

We hand out Genius Awards—**\$5,000, a big party at the Moore, a long and glowing profile of the artist**—for many reasons: Sometimes we reward lifetime achievement. Sometimes we reward potential. Sometimes we reward big institutions. Sometimes we reward tiny, low-to-the-ground guerrilla groups. Sometimes we reward people who need the money. Sometimes we reward people who don't.

We're capricious that way.

This year's winner for institution is **Pacific Northwest Ballet.**

When PNB was looking for a new artistic director a few years ago, it made a genius move by hiring Peter Boal—an artist instead of an administrator, someone connected to the new work happening in New York and beyond. Boal has breathed new life into the city's ballet.

As I wrote in a review of PNB's homage to [Jerome Robbins](#):

Since 1977, when Kent Stowell and Franca Russell took over, PNB has been an outpost for the Balanchine legacy, a kind of NYCB West. But Stowell and Russell virtually ignored Jerome Robbins, performing only two of his ballets in 28 years.

Since Peter Boal took over PNB in 2005, he has staged four Robbins ballets and will add two more ("West Side Story Suite" and the famous "Dances at a Gathering") to the repertoire next season. Boal has been gently prodding PNB out of its fustiness with more modern choreographers and sexy print ads. All Robbins is a welcome coup from that admirable campaign, introducing Seattle to the other—more populist and comical, but no less important—genius of New York City Ballet.

Kent Stowell and Franca Russell worked hard to bring Seattle a reputable ballet. But Boal and his staff have **kick-started their legacy into PNB 2.0.**

Boal has kept the old Balanchine favorites in the repertoire, but has imported new, sexy, and vital choreographers into the building: William Forsythe, Marco Goecke, and Benjamin Millipied. Boal has replaced Kent Stowell's *Romeo and Juliet* with Jean-Christophe Maillot's steamy *Roméo et Juliette*. (See Jen Graves's review [here](#).) These days, PNB is on fire—and big Seattle arts institutions who are due for new leadership in the next few years should follow the ballet's lead. (I'm looking at you symphony, opera, and Seattle Rep.)

We burst into a development meeting Boal was having in his office this morning. "Oh my," he said, beaming. "We love *The Stranger*. The staff will be so excited to hear about this."



"Well," he said to his meeting as we walked out the door, "**this day is starting off well.**"