

The Dance Centre

Outside In/Inside Out:
the Vancouver
Dance Aesthetic



Outside In/Inside Out: the Vancouver Dance Aesthetic is published as a supplement to a panel discussion of the same name at The Dance Centre's 6th biennial Dance In Vancouver event November 14-18, 2007, featuring Paula Citron, Dena Davida and Brian Webb as guest panelists and Stephen White as moderator.

Introduction by Stephen White

When the box arrived at my office I was anxious. It was an honour that the Dance Centre had asked me to curate Dance in Vancouver 2007, but the moment of truth was literally at hand. A curator is only as strong as the pieces he has to work with. What if this box was a giant question mark, full of submissions from dance companies I'd never heard of? What if the work being proposed was naïve or just plain uninteresting? Maybe I could phone Raquel and say, "I've just come down with terrible cold and I don't think it will clear up for at least 8 months..." No. I had signed on, I was committed, and I had to see it through.

And then I opened it. We've all seen those Disney cartoons where someone opens a letter and little bluebirds and twinkly stars fly up into the air accompanied by the sweetest music? Well, when I look back on that moment – that's how I choose to remember it. (OK, things are different here in Victoria.)

Well, those bluebirds were twittering as I kept pulling submission after submission out of the box. LOLA Dance, followed by Kokoro Dance Theatre. Flamenco Rosario and Noam Gagnon. Could it be? Wen Wei Dance and battery opera. Tara Cheyenne Friedenber and Kinesis Dance. I won't mention them all, but I was thrilled because these were the real deal – serious companies with artistic aspirations backed up by substantial bodies of work. If you were to list the most important Vancouver companies and dance artists in the past ten years – all of these would be on that list. At that moment, I knew I was going to look like a brilliant curator.

Then, of course, I had to start to put it together. It's a little like what I imagine quilt-making to be: Well, if I put this with that, and stitch it with this. There were so many things to consider, but with imagination and a bit of finesse the outline of a truly exciting festival began to emerge. There is a real satisfaction when it all comes together, when you have dance works that complement each other on the same program and a whole festival filled with dances you want to see.

And then it was off to my meeting in Vancouver, scraps of paper in hand. Raquel and I sat in Mirna's office while I told her my ideas. Her eyes lit up, and we both became excited with the possibilities of this project. We knew that we were onto something very special.

And then I had this other idea. While I'd been looking at the submissions and thinking about how to put it all together, I realized that because Dance in Vancouver is only produced once every two years, it's suspended in a way, like a snapshot in a photo album. It's a picture of current practice in a given time period. It says to the audience, the visiting presenter and eventually to the historian: this is what was of interest to dance artists in the Vancouver of 2007.

The idea of the dance historian stayed with me for a few days. An idea started developing – I wondered, when I looked at our program, what the historian would say about dance in Vancouver in 2007 – about the aesthetic, the ideas the artists were interested in and the form they had chosen to express those ideas. Was there something linking these dances? If we tried, could we capture a moment in Vancouver's creative life and somehow define it. In short, is there a Vancouver aesthetic and, if so, what the heck can you say about it?

I believe that an artist realizes her potential through nurture. An aesthetic evolves: it's a goulash of life experience combined with an array of influences – music, other dances, visual art, books, external events. Sometimes an artist makes a conscious choice – such as a decision to work in a specific way. Often, though, the choices are completely unconscious. A new dance work is restricted by the availability of public funding – and we all know that in BC there's not a heck of a lot of that. That lack of financial resource has made our dance artists resourceful in other ways – finding simpler ways to say what they wanted; making compromises on production values, thus putting more on the shoulders of the interpretive artists; or spending more time outside the studio preparing because each second inside is so expensive.

And then there are the mountains, the lively street scene, that hard-to-describe but exhilarating West Coast vibe. There is the way diverse cultures meet and play and rub up against each other in this city. And there is the dance community itself – for example, what happens to Wen Wei on a very deep and personal level when he sees Lola's new piece? Or the unique energy that the dancer Yannick Matthon will bring into a battery opera rehearsal after being on the road for six weeks with Kidd Pivot.

Another factor is how in recent years something really very vital has been happening in Vancouver. This city has become a recognized centre for contemporary dance. Our companies are touring across the country and internationally. So there has to be something feeding the art form.

I had a lot of questions, but I knew I wasn't the guy to answer them. In fact I'm not sure anyone on the West Coast is in the position to answer these questions because we are too immersed in this culture to have perspective on it.

And so we talked about all those issues and the questions they gave rise to. And that's when Raquel and I came up with our best idea. And that idea is this book that you're holding in your hands.

We contacted three important and knowledgeable writers: Brian Webb, because he sees everything across the country; Paula Citron, because she's Canada's leading dance critic; and Dena Davida, because she's so smart. And then we asked each of them if in fact there was a Vancouver aesthetic.

Their answers will intrigue and delight you. I am excited that Brian, Paula and Dena agreed to do this. I am also very grateful that these three exceptional players in Canada's dance milieu wrote their contributions for less than the price of a pair of dance shoes. (As I already mentioned, there is a dire lack of arts funding in BC....) But like all of us they are committed to this ephemeral art form. And so they committed themselves to capturing that moment in our collective history – Dance in Vancouver in 2007.

Stephen White
Guest Curator
Producer, Dance Victoria

Stephen White is Executive Producer of Dance Victoria, a presentation series of classical and contemporary dance now in its eleventh season in Victoria, BC.

Stone + sand + sea + skyⁱ: Environment and dance aesthetics in Vancouver by Dena Davida

The assignment

Montréal, June 23, 2007

Hello Stephen and Raquel,

Thank you for this proposition to write about a concept that so intrigues me as a novice contemporary dance anthropologist. Although I will try to integrate the companies in the Dance in Vancouver event, I am most excited by the idea of discussing the possibilities of “a municipal dance aesthetic.” By this I am thinking of a dance genre or style that might be seen as the unique product of a particular time and place, social, political and economic situation. Has every sizable metropolis like Vancouver become a global dance village in this day and age? Or is it really a matter of how participants in the local dance history have created a heritage of certain ways of dancing, dance making and dance watching? What, if anything, could be seen as shaping the contours of a Vancouver dance aesthetic?

xxx Dena

Prologue/Travelogue

Over the years during travels to Vancouver and conversations with the city's resident dance community, I have gleaned the impression that there exists a common/sense set of beliefs, a kind of local dance folk wisdom (not to be confused with “folk dance wisdom”!). Certain motifs have frequently resurfaced throughout my experiences in the city as a tourist and traveling dance presenter. My list currently includes: the impact of natural environment's power and beauty and so a “down to earth” way of life (and maybe world view); the sense of living far away across the mountains from the political and economic centre of Canada (the Ottawa/ Toronto/ Montréal hub) but in proximity to Pacific Rim cultures, especially Asian; a collective sense of isolation from the wider international “dance scene,” invisible to its artists and producers; the poverty of provincial arts funding and high cost-of-living; the strong presence of First Nations cultures; the ever-present marine/marina life (boats and sea lore); and the British Columbian legacy of utopian settlersⁱⁱ.

But have these phenomena produced a distinct dance aesthetic that is native to Terminal City? A California-raised girl myself, and in that sense a bit of a cultural insider, I can at least testify that we North Americans living on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, embedded in the sandy land and rocky seascapes of its shoreline, often identify with a cultural syndrome we call “West Coast.”

An anthropologist's perspective on the question of aesthetics

“Folk” dancesⁱⁱⁱ are commonly thought of as symbolic, kinetic representations of the national and regional “folk” cultures from which they come, even when they migrate

outside of their place of origin. But what might be said about the uncommon idea of contemporary choreographies serving as emblems of a municipal dance style? This is actually one of the implications of Joann Kealiinohomoku's infamous essay of 1969, "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic dance," which still raises the ire of some dance historians (especially balletomanes). Her main point was that all dances are in fact ethnic because they always bear the distinguishing marks of the time and place in which they were conceived.

So then what configuration of elements might compose the "markers" of a Vancouver contemporary dance genre, if one exists at all? The answer of course, as with all answers to all questions, depends on whom you ask. From an anthropologist's eye view like my own, dance presentations are usually thought of as extra-ordinary social gatherings, requiring the participation of artists, spectators and various kinds of personnel and funding agents. We dance anthropologists tend to watch dance within the framework of "the dance event." From this perspective, any description of a Vancouver dance aesthetic would necessarily include a multitude of stories arising from extensive in-the-field observations about what various dancing and non-dancing participants said and did, and where, when and how they did it and said it. And in the end, careful analysis of the data would reveal the range of meanings that this kind of dancing and event holds for its participants. (This is a huge undertaking!) This complex ethnographic, multi-voiced tale of dance would then be grounded in a local worldview: literally a way of looking out at, and understanding of, the world from the geographic site in which the dance event takes place^{iv}. As Vancouver dance writer Max Wyman once mused in the pages of *Dance in Canada* magazine, "The experience of the individual human being is rooted, ultimately, not in broad nationality but in specific place, not in timeless generality but in the detail of specific moments"^v.

A very short history of the performing arts

In view of giving deeper ground to the concept of a Vancouver dance aesthetic, it is interesting to remember how the very idea of the performing arts and of aesthetics, came into being in the "Western world". How did the custom arise in the first place of sitting side-by-side still and silent in the dark, as we reverently peer in at professional dancers who gesture enigmatically and emphatically in an illuminated three-sided box of a performance space – as we are all doing here at *Dance in Vancouver*?

I have been recently intrigued by Shiner's account^{vi} of how the concept of "the arts" began in England and France during the 1700s (think of performances in Shakespeare's time). As he tells it, there was initially the necessity to dispatch armed soldiers to quell the loud and unruly crowds, the removal of flirtatious aristocrats from their privileged seating on the stage itself, and finally the placement of audience seats in neat rows *par terre* and boxes that actually faced the action occurring on the stage. Arts historians agree that this shift was at the time a part of general movement, rife with social politics, to cultivate a bourgeoisie class identity. In contrast to the tradition of the craftsman, this newly

coined vocation of “artist” was characterized by inspiration, spontaneity, originality, creative imagination and freedom of expression. Shiner also reminds us that this invention of the arts required about 100 years of effort.

Ever since Western aesthetic philosophers contrived the idea of art, an enormous array of genres and styles have emerged. Now we are embarked on a social programme of democratizing these arts, of making them part of the life of all citizens. Evidence of this widening diversity of dance orientations and audiences is clear in the programming of Dance in Vancouver. In the view of dance historians and aesthetic philosophers, we are currently in the so-called postmodern period of the arts (or its aftermath according to some). They tell us that this phase involves the proliferation, co-existence and inter-mixing of dance forms and styles which points us beyond Modern Dance’s uniformly codified schools of dance, each with their own choreographic traditions (e.g. Graham, Limon, Cunningham, etc.) towards the predominance of each artist’s unique aesthetic or “voice”.

Most contemporary choreographers, like those in this festival, have taken to heart the postmodern dance manifesto embodied in Yvonne Rainer’s seminal dance of the 1960s called “Trio A” in which all kinds of movements – from the utilitarian everyday task-like to the gymnastic posturings of classical ballet – were given equal value and proclaimed of equal interest to choreographers^{vii}. The concept of aesthetics has in consequence also taken on an expanded sense that, as Goldman wrote, “now qualifies not only as judgment or evaluations [of beauty], but properties, attitudes, experience, and pleasure or value as well [...]”^{viii}. This shift towards eclecticism and personal inventiveness means that dance making, performing and spectating are currently adventurous, innovative activities. But there is no longer a predominance of a single aesthetic point of view.

Elements of a Vancouver dance aesthetic

Returning to the question at hand and thinking through the artistic programming of Dance in Vancouver, I have only managed to find a few common elements among the dozen choreographies onstage. I see an evident link in the “cultural fusing” of battery opera, Kokoro, and Wen Wei Dance. Then there are two proponents of the modernization of time-honoured dance forms, claiming the right to creative license with tradition: Flamenco Rosario and Coyote Percussive Arts Performance Association. I find a third connection in the intersections between sophisticated new body philosophies from European contemporary dance and previous Vancouver dance training running through the work of both Lola Dance and MachineNoisy. Then with no apparent commonalities, there is a group of charismatic individuals, some home-grown and others migrants from other parts of Canada and abroad, who have each forged a personal aesthetic, with a mixture of affinities to various contemporary dance “schools of thought.” In a nutshell there is: the highly charged physicality of Noam Gagnon; Sarah Chase’s gentle and deconstructed gestural story-telling; Judith Garay’s neo-modernist-inspired compositions; and Paras Terezakis’ psycho-dramatic human narratives. But in the end, these descriptive fragments only serve to reinforce the



fact of an eclectic mix of aesthetic orientations, one which is not really so different from the dance offerings in other cosmopolitan city centres like Toronto, Paris and New York City.

So then if anything is to define a distinctive Vancouver dance aesthetic, it will have to be the natural and social environment itself: the environmental framework in which the dance-makers are working. During *Dancing on the Edge*, I have often noted choreographic themes that refer to distinctive characteristics of Vancouver (mentioned earlier) such as: earth and water, mountains and sea, native cultures, utopian humanistic longings, Asian cultures, marine life, and so on. And there are always the remnants of a common local dance history that become embedded almost subconsciously, which in this case includes at least six strong-minded Modern Dance founders in the 1960s and 1970s, the experimental Terminal City Dance collective and iconoclast Jennifer Mascall in the 1980s. When standing in downtown Vancouver, I am always reminded of the powerful visceral effects of a majestic landscape and rainforest climate on the somatic reality of the body, e.g. the consequence of

dampness on dancers' joints, muscles (and spirits), and the inevitable euphoria when the sun comes breaking through the clouds on the mountains. And, oh, the politics and economics of British Columbian art-making! Made with fewer means than most, I have indeed noticed that Vancouver choreographies are frequently distinguished by resourceful creative strategies, smaller-scale and low-budget productions, with less extravagance perhaps and more economy of means (sometimes for the better, I think).

But after all of this is said, with choreographer's biographies and touring itineraries that bear witness to extensive traveling, maybe we can no longer make a strong case for a local aesthetic. Could it be that our collective dance identity has finally gone global, with only shallow roots in the localities where we dance?

Dena Davida, PhD, Artistic Director of Tangente (Montréal)

- i This is the title of a song by Canadian folksinger Penny Lang, from her 2006 album by the same name. She currently lives on Vancouver Island where she penned the lyrics.
- ii This idea was put in my head by a book found in a B.C. travel shop by Andrew Scott (1997) *The Promise of Paradise: Utopian communities in B.C.*, Vancouver/Toronto: Whitecap Books.
- iii The definition, origins and implications of the term "folk dance," like that of "ethnic dance," have been the subject of on-going debates among anthropologists and dancers. As early as 1972, Joanne Kealiinohomoku's laid out the issues in "Folk Dance," in the anthology *Folklore and Folklife: an Introduction*, published by the University of Chicago Press.
- iv This is actually what I just finished doing for my doctoral dissertation with Montréal's O Vertigo dance company, resulting in an ethnographic study of the *Luna* dance event that took me over 8 years and 550 pages to accomplish.
- v Wyman, Max (Winter 1983/1984) "Who Needs Canadian Dance?: A Futile Search for National Identity," *Dance in Canada* magazine, p. 13.
- vi Shiner, Larry (2001) *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- vii Rainer, Yvonne (1974) *Work 1961-1973*, Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York: New York University Press.
- viii Goldman, Alan (2001) "The Aesthetic," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, Eds., London and New York: Routledge.

Between the Mountains and the Sea: The Vancouver Dance Aesthetic

by Paula Citron

This is a warning to anyone reading this essay. It is awash in subjective generalizations, and my arguments probably have holes in them big enough to shoot canon balls through. Nonetheless, I'm using this opportunity to indulge myself in speculation based on empiric evidence gained from criss-crossing the country in pursuit of dance. For anyone expecting a scholarly, footnoted, bibliographed definition of the Vancouver dance aesthetic, you are not going to find it here. What you will get is my gut feeling (with a little help from Vancouver's own dance community) about the forces at play that underpin the broad definition of Vancouver dance.

It is a well known fact among teachers that each class takes on a unique personality. The 30 or so young people that serendipity throws together each year collectively assume a unique aura. In staff rooms you'll hear, for example, a grade 11 drama class described as rambunctious while another is deemed lacklustre – which is not to say, of course, that rambunctious students can't be found in the latter and lacklustre ones in the former. Generally speaking, however, an overall mantle embraces the whole and eclipses the particular. As a former teacher, I can personally attest that class personalities are an educational truism.

Since this is an essay purportedly on the Vancouver dance aesthetic, a reader might wonder just what on earth the above educational revelation has to do with the subject at hand. In fact, a great deal. Just as classes have unique personalities, so do cities, which will in turn impact on the cultural life of those cities. Since I have already declared myself in an unsubstantiated speculative mode (at least by critical standards of inquiry), I might as well go for broke and really stick my head out. The dance aesthetic in Vancouver is created by the unique persona of the city itself – or at least as I perceive it to be.

Canada is a country that is horizontally challenged. We stretch for thousands of miles from sea to sea to sea throwing different geographies together on a collision course. I once knew a professor of human geography who felt that North America's problems could be solved if we redrew the map of the continent. He would have created a series a smaller countries that had things in common, much like the homogeneity one finds in Europe. For example, the Maritimes fit naturally with New England, the Canadian prairie provinces logically go with the American midwest, and the west coast rainforest should form one unit. Quebec by itself is a given, while Toronto clearly belongs with the big American cities that surround the Great Lakes and dominate the Eastern seaboard, not to mention Alaska with the Canadian northlands.

Thus, the continent may be divided into just two unwieldy countries, but cultural influences have tended to travel more vertically, that is north and south rather than east and west, or even in the case of Quebec, trans-Atlantically. In light of the mismatched human geography of North America, to really understand Vancouver, at least from my point of view, one has to view the city in relationship to the other two major Canadian dance centres – Montreal and Toronto. A compare and contrast is needed to put all three into stark relief – and again I reiterate, I am espousing generalizations, but ones, I believe, that are underscored by truth.

Quebec has never sat happily surrounded by English speaking millions. It is likely that more Quebecers have travelled to Europe than have ever visited other parts of Canada. In latter years, insecure within the Canadian nation, Montreal dance has been driven by a European aesthetic. It was Montreal choreographers who first flirted with the hour long, full-length, festival-suitable show much beloved by European presenters. This city which used to be a madcap hub of eccentricity has increasingly tailored its choreography to European tastes – by that, read abstract, intellectual, philosophical. Dance as movement has increasingly been replaced by obtrusive European experimentalism with technique sailing out the window. In fact, a great deal of Montreal dance is starting to look alarmingly like Eurotrash, or if one prefers, pretentious twaddle drowning in oblique symbolism.

Because Quebec was shut off from North American influences at large, in contemporary dance's early flowering, Montreal did develop a unique type of imaginative choreography with audiences being very accepting of creative risk-taking. The province has always been the Canadian epicentre of folk art and artisanship, and this untamed creative spirit infused the first generation of Quiet Revolution choreographers. Happily, a new generation of Montreal dance artists is divorcing itself from Eurotrash. They are finding their own creative, unique choreographic voices, so I do live in hope. A lot of what I'm seeing among younger dancers radiates independent thought, harkening back to the choreographically exciting 70s and 80s when every major company in that city was divinely different, one from the other. Will the Europe-driven fixation ultimately be overthrown by the pursuit of one's own voice? Who knows? Where this great divide, this generational split, ends up is anyone's guess.

Toronto, on the other hand, has always been a city that dances, probably because the best training institutions in the country are there. Despite all the flirtations with text, video projections and other theatrical elements, Toronto contemporary dance remains rooted in modern dance. Choreography tends to be polished, well-crafted and sophisticated. Because the city is the most multicultural in the country, ethnic flavoured dance abounds and fusion works are the name of the game – kathak and flamenco, Caribbean and jazz, hip hop and modern, Chinese and ballet. The city is the home of the great Canadian choreographic hybrid with a global perspective.

From a thematic point of view, Toronto dance has followed social trends. In the feminist 70s, women's issues were a big subject of choreographic inquiry. Similarly dance pieces have paralleled the angst-filled 80s, the Me generation 90s, and the confused 21st century. There has also been a strong thread of satire and humour, a bent towards geopolitical statement, and a keen sense of big city, mean streets urban sensibility. New York choreographic developments have also been a strong influence. As a dance aesthetic, however, Toronto lacks a centre, probably because so much choreography is happening all at the same time, and so many cultural influences are swirling around like a vortex. Exciting choreography does take place in the city but it's hard to lock into one defining characteristic. In short, Toronto dance reflects the gaggle of cultures that dominate the city's persona. Choreographically, it is a true multicultural salad bowl rather than a melting pot.

Which brings us to Vancouver, far flung as it is on the other side of the Rockies, wedged between the mountains and the sea. The dominant wellspring of Vancouver dance has been individuality born out of this very isolation, with not much influence, certainly as far as dance is concerned, coming up from our neighbour to the south. In that respect, Vancouver differs markedly from Toronto where the travel back and forth to New York is like a revolving door, or Montreal with its trans-Atlantic obsession. That being said, a significant number of Vancouver choreographers have come from another part of the country, or even another country all together, yet this very "foreignness", for lack of a better word, has manifested itself in the same individuality as those born on the west coast. From my perspective, the smaller (in terms of numbers) Vancouver dance community has allowed more breathing room for choreographic development on a personal level, and the more laid back atmosphere of the city itself has been a gentle, nurturing garden rather than the intense hot house atmospheres of Toronto and Montreal.

Because I'm a journalist, I am always in interview mode. I took advantage of this predilection when I was at Vancouver's Dancing on the Edge Festival in July. I was interested to hear what Vancouverites themselves had to say about a Vancouver dance aesthetic, and whether it bore any relation to what I thought of dance in the city as a whole. I canvassed presenters, choreographers, dancers, writers, administrators, dance fans – in fact, no one was safe from my questions. What was most interesting is that people did not have quick and ready answers. Many even had difficulty with the notion that there is a Vancouver aesthetic. To these west coast denizens, the very idea, it would seem, was an ephemeral thing.

Nonetheless, with a little prodding on my part, common themes did begin to emerge. Clearly, the mountains are both a physical and psychological barrier, and rather like the isolated francophones of the late 20th century, this wall, as it were, has led to very personal and individualized approaches to dance. In short, every choreographer in Vancouver is doing something different. Eclectic was a word that came up often. Because

Vancouverites can spend so much more time out of doors than the rest of the country, site specific works are popular. A lot of dance takes place outside because the choreographers enjoy being there. Vancouver has always been viewed by Canadians as the place in the country to loose the formal shackles that are deemed the curse of eastern cities. It is a place where you can do your own thing and be your own person. This philosophy has certainly manifested itself in Vancouver dance. For a significant number of my respondents, west coast choreography has gone hand in hand with a reflective journey of self-discovery, befitting a society that views itself in isolation.

Because Vancouver really does not have a strongly etched history or tradition of dance that links it to well-established techniques, as in Toronto's grounding in Graham or Limón for example, each successive generation feels no bonds to the past and heads off in his or her own direction. One could say that Vancouver's distance from major dance centres has allowed many aesthetics to develop, and one finds the Vancouver technique to be a hodgepodge of contact improv, butoh, hip hop, martial arts, and ballet. One school of thought has young dancers not even wanting to be burdened by technique. Yet, as one writer expressed it, having a ballet background for others is a badge of honour, and there has been a virtual renaissance of ballet as a handy tool to both keep the body in shape and use as choreographic vocabulary. A veteran choreographer felt that the best description of au current Vancouver dance technique is the fusion of contemporary dance, urban street dance, and ballet.

Because many young choreographers are not welded to technique per se, exploration and improvisation with movement is a logical step. Thus, Vancouver is a city that sets aside the classics of dance to follow experimentation and risk-taking. Fusion dance has become the norm. Many Young Turks are incorporating hip hop vocabulary into their choreography as if it were the most natural thing to do. For others, whether of Asian heritage or not, they are drawn to eastern genres such as Japanese butoh or Chinese traditional dance forms and martial arts which they cunningly fuse with western elements. When pushed to describe Vancouver movement per se, the most popular word was "dynamism" – a go-for-broke, break-neck, athletic physicality inspired by Holy Body Tattoo – perhaps the city's most successful company on an international level. Vancouver dancers, it seems, are naturally inclined to move in a more vigorous way than the rest of the country. That being said, many interviewees lamented that the rush to individualism means a certain naivety on one hand and a lack of sophistication on the other. What one can't deny, however, is the youthful zest that is a hallmark of Vancouver dance.

When one looks at the artists in the Dance in Vancouver showcase, they are a compendium of the rugged individualists who people dance in the city. Along side the Asian-influenced sculptured dance of Lee Su-Feh, Wen Wei, Barbara Bourget and Jay Hirabayashi, there is the Mediterranean passion of Paras Terezakis. Karen Jamieson and Byron Chief-Moon have come together to reflect on First Nations' issues and our relationship with the planet, while



Rosario Ancer is the doyenne of Spanish flamenco filtered through her Mexican-born Latino sensibility. The cool intellectual inquiry of Lola MacLaughlin is contrasted by the emotional physical images of Judith Garay, with both women in pursuit of putting the human condition in motion. And then there is the raw edge *Furies*, as it were, embedded in the works of Daelik, his partner Delia Brett, and Noam Gagnon. Last but not least, there are the purveyors of the quirky and the droll, the character-driven storytellers Tara Cheyenne Friedenbergl and Sarah Chase (although as a Torontonian, I do have to remind everyone that Chase did launch her career in that city).

In the final analysis, for me, Vancouver has always been the wild child of Canadian dance. It is a city of big, bold physicality and endurance over polish. There is a disarming rawness to the choreography. Even in the most refined works, one finds an edginess that comes from an eagerness to make a strong, personal choreographic statement. What makes Vancouver dance so refreshing is the seeming lack of formal choreographic restraint. Underlying everything is an adventurous spirit that stems from the love of the great outdoors. Dance is freer and less structured, and even in works that attempt to tackle serious themes, an effervescence is just bubbling beneath the surface. Vancouver, in short, is like the New World of Canadian dance, and for a big city easterner such as myself, it is like Columbus finding America. Everything seems born again.

Paula Citron, Senior Dance Writer for the Globe and Mail

A community... A centre... A hub of creativity by Brian H. Webb

When I first began to dance in New York in the 1970s, the dance boom was in full swing, and the dance community there was most active. That community was large – there were, in fact, three major ballet companies as well as several smaller ones; the first generation modern dance choreographers were still active, and the next generation was firmly established. Merce Cunningham, still a major force on dance today, was regarded as a major artist whose influence was undeniable. The New York dance community of those heady days was of a critical mass that there were actually numerous communities or schools of thought that rivaled each other. These schools were not restricted to modern dance; they included other like-minded artists in visual arts, writing, music, and theatre. The fellow artists worked together or showed each other their work. They encouraged and they criticized each other's output so that they did not work in isolation. They developed their work together in a like-minded supportive atmosphere. The most famous of these groups was of course led by the composer, John Cage, and his group included Merce Cunningham (choreographer), Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (visual artist), and David Tudor (composer) as well as many others.

Inside one of these groups, there was a significant amount of critical dialogue. Members were most supportive of each other, and they encouraged each other to go forward. There was competition inside the community and there was certainly competition outside it. Groups were quite hostile toward each other. On the surface they had nothing to do with each other, but they were extremely aware of what each was doing.

I know that being a part of one of these groups in my formative years richly influenced my development as a dance artist knowledgeable beyond my own media. It helped me to become more curious as an individual and to realize that little happens in isolation. In his book, *Air Guitar*, philosopher and art curator, Dave Hickey, states that this is the best way to develop creatively and artistically. He encourages young artists to work together, to make work for each other, to push each other forward and then, when ready, to include the general public. I believe that this is how an arts community develops. I firmly believe that all art is made from a community for a community, and that the viewing public is an integral part of the discourse. Their involvement needs to come at a time when the artistic work is mature and ready for consumption.

I come to the question: "Is there a Vancouver aesthetic in the dance community?" I believe that in 2007, Vancouver is a happening scene and this, of course, is just not in contemporary dance. The whole arts community seems to be alive and energized. Unlike some other communities in Canada, there is no sense of malaise. The work is fresh, new, contemporary and original. This didn't just happen – it developed over a period of time. While artists have been active in Vancouver for many years, in contemporary dance, it

seems to have found its moment now. I believe that there are individuals and groups as well as happenings that have caused this very positive action.

In Vancouver, the influence of Grant Strate on the dance community cannot be underestimated. As Director of the Centre for the Arts at Simon Fraser University, he introduced a much stronger discourse that encouraged creative thinking. As a result, young choreographers began to create work that revealed a stronger individuality. The National Choreographic Seminars that he founded provided some of the first real creative process investigations in Canada, and the one that SFU hosted strongly impacted the community. He recognized the reality of diversity. Through his own interaction abroad and certainly in Asia, he helped to open the door for the participation of people from the Pacific Rim and other regions of the world. Grant is a creative thinker, a post-modernist, and an active participant in the international community of contemporary dance. More than an academic, he is a consummate dance artist who gives wholeheartedly to the development of contemporary dance. Vancouver has benefited hugely from his involvement.

Contact improvisation has certainly influenced the dance of Vancouver. Before EDAM, Synergy created by Linda Rubin began this influence. It grew through the investigations of EDAM. When Peter Bingham became the sole artistic director of that company, its influence grew in a very positive and long-lasting way. Today, the influence of contact improvisation seems to be less strong as it is all over the world. In Vancouver, the contribution of ballet through Ballet BC was equally strong. John Alleyne, its artistic director, introduced a much more contemporary attitude to the company, showing that contemporary ballet has a strong place in the contemporary aesthetic. He encouraged a broader investigation by including the work of William Forsythe and others. This influence is certainly felt in the dance of Vancouver today.

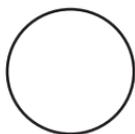
The creation of the company Holy Body Tattoo certainly impacted the Vancouver community. Dana Gingras and Noam Gagnon aggressively developed an international career as well as a strong presence in Canada. This gave Vancouver a much needed shot in the arm as they blew the top off of a pervasive isolationism that tended to define the Vancouver dance community of old. Today there is a much more open attitude in Vancouver. The Dance Centre itself contributes enormously to this very positive trend. The Holy Body Tattoo has influenced the vocabulary of dance in the community as well as the inclusion of popular culture in the aesthetic. It is easy to witness their energy, their physical extremism, and their very developed sense of production values in younger companies.

While this article has spoken about the community and about the individuals and groups that have contributed to the Vancouver contemporary dance community's success, it is important to discuss dance artists who today are seen as defining that success. There are many local community players and I will focus on those whose influence reaches beyond the local to embrace all of Canada and abroad. In recent years, many of the largest tours in

Canada have been by Vancouver dance artists. The companies of Lola MacLaughlin, Wen Wei Wang, and Crystal Pite have joined the Holy Body Tattoo in this area. Crystal is developing a most significant international reputation. Alvin Erasga Tolentino is performing abroad while his work in Canada outside Vancouver is somewhat limited. Lee Su-Feh is also a dance artist that the national and international dance world recognizes for her very creative potential. What is most interesting about these artists is their individuality, their intense investigation of the body as a most powerful tool of communication. They are taking their own dance forward and dance audiences are responding everywhere with joy and admiration. They are all very active members of the Vancouver dance community. Some of them have more influence than others on the development of the dancing as well as the dance in Vancouver, but their presence is undeniable.

Does this define a Vancouver aesthetic? I personally do not think so. In general, I see Vancouver dance artists working quite separately from each other. I do believe that this is not unique to Vancouver but a trend of this time. It may be argued that the “schools of thought” dampen investigations and hinder creativity. On the other hand, the collective is always more intelligent than the one genius! How does a community of artists sustain itself? How does it build creativity? How does it enjoy a continued success? The Vancouver dance community at this point and time is a very exciting study, one that is full of potential while already establishing itself as an undeniable dance centre and certainly the most creative one in Canada today.

Brian Webb, Artistic Director of Canada Dance Festival and Brian Webb Dance Company



Photos Cover: Lola Dance by David Cooper. Inside cover: Flamenco Rosario by Adam P.W. Smith, Kokoro Dance by Peter Eastwood, Tara Cheyenne Performance by Chris Morris. Page 7 Wen Wei Dance by Donald Lee. Page 13 battery opera by jamie griffiths.



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