

Dancemakers' First Sixteen Years – a contextual/personal take on beginnings

My sense that creative energies are powerful and attract similar energies stems strongly from my early dance years. Researching and considering Dancemakers' initial years for this research project has recalled this “Begin it Now” understanding.

I was with the company when it began, and with a couple of ‘times out’ in the 1970s, I was a company member, with varying roles including dancer, choreographer, rehearsal director, teacher, artistic director and resident choreographer, from 1974-1989. Dancemakers was my ‘dance house’.

In 1973, Andrea Ciel Smith and Marcy Radler were students in York University's thriving Dance Department. Started in 1970, the program was guided by Grant Strate's vision of this new university dance program as a potential ground for creativity, training and research. Grant – a choreographer, dancer, teacher, charter member of the National Ballet of Canada, who earned a law degree before starting to dance, was well-connected in the dance world. He drew on his international dance connections, and a flow of discretionary funding available through the university for its new fine arts departments, along with his canny administrative skill and determination to make things happen, to bring in stellar artists and teachers to the burgeoning York program. These included Helen McGehee and Bertram Ross, artists of the Martha Graham Company, Chase Robinson, Gus Solomons Jr. and Sandra Neels from the Cunningham Company, charismatic Robert Cohan and Noemi Lapsezon from London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Norman Morrice, soon to be Artistic director of England's Royal Ballet, renowned dancer/teacher Christine Hennesey, celebrated choreographer Antony Tudor, Maurice Béjart, of Belgium's Ballet du vingtième siècle fame and notoriety, and a little later Limón Company luminaries including Clay Talliaferro. Renowned visiting artists offered master classes, among them choreographer/dancer Murray Louis, and icon Bella Lewitsky. Memorable teachers were on the faculty – Yves Cousseineau, mime and character dancer, the divine Angela Leigh, a spirited and glamorous early National Ballet of Canada ballerina, rigorous Ahuva Anbary, a Julliard graduate who'd danced with Bat'Sheva. Selma Odom taught dance history, Julianna Lau spearheaded dance therapy, a new offering in Canada, Mary-Elizabeth Manley guided studies in dance education, and Sandy Caverly taught ballet and the intricacies of Benesh notation. This abundance of dance styles, training, and history offered new avenues of knowing and moving.

Grant Strate's philosophy that dancers should take responsibility for shaping their own careers deeply influenced York dance students. He gathered all the students in the department regularly for inspirational talks. They were avuncular - he'd smoke his pipe and, accompanied by his little dog Fella, talk about creativity and making things happen. We seized on the understanding that we could do whatever we wanted - if we made it happen. Told by some that it was impossible to learn to dance at university, we didn't listen.

A new vibe animated the early 1970s, and Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau's government supported young people's potential with the Opportunities for Youth program, offering small short-term grants that allowed kids to seed new initiatives. All over the country, aspiring young music, theatre and dance artists took advantage of them. Marcy and Andrea applied for and received one of these 'OFY' grants to start a summer dance company.

Along with my 'creativity attracts creative energy' view goes a theory that things go on as they begin - which Dancemakers seems to corroborate. Dancemakers' spirit at the beginning, was curious, somewhat nomadic, eclectic and definitely wideranging, committed to exploring a scope of artistic views. To my understanding, this curiosity endures - fifty years later, as at its inception, Dancemakers resonates with a spirit of creative investigation.

To look at some aspects of the company's development with very broad contextual strokes - the Royal Commission on the Development of Arts and Letters, or Massey Commission - was struck in 1949. The Massey Report was tabled in 1951, recommending and leading to the establishment of the National Library, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Canada Council for the Arts, in 1957, to support a national cultural landscape in post-WWII Canada. This was monumental, and not so long ago, in timelines of cultural development. Soon the three ballet companies, with their feisty women pioneer founders, staked out their claims in the dance 'sector' - Celia Franca, with Betty Oliphant the main teacher, with the National Ballet, Gwenyth Lloyd and Betty Farrally with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and Ludmilla Chiriaeff with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

Modernism showed up first in dance as roots and tendrils, as individuals brought visions of European modernism/Expressionism into play - Bianca Rogge and Saida Gerrard in Toronto, Yone Kviety's of Toronto and later Calgary, and a few other intrepid dance artists, brought strands of 'new German' dance from the Expressionist hub of Mary Wigman's work and school, and ideas from Laban into play. One of my early teachers in Montreal, Patricia Cannon, taught

with Maisie McPhee (later head of dance at the Ryerson Polytechnical (now TMU). A British woman, she'd trained in 'Laban dance' at Dartmouth College, England, where Rudolf Laban taught after fleeing pre-war Germany. Patricia had also lived in the Caribbean, and taught at Goldsmith College, London. She taught an interesting blend of spirals and effort/shape dynamics, along with an occasional foray into merengue.

In the next phase, as modern dance began to grow, there were modern companies – intrepid Rachel Browne started the first, in Winnipeg, where she'd originally danced with Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Her 1964 startup of Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers was followed closely by Le Groupe de la Place Royale's founding in 1965, the company based first in Montreal and later in Ottawa, and Toronto Dance Theatre in 1967. Judy Jarvis, one of the final students at Mary Wigman's Berlin school, was dancing solo programs before starting her company. In 1967 my mother took me to see Trish Beatty's "New Dance Group" at Toronto Workshop Productions Theatre (now Buddies in Bad Times). Toronto Dance Theatre formed when Trish, Peter Randazzo and David Earle joined forces to create TDT as a forum for each of them to choreograph, teach, and spread their visions of Graham-inspired dance theatre.

Most early Dancemakers took class at TDT – it was the mecca for modern dance – where the founders, especially Trish and David, shared their mission to disseminate this deep and powerful way of dancing. Peggy Baker met Trish at a Banff summer school, as did Pat Miner – Peggy came from Edmonton, Pat from Wetaskawin, Alberta, and both travelled to Toronto to study at TDT. They were apprenticing with the company before they began working with Dancemakers.

The York Dance program was the first of its kind in Canada. With Grant's long vision and stellar connections, it was a magnet for students across the country, and from the U.S. Along with the academic degree program, intensive summer schools included flamenco, ballet, modern, dance history, notation, and opportunities to perform and choreograph.

During a 'stop out' from university, in 1969-70, Grant had allowed me, then performing with Judy Jarvis' first dance/theatre company, to take classes at York– so I'd troop up there every day to take a ballet and a modern class, and later head downtown for evening class and rehearsals with Judy Jarvis.

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