

OGRES OF LIFE: Serge Bennathan and the original cast of "Chronicles of Simple Life"

FIRST STEPS

"Because our conceptual systems grow out of our bodies, meaning is grounded in and through our bodies. Because a vast range of our concepts are metaphorical, meaning is not entirely literal." Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy of the Flesh*, p. 6)

Meaning is embodied. This is true for the meanings found by the dancer and by the audience member. Dance strives to reveal something to the audience, perhaps something they didn't realize they needed to know. In the best situations, this audience experience happens viscerally and invisibly.

On November 5, 1993, as a second-year student pursuing a Joint Honours bachelor's degree in dance and music at the University of Waterloo, I had my first visceral and invisible experience as a dance audience member: *Chronicles of a Simple Life*, choreographed by Serge Bennathan and performed by the Dancemakers company at the Humanities Theatre on the university campus. When Dancemakers and Dance Collection Danse put out a call for research project proposals to celebrate Dancemakers' 50th anniversary, I knew I had to write about this work. I knew because I couldn't remember any specific movements, colours, or music from *Chronicles*, but I could remember that it changed my view on what dance was and what it could do.

I set off to interview as many of the original cast members as I could as well as Serge Bennathan – choreographer of *Chronicles of a Simple Life* and the artistic director of Dancemakers from 1990-2006. I was successful in connecting with Serge and six of the original eight-member cast. The following essay includes interpretations and impressions from the synergy of their memories and my own. The full scope of these interviews is far too expansive to include here. To read the full interviews with these exceptional artists, follow the links at end of the essay.

These artists claimed their memories are vague – it was 30 years ago after all – but their impressions of the work and a particular golden time for the company are vivid. They couldn't stop themselves from showing me the 'schlack', the 'shlump', the low grounded plié, or the lift of the chest to the sky. They shift speaking in past and present tense fluidly. I can't help but think that this is answer to the metaphysical question: does a dance exist when it is not being danced?

Yes. It's there in the cells and electrical writing of the humans who know it so well.

CHRONICLES OF A SIMPLE LIFE

Chronicles of a Simple Life (1993) was the second new work Serge created as artistic director of Dancemakers, and its process congealed the personality, rigour and synergy of the company under new direction. The original cast included Julia Aplin, Marie-Josée Chartier, Learie McNicholls, Jackie Nell, Julia Sasso, Gary Tai, Gerry Trentham, and Carolyn Woods. (Later casts included Shannon Cooney, Ken Cunningham and Hope Terry.)

Serge asked his dancers to go deeper, get bigger, give more and more heart, which was always Serge's approach, but the subject matter of *Chronicles of a Simple Life* created a powerful urgency. Serge has no trouble remembering why.

"I created [*Chronicles*] because a person very close to me died of AIDS, and because of our closeness and the look it forced me to have on the tragedy that destroyed a full generation in dance, and all arts. Seeing this person I loved so much go through the horrible times – we forget that there was no cure then, [the medical field and the public were] so discriminatory, and the disease, the suffering, was terrible. It was horrendous. I wanted to honour the life and courage of this person and, through this person, the millions of people who went through it, who suffered not just the disease, but also the look of society on them. We forget now how it was truly, truly a plague. I wanted to honour their courage. The absolute courage. My friend was so generous in his turmoil. It was incredible. *Chronicles* came from that. It was no effort – the piece just came out of me. After it was done, I felt a connection to him through it. A true connection, not just thinking of him."

Chronicles of a Simple Life premiered at Premiere Dance Theatre (now Fleck Dance Theatre) at Harbourfront Centre, January 26, 1993. It was dedicated to J.L.B., Serge's dear friend Jean-Luc Barsotti. The work received mixed reviews over its years of performances: touring through the United States, Europe and Canada, including a pinnacle for many dance artists, a week of performances at the Joyce Theatre in New York City.

Some critics saw a unique, "exaggerated natural-movement style", "less tidy" but with a "sharply defined profile" (Anna Kisselgoff, *The New York Times*, 1996). Others thought it went on a little too long, "like an over-embellished pas-de deux", as Michael Crabb wrote of its premiere (*Toronto Star*, January 27, 1993).

From the same performance, Robert Everett-Green of the *Globe and Mail* (January 27, 1993) saw something different. "It was tempting, watching Dancemakers [...] to scan for shreds of personal narrative. No doubt these are present, but the piece stands secure on its own. Its richness flows not from confessional detail but from diversity of mood and accent."

No doubt Everett-Green's experience was an emergent property from Serge's deliberate development of movement with the individual dancers' abilities, allowing his personal root of the work to evolve through the unique people in his cast. In Serge's words,

"Of course, you create a piece, you have all the work you do with the dancers, you show them the path, but let them discover the path. The dancers had to find it in themselves...because the piece was quite hard, physically...so they had to find the courage themselves. Not to compare with the courage of my friend. The dancers had to find their own place of courage and go and let their spirit drive the physical."

Serge's work, though meticulously created and rehearsed, always seemed a little unfinished in a most intriguing way. The humanness you feel from this work is in its thematic content but also in how the people are moving. Dancers had to get to the next thing and the next thing, with no time to wallow, hesitate or self-analyze. It's not about telling the story of grief, it's the embodiment of grief and the relentlessness of life. It not showing it, it's being it.

Chronicles is bookended by duets for original cast members Gerry Trentham and Gary Tai. Their movements are matter of fact: jumps, lifts, gestural work. These two are well-matched, in their Doc Marten shoes but, half-naked, Gerry is clearly more vulnerable. He does not move in a weak manner, but he requires support.

Gary Tai describes his interpretation of the duet as it unfolds throughout the piece. "For me it started with this person in the distance – it could have been the past. I don't know whether we were lovers, brothers, that was kind of irrelevant. The story was that I'm losing him. Here's a serious point in our relationship, and then here's another one and another one until it's the end.... I can't talk to him anymore, the relationship is still there, but he is gone. For the people that I lost to AIDS, and my dad when he passed away -- I don't think I really grieved until *Chronicles*. It was my relationship with Gerry from beginning to end of *Chronicles* that helped me."

Gerry describes his duet with Gary as being "like one person on stage. We got to a timing that was crazy-beautiful. After you get to that place, how do you not polish that memory again and again? It was a partnership from heaven, that relationship between us in *Chronicles*."

As Gerry and Gary's final duet finishes, the choreography sets free one last wave of humanity. A solo, created for Carolyn Woods, which was the first section created.

"It hadn't been long since I'd lost my own father when we did *Chronicles*," says Carolyn. "Because it was me by myself on stage, there was an opportunity to find peace with him dying. Being somebody who's a bit shy and afraid to express myself, I held a lot of emotions in. So, at first there was the whole battle of having a solo: why me? why put me in this position? But I really connected to Serge's movement. It was through that piece -- all the dynamic schlackin¹ - I got it out. It was like therapy. It wasn't a sad thing for me. It was a sort of liberation, allowing myself to be present on stage and expressing the emotions of grief and of friendship and love."

And it isn't a sad ending. It just doesn't let us linger in the sadness of a death. As lights fade on Gerry and Gary in their last moments, a young woman is illuminated, her gaze up and out, running in circles with chest to the sky, swinging arms in semaphores that say both goodbye and hello. It's another element of courage: the courage to keep moving and to face the inevitability of movement, throughout the universe.

"This is a piece in which you can't ever let go," says Serge.

Sometimes we want to, we need to let go. Holding on is too rigid, too exhausting, and we want to surrender to a flow. But flow can easily become mindless and deceptively soothing. When you practice not letting go you find new paths – through tough choreography, through tough personal moments. Not letting go becomes a different kind of flow. Serge agrees,

“Yes, exactly.”

THE ENSEMBLE WITHOUT COUNTS

Like Serge’s work generally, *Chronicles* had no counts. The company built internal cues, some musical, some breath based. But the intentions behind the movement were what really created the synchronization as a group.

Marie-Josée describes her first moments in *Chronicles*. “Gary and Gerry are finishing their duet and the six of us – Julia, Julia, Learie, Jackie, Carolyn and me – are in the dark, on stage. Then the lights go up and we’re in the sextet.”

It is fast, big, covering the full stage hungrily. While watching the digitized VHS recording at Dance Collection Danse this is the only section where I really cannot tell who-is-who.

“We were a unit. Snap on lights and an hour of...throws on the floor, blinded by the sidelights. It was exciting to perform.” Marie-Josée gets up in the café where we are chatting and demonstrates the beginning movements of this section, like it was yesterday. Watching her ignites my memory. From the perspective of my seat in Humanities Theatre in 1993, near the back, house left, this tiny army of movement gushing through space.

How do you become a unit when you can’t see each other, and there’s the sound of 8 pairs of Doc Martens against the floor, the wind rushing through your ears, and the swell of neo-classical music, the loud beating of your own relentless heart?

When there are no counts, explains Serge, “It’s all on the flow of the dancers, it goes here, we shift, it goes there.”

“He looked at the spirit of people and then always found a way to work with their bodies.” says Carolyn Woods, “We were so different physically. He never ever made us feel small for what our bodies looked like...He was wholly inclusive of who we were.”

These differences may have, in fact, created the strong connection in timing. By being so different, they couldn’t rely on their bodies doing things the same way, and instead paid deeper attention to each other, finding a collective consciousness. Work-days spent in class, rehearsal, stretching or socializing at the end of the day also helped build this intuition.

“It was the rehearsing it over and over that built that group dynamic and synergy.” says Carolyn.

"When you took [Serge's] class, he would just start with something big, and we'd be expected to start. No counting. Totally intuitive." Gerry Trentham relates this intuition to an unusual sense of musicality. "Serge and I were intensely musical when we danced. He would lift things out of the music. We were floating on some kind of other sense of the music in the air. Musicality that's not necessarily about being on the beat."

Fresh-out-of-school when she joined the company, Julia Aplin felt inspired by observing her 'elders' in the company. "As a young dancer, to work with Marie-Josée Chartier and Julia Sasso and Learie McNicholls, and to see how they just dive in...you don't have a choice, you have to just dive in too."

It wasn't instant, this connection and synergy. "It does have to build over time," Julia Aplin continues, "but we were all willing to be open to one another, even though it took practice, it didn't take psychological adjusting. We were ready. When everyone's ready, the practice changes things exponentially."

Their collected courage embedded itself in their synergy.

"The work we had to do was different than if there were counts." says Serge. "The dancing in the company had to be visceral. You have to feel the trembling of energy in a visceral path. That's why I brought voice work into the company because voice work makes you go down."

Serge knew that to bring his dancers to the place he desired for performance he had to give them tools beyond technique class and rehearsals. They needed non-dance paths into themselves to respond to his calls for 'bigger' and 'more'.

Katherine Duncanson provided voice work that emphasizes a deep sense of self and breath as important elements of technique. Practicing this approach to speaking and singing is visceral and translates to dancing almost imperceptibly. It becomes not about articulating the voice but articulating the self in its fullest range.

The dancers also speak of the important contributions of Diane Miller to the company's health and depth. Diane, a master teacher of Pilates and ballet, would help dancers find specific, anatomical solutions to choreographic and energetic puzzles.

In Julia Aplin's words, "She would say, use your serratus anterior and move on the exhale, use the pelvic floor and release your hallucis longus. So instead of trying to just make it happen we'd be specific and then we'd start sharing what worked and figure it out together."

Peter Boneham, longtime director of Le Groupe de la Place Royale, would also teach, dissecting habits that slowed the company down, offering different ways of shifting weight for maximum efficiency.

"It wasn't theoretical, it was practical: use this to do that." says Aplin.

Gerry's memory of Serge's creative process contains this blend of practical and imaginative. "Serge would come in with fully formed ideas of the choreography. He would probably have drawn things. That's where I realized that choreography is interdisciplinary for many people. It's no surprise that Serge is painting so much now!"

What lingers most in the dancers' memories of the creative process of *Chronicles*, is the feeling of working together. Their memories make me think of the wave-particle duality of a photon of light. This process was built by moments with specificity, pattern and form, but the memory of it is a constant flow rather than a sliver of time.

Serge laughs a bit when I ask him about the process. "To be honest, I couldn't tell you a thing about the process ... when I think about the dancers, I feel the work we did, the journey we had. That's what I remember...The flow of courage, the flow of staying present, moment after moment. That's the thing."

Julia Sasso experiences a cellular memory of the process. "Oh my god, there are pieces when I watch now, I can feel every movement. I can remember making them, how they came about, how they were made. It is so overwhelmingly embodied. It stays there. You don't remember everything chronologically but the visceral feel..."

Choreography never began with shape or form, which is why it was always possible for Serge to ask for 'more' and 'bigger'. If there is no ideal form, then there is always a direction – in space or energy -- in which one can stretch and expand.

"I was just always trying not to do the gesture the way Serge did it, but to do the essence of his gesture. He wouldn't direct shape but something from the inside. Every gesture you did he coached. Every gesture had notes to make it more and more." recalls Gerry.

Building for individual bodies and intention over form made it tricky as members of the original cast left Dancemakers, new people joined, and original cast members shifted roles.

"I migrated my roles quite a bit." says Julia Aplin, "Hope [Terry] took over part of what I had done, then I did parts of Jackie's part. It is really hard to give up a part and also to take over someone else's part. Serge choreographed for the person....so it's not that it can't translate but it's really hard.... all of that poetry and the way it's translated between you [and Serge] goes into the body so when you teach it to another person...our standard way of teaching a part is about the shapes. It's the shell."

That approach would never capture the essence of Serge's choreography. Julia describes it like being blindfolded, pawing into the space around you. "What was it....?? What was it?"

MEMORIES

I ask the dancers about memorable moments in the life of *Chronicles*. Everyone mentioned a worse-for-wear theatre in East Germany, just a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. On this day their driver had taken them on a very scenic route from their last location, and the company arrived with very little time to prepare before performing.

Julia A: We had to get ready and just go on stage. We realized water was dripping on the stage, so we're in the middle of the show and we were whispering through the cast "there's water on stage left" and on to the next person. Then we arrived at the first tableau, the first pieta moment, stillness.

Julia S: And Serge walked on stage with a towel.

Gary: In his white running shoes.

Carolyn: He gently mopped it up.

Julia A: He had to do it a few times.

Carolyn: The wet spot was there again when I was running in a big circle at the end. I slipped and fell down, but I kept my arms up and just got up and kept running. I had a real connection to my grandma at that time and she was notorious for falling and getting up really fast without anyone noticing. It was a funny moment for me.

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For obvious reasons, Marie-Josée remembers a particular studio rehearsal showing with vivid recall. "Learie and I were throwing ourselves to roll across the stage and Gary and Gerry would jump over us. Learie landed, instead of next to me, diagonally, his whole weight on my ankles.

I kept rolling and stood up and hid behind the curtain. I dislocated all the bones in both my feet. No breaks, no tears. Six weeks not being able to dance. Then after six weeks we did *Chronicles* in Vancouver. My feet were all taped together. I couldn't jump from my feet, so all my jumps came from my thighs. That is the only major injury. I don't think I missed any performances."

Gerry's *Chronicles*-related injury was a catalyst for the next phase of his career. "When we were in New York City for the Joyce Theatre run of *Chronicles*, I was walking down the street, and a cute guy went by, and I went off the curb and wrecked my ankle. But I couldn't stop. I had six shows left. We went to this big party at the house of this opera singer, in a fancy building and I went to the party and lay on the couch to get off my foot, while everyone was partying. Later during this trip, I went to Central Park and sat down and said to myself, "well, you can't keep going like this anymore. You're at the height. Do you leave the party now or do you keep going?" Once back home and foot healed, Gerry decided to leave the company.

Many remember the final scenes of *Chronicles* with great emotion.

"At the end, I think I'm holding Gerry," Gary says about the final moments where it is clear that Gerry's character is about to die, "and he would normally look at me, a glance and then move on. But there were a couple of performances he lingered too long, and I was going to lose it, I was going to cry."

Julia S can feel another moment even now. "The opening images of Carolyn's solo at the end of *Chronicles* – she swings her hand up and looks at it..... I remember so many things about the solo...He set it on her over the summer. We all came back to work [after summer break] and Carolyn ran the solo and Serge built the rest from there. It was so perfect. And so beautiful."

There was a pre-show ritual, Julia A tells me. "Before the show we'd stand in a circle and breathe together and then we'd buzz together. Serge was always in circle as long as he didn't have anything else he had to do. He'd watch every show from down stage left. He was always, always there, down stage left. One time he couldn't be there because he was working on an opera and so we made a little Serge effigy. A chair, a beret ..."

A shared and glorious memory for all -- even for Gerry, despite his injury -- was performing at the Joyce Theatre in New York City, a theatre and a city that is a beacon and pinnacle for dance. Serge and all the dancers felt part of a bigger continuum of dance and dance history by dancing on the Joyce stage. Julia Sasso's memory of this performance is even more personal and moving:

"I'm going to get emotional about this.... I grew up in a suburb of Detroit. I studied ballet with Rosemary Floyd, a big Cecchetti ballet teacher. She trained many dancers who went on to fame and fortune in dance, including Donna McKechnie who was in the original cast of *A Chorus Line* as Cassie. She had dancers who danced in the Joffrey Ballet, the Houston Ballet, Nederlands Dans Theatre. I was the kid who became a professional modern dancer in Canada. She was so proud of me.

"She came to New York, to the Joyce, to see me. To be on stage and to know that my teacher was there...She knew me better than my parents. We remained close to the end of her life which was just a couple of years ago...To know that she was there watching me and feeling proud of herself too. I will never forget knowing that she was there, you know, my parents didn't come. But she came to New York just to see me in a professional dance company.

That was very, very special."

The word chronicle can act as both a noun and a verb. The noun, a fixed point in a span of time; the verb, carrying that feeling into the present.

THE OGRE OF LIFE

Serge made the choreography for *Chronicles* quite quickly and the company spent more time rehearsing, fleshing out details and responding to Serge's prompts of 'more, more, bigger, bigger!'

"It makes you extremely vulnerable to be strong. To be powerful you have to be in a very fragile place because it's just the raw power of you inside that is talking." Serge aligns this vulnerability and power with trademark qualities of his movement – weight dropped down in the earth, seeming even lower.

"[Serge] always seemed to be three feet below ground level" says Gary Tai. "Maybe that's why I enjoyed his movement. I was always very grounded. I felt I was below the floor from the knees down."

Despite the heaviness of the language to describe it, the feeling is multi-directional. "There's a form of ogreness." Serge says, "In *Chronicles* you have to be an ogre of life. Like in a German fairy tale. And when you think about people going through illness...they have to be this."

He speaks about the drop into the earth, the heaviness below like a spring that launches the chest, the heart, the spirit to the sky. You have to be rooted so that the upper body can fly. It's a metaphor for mortality, really. With the limitation, the grounding of a mortal body you can find reason to soar.

This 'ogreness' is familiar to me, though I never recognized the connection before now. I watched my mother suffer through almost 10 years of illness, disfigurement, immense pain. She had always been polite, reticent to express rage or sorrow or even joy. But as a terminally ill woman she fought for life like wild animal, until she didn't have a choice anymore. She would have loved to call herself an ogre of life. Was this the invisible message I received from *Chronicles* all those years ago, and just a short time after she died?

Serge endeavoured to create the way for the dancers to go deep down, deep in and deep out all at once. He was unwavering in his belief that you could get there, that you could dance bigger and more heartfully, and that you could hold all the big intentions and feelings.

"What was great about working with Serge was exactly that." says Julia Aplin, "Here's the phrase where you be the ogre -- he would give you a place to put it. It wasn't just a thought; it was a physical vessel to pour all of that into."

"My role was to guide them there." says Serge. "A choreographer is not just to tell you "Do this, do that." It is to guide you to be in the mental space where you feel safe to do things that are dangerous."

Julia Sasso describes how the footwear reinforced this weighted and free feeling. "I remember the Doc Martens, the weight of those shoes, the way they behaved. They were heavy too, so you could kick and the leg would go right up beside your ear. They influenced how the choreography came out of us....."

After seeing *Chronicles* as a student, I performed many times in my combat boots, felt the joy of swinging the leg and slamming it down. My restless and reckless heart felt that the extra weight on my feet would save me from harm, an embodied metaphor for being 20 and no longer living at home, wringing every drop of energy from my body, throwing myself into love and books and bad choices, trusting there was an anchor somewhere to keep me from flying off into space.

Serge has a different metaphor for the shoes. "Our lives sometimes give us lead shoes and you still have to live a full life with these shoes. A mental state, exaggeration, a form of groundedness. As if the ground tried to have you. But then you have the upper body that is constantly elevating itself, reaching out."

How did the dancers know they were fulfilling the ogre-of-life itinerary?

"As long as you gave it 110%, he was happy." says Gary Tai, "You can work with those choreographers who just with a look will show they are disappointed with what you did. I never felt that with Serge. It was so uplifting to work with someone like that. Of course, you get corrections and work to make it his vision, but I never felt like I got off stage and had disappointed him. It was very refreshing. All the way til the very end of dancing with him."

Carolyn concurs, "We would sometimes perform and think 'we were awesome' and Serge would say 'it was ok'. I had to think about that was causing that. I think it was that the ego was performing, we weren't in our humanity when we did it. We'd have to go back to the emotions, the roots, to ground us. When the piece came from its true place, Serge was always happier, regardless of what the critics or the audiences said."

As Lakoff and Johnson wrote in their book on embodied philosophy, "The Philosophy of the Flesh", our experiences are rooted in our senses, our base metaphors emerge from the organization of our sensory systems. Our sensations as dancers, not just physical mechanics, drive the performance. The ogre is not "ugly", just raw, immediate, and filled with sensation. When you perform from this place, it can also transform the audience into ravenous-for-life creatures.²

RUNNING WITH A VISION

Beyond the parameters of Dancemakers, across companies and art forms, there was a real scene in the dance community in the 1990s. Tuesday opening nights at Premiere Dance Theatre were populated by the dancers of all the active companies and individual artists supporting and cheering for each other. There was a real sense of support rather than

competition, maybe support and competition in a healthy frame. And there was dedication to the unique visions of artistic directors.

"There was this sense that we were creating new movement, new energy. Almost like we were in this place of crystallizing who we were going to become. Serge worked us hard but through that came a resilience to just embrace the creativity, the moment and this idea that we were a community." says Carolyn Woods.

Marie-Josée loved the community feeling and notes this distinct aesthetic amongst the companies at the time. "Serge really had a signature style, for whatever that means. If we think of other choreographers – Balanchine, Forsythe, you know it's them. With Serge there are movements that are very him, because of how he's built – powerful, ballet – his movement was very athletic, very big, sweeping, jumping. People remember the power of the women, the group. You didn't see that so much back then."

"Serge was not passive-aggressive. He was absolutely direct." says Gerry. "It was beautiful to have that boldness and directness. Really hard work but a lot of fun... He'd get mad on Thursday afternoons because usually we were exhausted and someone would fart or something and the whole company would lose it, we'd be on the ground laughing."

"I didn't know what I was capable of until he came and pushed." Julia Sasso asserts, " 'Bigger, bigger, faster, faster, I need more, more heart, more soul.' He insisted on it, he demanded it. And we were hungry for it. Everybody in the company was hungry for it. So, I could put up with anything, any kind of mean or bad behaviour. I was also brought up [with the idea that] you show up and do what you're told. If someone says, "do it again and do it better", you do it again and you do it better."

"It wasn't always easy to do." Carolyn Woods remembers. "You come in with moods and injuries. For me I couldn't have met somebody better in my life to go through that kind of experience. Just before Serge came to Dancemakers, I wasn't sure if I was really attached to dance. When Serge took over the company that thing inside me said 'oh yeah, this is what I've been searching for'. There wasn't anything he created that I didn't have love for."

The company vision included the non-dancing collaborators as well. For *Chronicles* this included composer Arne Eigenfeldt, set and costume by Nancy Bryant and lighting design by Borja Brown. Many of the dancers commented on Nancy's attention to detail and individuality. Seemingly simple costumes of shorts and short-sleeved button up shirts were meticulously fitted for each individual's proportions. This intimacy with between design and body left dancers feeling that Nancy was inside the piece with them.

Nancy's set design was a gorgeous rarity. This painted backdrop was both a full scene, covering the entire back of the stage, and microcosmic, as different sections and imagery within the scene were highlighted by Borja Brown's lighting. Rather than disorienting an audience by

rarely letting them experience the whole picture, the backdrop and its lighting focused the attention, creating gentle links between static shapes and colours and the dynamic bodies of the dancers.

The neo-classical score evoked allegory: a specific story in a specific time and also utterly timeless. None of this imagery told you what to feel, instead keeping the whole situation from becoming overwhelming. Just like life and dealing with a death, clarity and focus support amid wheeling emotion.

LEAVING THE COMPANY

"When I left in 1997 it was very emotional." Marie-Josée remembers. "That fall we were in Scottsdale, Arizona, the culmination of a full month tour [including *Chronicles*]. I stayed an extra weekend by myself because I was trying to decide...I wanted to leave but it was really hard to leave Dancemakers. I spent the weekend alone and I drove through the desert. When it was my last week, well, that week company class was very emotional. There were a lot of tears. It was nice, in a way, that people were sad that I was leaving."

After Gerry told Serge he was leaving, he felt hurt that Serge started teaching his role in *Chronicles* to another dancer without speaking to him about it. "Ken [Cunningham] was learning my part. But I was also such an asshole. I came into the studio and saw Julia Sasso teaching my role to Ken and I just lost it. I said, "what the fuck! why are you teaching my solo, that's my solo?" I went to Serge and said "that's my solo, and I'm not gone yet. If you want to teach it someone why aren't asking me to teach it? I'm the one who knows it!" He just looked at me. I think that's when we finally understood how much we loved each other."

Julia Sasso had an equally hard time leaving. "We were starting to work on *the Invisible Life of Joseph Finch*. I had already told Serge that I was going to leave but I wanted to do one more creation with him. In the piece I represented all the Jewish people. I was disrobed and burnt in the ovens. In my darkness I thought "Serge wants to kill me". I was in therapy. I did not want to go through with the piece. I'd go in every day, and we'd start class, and I was with the other dancers, and I couldn't leave, I couldn't say I was going to go, I couldn't say goodbye. My therapist said "You have to go, in ask for a meeting with Serge. Don't go into the studio, don't take class, meet in the office, because as soon as you see those dancers....." That's how I did it. Everyone was mad at me. They thought I just quit without saying goodbye. But it was the only way I could do it."

When Gary Tai left, he left dance entirely. It was a decade before he came back to see dance shows, and eventually dance in the remount of Jean-Pierre Perrault's "JOE" in 2016, presented by Moonhorse Dance Theatre as part of Older and Reckless. Gary knew he was a company dancer, not an independent artist, not a choreographer or administrator. The break had to be clean to be less painful.

Time, emotion, and free bodies whirling with power, abandon, control and relentlessness created a vortex in which many of the original dancers stayed for a long time. And as the original group dissipated, it welled up with a new group of dancers with these same qualities and drive.

As Serge reminisces, he is brimming with gratitude for what they all offered him, and pride in all they have accomplished after leaving Dancemakers. These original dancers – including Sylvie Bouchard, who came from Vancouver with Serge, Jackie Nell and Learie McNicholls and danced in Dancemakers at the very beginning of Serge's time there – remain luminaries in Canadian dance, original voices and role models in the field. They are ogres of life, still.

PARTING WORDS

Through the hard times and the good, each artist I interviewed carries deep affection for each other and for the work they accomplished together, for the big pushes and the small details they were able to illuminate in themselves and for audiences through Serge's choreography.

Marie-Josée: "His work was always full of imagery. It really had substance. It had big, big feelings. People kind of shy away from that now... Oh, he had too much movement in him. But the dancing felt really good. Some of my best dancing. I felt so strong."

Gerry Trentham: "I learned about gravity from Serge. We all shared a sense of joy, of love. We loved those gestures. The love keeps us together. I still can't fathom why I got to be that lucky to be there with those people at that time."

Gary Tai: "When I decided to leave and not just leave Dancemakers but leave dance and retire, I told Serge up front at the beginning of the season. In all my years at Dancemakers, I had never had a duet with Carolyn. In my very last piece with the company, I got to duet with Carolyn. That was Serge's gift to me. I don't know if he intended that, but it was the most wonderful way to end my career. I love him for that gift."

Julia Sasso: "Many, many things about those years I feel extremely grateful for. Very special. I feel like I should write about it. I should write about my life -- but that seems even harder than dancing. I'm very proud to say I'm a dancer and I do. I don't say "I was a dancer" but "I am a dancer". I'm still doing it. I still want to do it. As much as artists can get slagged and pushed down, sometimes by their own communities, regular people are amazed. We're unicorns to them. It's not for the faint of heart, being a dancer, and it's going to barely keep you alive, but it's very, very special. When you think about dance in the big picture, there are so few of us in the world."

We really are unicorns.

Carolyn Woods: "There wasn't anything he created that I didn't have love for. I was thankful for my fortune and just did my best to try to accept that regardless of my insecurities. It was an amazing life."

Julia Aplin: "I have to tell you about the "pieta" moments [*the repeated tableaux in a kind of classical painting formation with Gerry ailing and the other dancers surrounding him.*] I would always arrive completely out of breath. I didn't have to produce the enormity of feeling; I just had to do the dance and arrive at the pieta. I had my hand on Gerry's calf muscle. But everything that had come before was in that touch. In that moment that's enough. That's all you have to do, feel it."

THE LAST TABLEAU

Chronicles of a Simple Life is a tribute to a friend, a physical expression of grief, a true expression not a performance of grief. Serge choreographed bodies exerting, exhausting, caring, challenging, rolling and flying blind.

And in the end, it ends.

Not with a bang, but a gesture. A performance, like a life, is ephemeral. The choreography is mortal, and the final gesture is a promise that though the lights go out, life continues.

Chronicles of a Simple Life existed in the time when it was needed. It is authentic and emblematic of the 90s: wild, big, raw, tainted by the promise of utopia, by an epidemic and a tragedy that ended many artists and other loved ones in their prime.

SERGE: Thank you so much for this interview and this work, because [*Chronicles*] was very deeply me. I feel that we created an impact in Toronto. I say this very humbly. It is good to hear, after all these years, that someone went through a window with it. It opened something for you. Thank you for that.

LUCY: Thank you for giving me the window.

SERGE: There were moments at Dancemakers that were hard, but I'm so thankful and grateful that I found a place where I could do the work that I wanted to do with the artists that I dreamed to have. I'm very proud of all the dancers, all that they did then and what they do now.

LUCY: You're going to be creating and creating and creating 'til the end of days.

SERGE: Until my shoes come off.

LUCY: And then you float away.

*

So, here are some memories of a bold humanity, of Serge and the dancers³ of *Chronicles of a Simple Life*, a microcosm of the collective chronicles we may one day leave, a record of our humanity, once our species is gone.

The important thing is not that we are remembered but that, at one time, we were here.

¹ By all dancers' descriptions schlacking is most often a big leg swing or kick with a strong, heavy slap or drop of the foot to the ground, usually keeping the weight on the supporting leg rather than into the dropping leg. Quite often accompanied by a release of the chest to the sky. The ultimate ogre of life – weight down in the ground, heart breaking open to the sky.

² A little like the plot of Shrek, we might find that our natural, most compassionate state is the ogre not the prince or princess.

³ Thank you to Serge and to all the dancers of *Chronicles*, the original cast, including those I could not interview for this project, and all those dancers who were part of the piece later – for your beauty, power, commitment and the inspiration you gave a very anxious young woman who wanted to become a professional dancer.

LINKS TO FULL INTERVIEWS:

JULIA APLIN

https://mybatteryispurelove.blogspot.com/2024/09/dancemakers-interviews-for-serge_77.html

SERGE BENNATHAN

<https://mybatteryispurelove.blogspot.com/2024/09/dancemakers-interviews-for-serge.html>

MARIE-JOSEE CHARTIER

https://mybatteryispurelove.blogspot.com/2024/09/dancemakers-interviews-for-serge_27.html

JULIA SASSO

https://mybatteryispurelove.blogspot.com/2024/09/dancemakers-interviews-for-serge_85.html

GARY TAI

https://mybatteryispurelove.blogspot.com/2024/09/dancemakers-interviews-for-serge_49.html

GERRY TRENTAM

https://mybatteryispurelove.blogspot.com/2024/09/dancemakers-interviews-for-serge_5.html

CAROLYN WOODS

https://mybatteryispurelove.blogspot.com/2024/09/dancemakers-interviews-for-serge_47.html