

Los Angeles

The Bittersweet Year of Chris Cooper

The Buzz

Steppin' Way Out

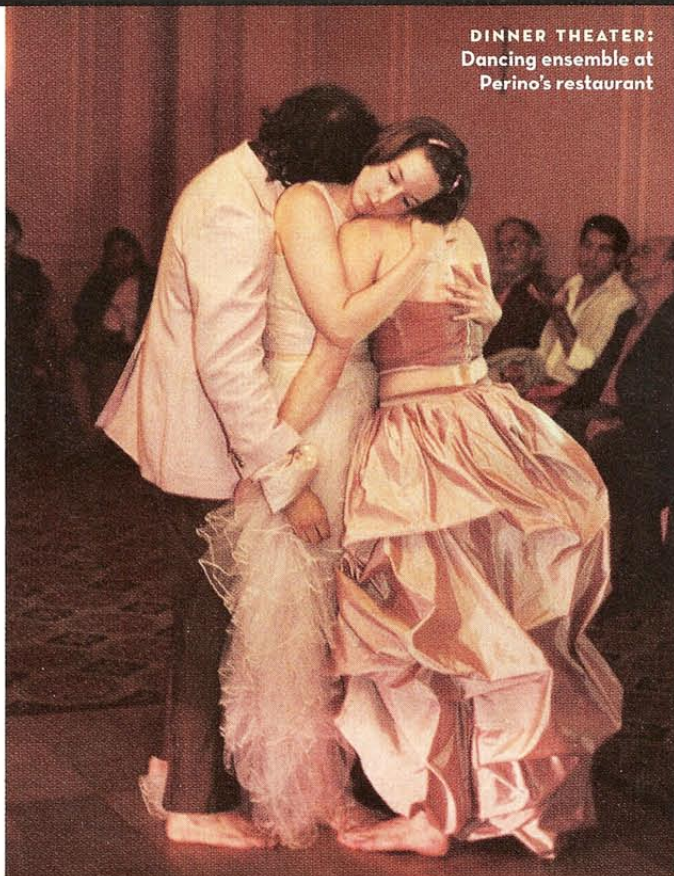
Location scouting with L.A.'s Collage Dance Theater *by Erik Himmelsbach*

AT THE LOS ANGELES Police Academy this month, as in winters past, a girl will meet a cop. A girl will lose a cop. A girl will marry a cop. The academy's coffee shop and shooting range have long been fertile ground for the beginnings of beautiful or bitter relationships, and its bucolic surroundings—Elysian Park, hard by Dodger Stadium—have been the backdrop for many weddings. Except this time around, both the girl and her LAPD lover will be professional dancers, singing and leaping their way through their romance as the stars of *Copera*, a production of the Collage Dance Theater that will be staged February 9 through 12 and 16 through 19.

"It's interesting to be able to go into a place that's real and mine it for metaphor and abstraction," says 53-year-old Collage founder Heidi Duckler, who credits Dada, '50s action painters, and Fluxus performance artists as major influences. Duckler has a dancer's angular, sinewy physique, honed by years of movement, but she's slowed down a bit these days, limiting her appearances to cameos. Her main focus is to conceive, direct, and choreograph Collage pieces in unlikely locales.

Since she staged her first on-site performance—1988's *Laundromatinee*—at Santa Monica's Thrifty Wash Laundromat, Duckler has reveled in the unpredictability of working outside the confines of the traditional stage. "I'm more into accidents," she says. "The black box is about control. This environment is very much uncontrolled." Indeed, during Collage's debut, an actual Thrifty Wash customer kept on washing and folding as dancers curled their bodies into washers and driers—unintended though powerful commentary on the persistence of daily drudgery.

Venues as divergent as the Ambassador Hotel, the Lincoln Heights Jail, Los Angeles Valley College, the California Science Center, Perino's restaurant, and the Herald-Examin-

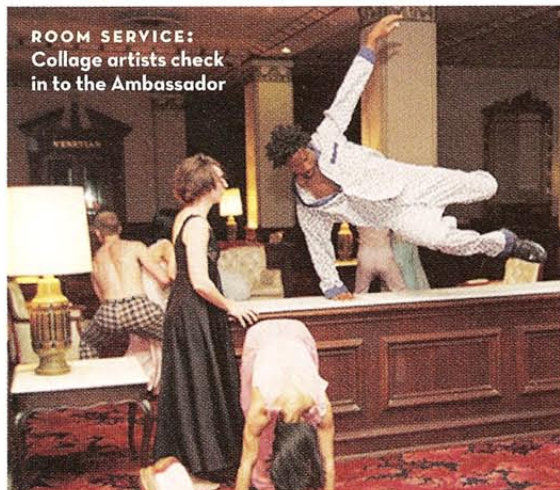


DINNER THEATER: Dancing ensemble at Perino's restaurant

er Building have superimposed their peculiar narratives on Collage performances. During 2001's *After Eden*, held at the Downtown Marriott Hotel, audience members got stuck between floors on a freight elevator. The mechanical mishap wasn't in the script. "People were freaked out, since it was just a month after September 11," Duckler remembers. "Then all of a sudden, the audience started singing 'We Shall Overcome.' They were nuts. One woman started singing, and another joined in. Then everybody was singing. That's the beauty of it."

At the police academy, the rich visual contradictions—the rock gardens, the training grounds, that coffee shop decorated with fading photos and billy clubs—will become *Copera's* costars. As the troupe performs in uniform, onlookers are to be treated as new recruits, viewing a black-and-white training film created for the show.

Duckler says she agonized to find her footing with the police academy. But after many ride-alongs and research trips to LAPD training facilities, she found that artists have a lot in common with cops. During a police training exercise she drew inspiration from witnessing the patting down of a suspect. "I was thinking about the close physical contact," says Duckler. "It's very intimate. It's like a dance that they do." **LA**



ROOM SERVICE: Collage artists check in to the Ambassador