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## Location... Location...Location

By Christopher Reynolds

It's been 13 years since the Ambassador Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard saw its last paying guest. The grass grows waist high in a courtyard, the building's owner and the preservationists are skirmishing over what to do with it, 50 cats are in residence, and the swimming pool out back is bone dry.

Yet at the pool's lip stands a gangly dancer named Chris Stanley, bowing and stretching like a shorebird at low tide. As he flexes to loosen his muscles, choreographer Heidi Duckler leads a visitor past.

"Hope and decay," she says. That will be the theme of "Sleeping With the Ambassador," the dance performance she's staging in and around the hotel. In the course of the show, which opens May 15, up to 175 audience members will follow dancers as they begin in the pool area, then move down a musty hall, passing and probing a series of oddly outfitted public rooms. In the Cocanut Grove nightclub, the audience will sit on stage while performers cavort amid the seats and tables below.

"I love these place that are stuck in time," says Duckler.



Here and there around the United States, you may occasionally find the modern dance in a derelict hotel, a theater production on a city bus, or a concert on a public park carousel. But in Los Angeles these things happen regularly – if not quite predictably – thanks to a handful of committed practitioners who have built careers around the making of site-specific theatre, dance, and music.

Apart from Duckler's Collage Dance Theatre, which since 1988 has been mounting productions in jails, swimming pools, gas stations, newsrooms and Laundromats, there is the Cornerstone Theatre Company, which since

1992 has built a nationwide reputation by enlisting community collaborators in staging plays in venues from a decommissioned cathedral to a senior housing complex.

Since 1995, Los Angeles-based performance artists Hannah Sim and Mark Steger, working under the name osseus labyrinth, have staged several startling events, including “Them,” a 1999 performance that began with the two dangling naked, hairless and upside-down beneath the First Street Bridge in downtown Los Angeles. (The duo obtained a filming permit for the production, which ended with them swimming away down the deepest channel of the concrete riverbed.)

Since 1980, meanwhile, MaryAnn Bonino’s Da Camera program has been producing chamber music and jazz in mansions, modernist homes, an aviary, a former railroad freight depot and once, at a merry-go-round in Griffith Park.

Nobody is in the business of tallying these kind of performances – and often they happen without permits or mainstream publicity – so it’s impossible to say precisely how Los Angeles compares to other major cities. But arts experts agree this area, with its mild weather, its penchant for novelty in all things and its vast population of performers in search of projects, has long been a stronghold for site-specific work. In fact, the city may be unique for having sustained so many site-work specialists for so long.

Maybe, suggest Bonino, it’s all the “derivative architecture” in Southern California, and the associations it sets off. Maybe, as UCLA Performing Arts director David Sefton wonders aloud, it’s the “extraordinary range” of sites here, from mountains to desert to downtown to beach.

Claire Peeps, executive director of the Durfee Foundation in Santa Monica and a veteran arts administrator here, points out the example set by performance artists like Suzanne Lacy, Paul McCarthy and Barbara T. Smith, who, in their search for new aesthetic territory in the 1970s and 1980s, devised works that by definition couldn’t be presented in conventional spaces.

In one performance, McCarthy used his face, head and shoulders like paintbrushes in applying a smeared line to the walls of a ramshackle room. For another, he salvaged part of the stage set from the old sitcom “Family Affair” and used it in videotaping a private performance involving a chef’s toque and a rubber Alfred E. Newman mask. What followed was a piece

titled “Bossy Burger,” which Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight wrote amounted to “a cooking demonstration that quickly degenerated into unrestrained chaos, violence, and edible lust.”

Another inspiration of sorts for site specialist, Peeps adds, is “the lack of official infrastructure” here – that is, the shortage of affordable venues for dance and other nontraditional types of performance.

Then there’s the constant and widespread on-location work of television and film crews – a circumstance that might foster live productions or impede them, depending on whom you ask.

On one hand, the city is full of intriguing but idle properties that landlords might dump, were it not for their occasional attractiveness to film crews. On the other hand, those landlords typically ask higher rental fees than most site-seekers outside the advertising, film and television businesses can pay. \_\_\_Also, insurance can be hard to get, and many sites limit the size of the audience.

“It is always hard, and there are always several heart-in-the-throat moments,” says Bill Rauch, artistic director and cofounder of the Cornerstone Theater. “Are we going to lose the space? Is the fire marshal going to shut it down? Is the owner going to change his mind?”

In fact, the first public appearance at the company’s “Crossing” project in St. Vibiana’s last year, a project exploring the immigrant experience of the Catholics, was canceled over permit issues. The rest of the production went on as scheduled, with a rooftop doubling for the deck of Noah’s Ark in one scene, and in another a line of red sand bisecting a room to abstractly suggest the River Jordan.

The show earned admiring reviews (“refreshing, emotionally direct,” said Diane Haithman of The Times in her review) and drew crowds large enough that its run might have been extended in a conventional venue. But it couldn’t be, Rauch said, because “there was deconstruction to be done on site.”

The sheer impracticality of such enterprises can be exhilarating in itself. Sefton, of the UCLA Performing Arts series, says half-seriously that his favorite new site-specific work is a German piece called “What Are You Afraid Of?” with a cast of two: a driver and a hitchhiker. The audience, effectively limited to three people, sits in the back of the car.

In their 1999 performance under the First Street Bridge, osseus labyrinth (named for a bone in the head that helps regulate balance) was seen by about 350 people, who were invited via a postcard mailing. There was no admission fee, in part because that would have required further paperwork, and there were no major newspaper critics on hand (though Times dance critic Lewis Segal has since described the duo's work as "contemporary dance at its most hauntingly extreme").

"It was all very guerrilla," says Steger.

The film permit (the project was videotaped) was free. Insurance was \$500. Everything else, harnesses and rope and such, amounted to about \$1,500. There was no wardrobe and no admission charge. And nobody who saw it is likely to forget it.

"People just thought we were crazy," says Slim. On the morning after they swam off down the concrete river channel, she says, "we called a surgeon friend of ours and asked if we needed shots. He said, 'Nah, it's too late.'"

Sefton proclaims himself a big fan of osseus labyrinth, and they could end up on next year's UCLA Performing Arts schedule. But all location work, he notes, carries another risk too – sometimes "you come out whistling the scenery, because the site is the most interesting thing. There are times when the site takes over and can possibly get in the way of the work."

Some site-specific performers are dedicated to creating or commissioning new material to specifically fit each site (as Duckler is doing at the Ambassador, and as local choreographers Parijat Desai, Rande Dorn, Tamica Washington-Miller and Rebecca Romero did at the Skirball Cultural Center on May 4 as part of that center's "Siteworks" series), while others adapt to new environments (like the Cal Arts production of "King Lear" that was staged at the Brewery arts complex in 2002). A company might use a site for the way it matches material (putting "Macbeth" on a Scottish island, for instance) or might use a location for a more abstract connection to the work.

Or a performer might take over a site with no tangible connection to the work, just because the space is intriguing, as in the case with most Da Camera chamber music performances in the Doheny Mansion.

"I got the idea for this when I was in Europe," says Bonino. "They perform in churches and palaces all the time. It's no big deal, and often, they don't make any connection between the architecture and the program. It's much

less self-conscious. The rooms are there, they play in them.”

That approach may be less intellectually rigorous, but in nevertheless seduces audiences often – as do several related extra-theatrical subgenres, including the Italian wedding comedy and the mansion murder mystery. At the Greystone Mansion in Beverly Hills, the local troupe Theatre 40 has been performing “The Manor,” a play by Kathrine Bates about a murder that took place in the residence in 1929.

That show, sold out through the end of its run in late May, begins with an address by the butler, and proceeds room to room telling the tale of a troubled clan not unlike the oil-rich Doheny family, which built Greystone.

What drives a director to site-specificity? For Duckler, it was an overstuffed car.

When she started as a choreographer in the mid-1980s, she was “filling stages with a lot of found objects and dealing a lot with popular culture. I had so much stuff that it was exhausting. So I just thought: What if I just go out there and do a piece in a real location?”

And so in 1988, Duckler and her fledgling company, Collage Dance Theatre, took over a coin-operated laundry in Santa Monica.

“My dancers loved it – they were able to do their wash while we rehearsed,” Duckler says.

Since then, she has assembled more than 40 productions at sites including a San Fernando Valley gas station, the old Herald Examiner newsroom and a women’s locker room at Los Angeles Valley College.

Duckler isn’t the only site specialist in her household. Her husband of 20 years, Dan Rosenfeld, trained as an architect and is a partner in the development company Urban Partners, which specializes in analysis and rehabilitation of historic buildings. (Urban Partners has worked as a consultant on the Ambassador for the Los Angeles Unified School District, which owns the site, but Duckler notes her troupe’s involvement came at the invitation of officials at L.A. Unified, separate from her husband’s work.) Duckler looks back with fondness on the Lincoln Heights Jail in East Los Angeles (rich in possibilities for illustrating themes of fear and confinement) and shivers when she thinks about her troupe’s one-night run in the concrete bed of the Los Angeles River at Atwater Village.

Though Duckler had a permit, county officials nearly shut her down at the last minute and electricity arrangements fell through, which meant renting a generator to power the lights and the musicians using acoustic instruments instead of amplifiers.

For the Ambassador venture, her most ambitious effort so far, Duckler's plans involve 12 dancers, 10 actors, four musicians, 18 months of planning, original music from composer-performer Amy Knoles and a budget of \$85,000. Even if the show is a box office triumph, ticket sales are unlikely to surpass \$50,000. Grants from city, county and state arts agencies and several local foundations, Duckler said, will make up the difference.

The choreography, Duckler says, is fueled by the site's strange, star-studded and often sad history: Joan Crawford won dance contests there. Publisher William Randolph Hearst and singer Marian Davies shacked up for a year, during which she once rode a white horse through the lobby to make a grand costume-party entrance. Judy Garland recorded an album there.

Duckler's script deals only indirectly with the most infamous event in the hotel's history, the 1968 assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. (He died in a pantry that's locked up). Duckler largely dodged that event, she says, because she worried about doing it justice and because it would have overshadowed the rest of the hotel's history.

In the last few months, officials at Los Angeles Unified, which wants to build a high school on the property, will decide how much of the original structure, if any, to preserve. One way or another, the site's long half-life is likely to end soon – probably too soon for Duckler.

With the zeal of a historian, she ticks off footnotes: The jury in the Charles Manson murders trial stayed at the hotel. Half a dozen Oscar ceremonies were staged there, along with innumerable proms.

In the collective memory of 20th century Los Angeles, says Duckler, "the Ambassador is a big place. And I wanted to take a big bite out of it."