

DANCE MAGAZINE
December 2002

Location, Location, Location

Collage Dance Theatre sets work in the where and now

By Heidi Landgraf

In the Herald Examiner newsroom in downtown Los Angeles, reporters were answering phones, typing madly, and jotting notes on paper, pieces of which seemed to be flying around everywhere. Men and women sailed down the aisles between desks, fighting each other for big lead stories. Amidst this chaos, some reporters (moved to get a fresh perspective, perhaps) did handstands on their desks, their feet touching the ceiling. Some jumped on chairs at the cry of "Mouse!" while others kicked their desk drawers in frustration. In the center of the whirlwind, an overwhelmed woman lay on her desk, and soon became buried in the paperwork. Suddenly, the penetrating ring of a cell phone arrested all movement, and the Los Angeles Police Department burst onto the scene to interrogate its owner, who reluctantly opened her purse for inspection. The room was declared a crime scene and all onlookers were evacuated into a corridor, where a television reporter instantly announced through a monitor that there was indeed evidence of a cell phone in the woman's bag.

Thus began Heidi Duckler's Cover Story, which took place at the historic downtown Herald Examiner Building. The reporters and police were members of Duckler's Collage Dance Theatre, the onlookers were audience members, and the woman with the cell phone was a catalyst for one of the choreographer's themes. "I wanted to play with the idea of the media creating something out of nothing," Duckler said.

She also explored other scenes of media influence. One corner of the building became a hospital waiting room where victims of media bombardment suffered; in another, a woman rocked catatonically before a bright computer screen, chanting, "I've got mail." The basement provided a cavernous space in which the audience became the voyeur as scenes of people on couches watching television played out before them. Monitors with a collage of media imagery also faced the audience. Finally, a parade went by with a talk show host at the head, creating a large mess, with Duckler following behind, sweeping. Then a newspaper boy on a bicycle delivered the next day's headlines as dancers sang, "Someday we'll know."

Duckler, a native Oregonian, didn't always make site-specific work. Trained in ballet as a child, she later studied Graham, Cunningham, and Limón techniques at the University of Oregon in Eugene, graduating with a degree in dance in 1976. As a young choreographer, she began work by surrounding herself with photographs, pictures, and text (not unlike a collage), creating an imaginary world around a chosen theme. She kept an eye out for props and objects that would contribute to this theme, and brought them onstage. "It was about the outside coming inside," she said. Created with this process, *The Mental Traveller*, based a William Blake poem of the same title, was awarded "Best of the Fringe" at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1974.

In 1980 Duckler moved to Los Angeles with her husband and completed a master's degree at UCLA. Because she felt a growing need to engage the surrounding environment, her thesis project, titled *Desert Dessert*, was about her new home. The choreographer was involved in her usual process of collecting props and creating a world onstage when she had a self-described epiphany. "There I was, loading and unloading my station wagon with stuff and driving all over Los Angeles, exhausted, when I had the thought, 'What if the inside could go outside?' Everyone's already there and it would be so much easier."

No longer would Duckler need to create a world in which to perform; she would go out to meet the world where it already was. Her first site-specific work was called *Laundromatinee* (1988) and was performed at the Santa Monica Thrifty Wash Landromat. Although she still makes work in theatres, Duckler enjoys site-specific work more because she can reach a more diverse audience.

Collage Dance Theatre, formed in 1985, has grown into a team of twenty multidisciplinary artists – actors, video artists, musicians, and writers from the Los Angeles arts community. As her company has expanded, Duckler's process has become more refined. First she identifies a site that inspires her, and then she obtains written permission to use it. Sometimes she does the negotiation herself, establishing trust with the owner of the site, but at other times she relies on her board of directors, which includes real estate brokers, lobbyists, architects, and curators.

Collage Dance Theatre carries special-event insurance, a point that invariably arises during negotiations. When Duckler has produced work in City of Los Angeles locations, such as the Lincoln Heights Jail in East L.A.

or the abandoned Subway Terminal Building downtown, she has been funded by the City of Los Angeles through its Cultural Affairs Department.

Once the site is secured, the dancemaker begins working with writer Terry Wolverton to create a narrative design months before rehearsals begin. Once in rehearsal, she leaves space for new discoveries and enjoys working collaboratively with her company, though she finds that “sometimes the process can be difficult with twenty artistic opinions being contributed. It is like a marriage – you have to find a mutual vocabulary. But we have no divas; the work always comes first,” she reiterates.

Most Wanted, set in the Lincoln Heights Jail, was about “how we create our own prisons,” Duckler explains. Spectators were treated as inmates and had their fingerprints and mug shots taken before they entered the jail. Later they were taken up a freight elevator, where they were greeted by a security guard. Divided into groups, some spent time in solitary confinement, while others witnessed dancers performing in handcuffs as an opera singer sang, “I am the lock, you are the key.” The piece was honored with four Lester Horton Dance Awards, which are presented annually to the local dance community in memory of the Los Angeles-based modern dance pioneer. It proved a truly visceral experience for one spectator: Duckler had to call 911 during the performance when an elderly man began experiencing heart palpitations.

Although she has had no shortage of choice locations in Los Angeles, in January 2001, Duckler created an exploration of illusion and fantasy titled *Under Eden*, set in Miami’s historic Eden Roc hotel. A narrator (a magician who had lost his magic) led the audience through the hotel, then outside to a pool where he transformed into a mermaid. The piece was produced by Miami Light Project as a part of the OnSite Performance Network, a Dancing in the Streets program, with funding from the Charles E. Culpeper Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Duckler and choreographers Joanna Haigood, Ann Carlson, and Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig were chosen to present work outside their own cities as part of a three-year project.

“The intent was to see whether site-specific work artists could work in a community other than their own and not be considered outsiders,” Duckler said. Coupled with Miami Light Project’s executive director, Beth Boone, the team planned to work with a retirement community in Miami. But when they went into retirement homes “it felt too invasive,” Duckler said. While scouting other locations they noticed the Eden Roc, a gorgeous hotel surrounded and supported by a community of elders, and decided that it

would be perfect for the project. They used some of the Collage Dance Theatre dancers but also worked with retired women from a local Jewish community center, Santeria priests, and one of the hotel's housekeepers. Duckler said she found that working with locals and local audiences, who might not otherwise be exposed to dance, was one of the most rewarding parts of doing site-specific dance.

After viewing *Under Eden*, an 80-year-old Cuban woman told the choreographer, "You've inspired me to keep on living."

Duckler, who was recently awarded a prestigious COLA grant (City of Los Angeles) for \$10,000, says that kind of audience response is what inspires her to keep on making dance.