

The Oregonian

Conduit's still got the moves after 10 years on its feet

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The set resembled the cheek-by-jowl gravestones that travelers from John F. Kennedy Airport pass on their way into Manhattan through Queens, New York. Among its vertical blocks of wood, the Wally Cardona Quartet struggled to extend their limbs. Not until, in the course of the piece, they dismantled and rearranged the wood did they have room to swing a cat, never mind an arm or a leg.

Cardona's "Everywhere" premiered at Newmark Theater last month as part of PICA'S 2005 TBA Festival. A clear metaphor for space or, more accurately, lack of it, the intricate piece could as easily have been titled "Everywhere but Portland," in the most literal sense. "No Portland choreographer would have made that piece," choreographer Gregg Bielemeier commented after seeing the work. "We have space and we use it."

In every city in America, including New York, where Cardona is based, adequate, affordable space in which independent choreographers can create their work is as scarce as funding for experimental art.

This week, however, Portland's dance community celebrates the 10th anniversary of Conduit dance studio. Founded in 1995 by Linda K. Johnson and Mary Oslund, on the fourth floor of the Pythian Building on Southwest Yamhill Street, in a 2,400-square-foot studio where ballet was taught for decades and Mikhail Baryshnikov once taught company class, Conduit gives the city's diverse contemporary dance community plenty of space to teach, learn, create and perform.

As we celebrate Conduit's 10th year, though, we aren't just acknowledging its importance to today's generation of dancers. From Conduit, with very few degrees of separation, we can track back to the very beginning of contemporary dance in Portland. And though the institutions that have supported dance here have been delicate and mostly short-lived, the dance itself always has been alive and sometimes amazing.

Past contemporary

The real history of Conduit -- and contemporary dance performance in Portland -- began in the late '60s in a class taught by Vaunda Carter, who had worked with improvisational dance pioneer Anna Helprin in San Francisco. The class attracted four young women -- Jann McCauley (now Dryer), Bonnie Merrill, Patricia Wong and Catherine Evleshin -- who planted the art form firmly in the city.

"We gave an improv concert workshop in 1970," Merrill, whose training had been in ballet at the University of Utah, said in a recent interview. "Judy Patton saw it and joined us and in 1971 Portland Dance Theater was formed."

In 1972 Bielemeier, who was one of the five original core artists at Conduit and is now one of its creative members, joined the company as an apprentice. Soon there were 11 company members, and by the mid-'70s the troupe was touring the Western states.

Wong, who now heads the dance department at Reed College, remembers well the collective's first piece, called "Much AEIOU About Nothing" in which they yelled the vowels at the audience in a parody of dance teams.

That surreal humor is arguably Portland Dance Theater's most important legacy to the city's dance community. Dryer became the artistic director of Portland Dance Theater because, Merrill says, "she had the most consistent vision" and was expert at juxtaposing wildly different images in surrealistic ways.

Other Portland Dance Theater characteristics that form what might be called a "Portland style" include an attitude of freedom about what "dance" rightly can be, freewheeling movement that covers whatever space in which it is being performed, and an advanced sense of theatricality in costuming, lighting and set design that led to a focus on dance as an immediate visual experience.

So just as the Portland Dance Theater collaborated with lighting designer Peter West and easel painter Henk Pander to create richly textured theatrical pieces, Oslund, Minh Tran (another of Conduit's creative members) and Tere Mathern, who now co-directs the space with Oslund, work collaboratively with contemporary artists from many other disciplines.

Out of the ashes

As Portland Dance Theater was winding down in the late '70s, Patton, Evleshin and Merrill along with Nancy Matschek became the founding mothers of the Portland State University dance department, which began in the physical education department and became the heart of modern dance in the city.

The 1993 closure of the department at PSU provided the immediate impetus for Conduit, but there were other significant closures that led to the necessity of its birth. Dancers Workshop opened in the late '70s, led by Judy Masee, then head of Reed College's dance department. It provided space for adults to study modern dance and for young dancers and choreographers to develop their work, but in 1991 it closed the last of the three spaces it had occupied.

Coil, which Johnson had opened in Southeast Portland in 1993 in a ballroom space chopped up by ceiling-supporting pillars, provided an inexpensive place to make work for a number of choreographers, including some displaced by the closures, but it proved an unsuitable space for either teaching or performing.

Conduit begins

Two years later, Johnson and Oslund, who had transferred the company she founded in 1977 in Eugene to Portland when she began teaching at Lewis & Clark College in 1985, went in search of appropriate space for a two-week summer workshop in contemporary dance.

What they found was the Body Moves studio, then and now next door to Conduit in the Pythian Building. On the last day of the workshop, according to Johnson, Vin Marti, another alumnus of Portland Dance Theater, "came rushing in to say the space next door, where I had taken lots of ballet classes, was available for rent."

Coil's cooperative structure was soon transferred to Conduit, which swung into action as a collective with Oslund, Bielemeier and Johnson, joined by Michael Menger and his Really Really Big Dance Company, and Keith Goodman. Tere Mathern, now co-director of Conduit, and a PSU graduate and

dance department faculty member, who was a member of the university's modern company The Company We Keep, returned to Portland from New York in 1997 with a master's in fine arts in performance studies from New York University and joined the roster.

Just as dances undergo revision over time, Conduit's population has shifted, and its structure has changed. Menger, another proponent of humor in dance (his clumping cow ballet provided some memorable hilarity as his dairy herd lumbered around Conduit's wooden pasture) has gone to New York. Goodman, whose culturally eclectic, ritualistic dances filled the studio space with an elegantly spiritual take on movement, is concentrating on other work.

Younger artists such as Tracy Broyles and Tahni Holt, who have their own vision of what contemporary dance is all about, often focusing on interior rather than exterior space, are now creative members.

In 2001, what had been an artists collective became a nonprofit organization with a mission statement and a hardworking, dedicated and knowledgeable board of directors that includes the co-artistic directors, Mathern and Oslund, cultural planner Bill Bulick, dancer Jim McGinn, and dance aficionados Cerinda Survant and Rachel Silbert.

While the struggle for funding is never-ending, Conduit today is a place where dance flourishes in the making, the performing and the teaching, the largest and most inclusive space in the heart of the city's cultural district.

"What I love about Conduit," choreographer Josie Moseley says, "is as long as they're interested in developing an idea, getting in there and making work, it belongs to whoever walks into that space."

It also, uniquely, belongs to those who watch.

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