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## **A conduit to the future - Portland, Oregon dance community**

**By Martha Ullman West**

Contemporary dancers Gregg Bielemeir and Mary Oslund embody the indomitable spirit of the Portland, Oregon, dance community.

There must be hundreds like them, all over this country. Gregg Bielemeier and Mary Oslund are gifted creators of contemporary dance, closer in age to fifty than forty--midcareer artists with their roots firmly planted in their communities. With their bodies and souls dedicated to making art and performing it, they stubbornly weather the ups and downs of funding and the openings and closings of performance and rehearsal spaces. Oslund is the artistic director of Conduit, a

studio space for teaching, rehearsal, and performance in downtown Portland, Oregon, that she and Linda K. Johnson founded in 1995. She also directs Oslund and Company Dance, a touring company that she began in 1977. Bielemeier, a big man who moves his well-made body with easy grace, is one of Conduit's core artists--there are five, including Johnson, Keith V. Goodman, and the Michael Menger's Really Big Dance Company--and he also directs the Gregg Bielemeier Dance Project, which includes both dancers and musicians. Although they reside in a state that is much better known for its maverick politicians and spectacular scenery than for its cultural contributions (Oregon ranks forty-eighth on the national list of per capita state expenditures on the arts), they deny that they are swimming in a backwater. They do acknowledge that they are swimming upstream, but neither wants to be anywhere else--at least not on a permanent basis. Recent concerts have been supported by teaching, special commissions, and the Regional Arts and Culture Council.

Bielemeier, with over sixty choreographic works under his belt, was active for fifteen years in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Amsterdam before settling in Portland. He says, "I have never paid much attention to where people say it's happening. There are just as many creative people in this region as there are in the next. I've probably made some of my best work here." Teaching, private commissions, and

Isadora-style dancing at private parties are all part of his routine.

Focused on his work, sometimes at the expense of fundraising and the schmoozing he detests, Bielemeier says, "I don't need to be in a large city to prove my art. And I don't want to deal with six part-time jobs to pay the rent." Then he adds wryly, "Just two."

A similarly witty attitude permeated "Drop Waltz," a knockout of a program that his Dance Project performed at Conduit last year. It embodied his approach to life, as well as dance--the work of a serious, seasoned artist at his peak, making dances that drive the point home with laughter and passion. "If you came, you saw, and you didn't want to leave, then you got it," Bielemeier says. The small house was packed for all three concerts, and "Trunk Concerts" last winter was equally successful.

He belongs to that proud tribe of native Oregonians that leaves the state from time to time but inevitably returns. The son of German-American Roman Catholics, he was born in Mt. Angel, a few miles south of Portland, and started his dancing career in the late sixties when he enrolled in a class at Portland State University to fulfill a physical education requirement.

He was soon spotted by the founders of Portland Dance Theater and joined the company to perform and choreograph until it folded in 1979. "I'm so grateful to Portland Dance Theater," he says. "It's how I came into this art form. I was truly an apprentice, learning from other artists. That's a dying way to educate dancers."

After Portland Dance Theater collapsed, he headed for San Francisco to perform with another company veteran, the late Ed Mock. Eighteen months in the Bay Area was followed by a two-and-a-half-year stay in Holland, where he performed with Rotterdam's Theatre Lanterne and was a featured artist in the International Dance Festival. Starting in 1987 Bielemeier spent almost eight years in Los Angeles dancing, choreographing, teaching, and receiving two Individual

Artist Fellowships (in 1990 and 1991) from the city of Pasadena. His performances at Dance Kaleidoscope and in Dance Gallery's "In the Works" performance series earned the salute, "an artist alert to the expressive possibilities of movement," from Elizabeth Zimmer in the Los Angeles Times.

The promise of a teaching job at Portland State University and the desire to be near his family brought Bielemeier back to Portland in 1993. Except for a teaching stint at the University of Nevada, where he conveyed his own brand of athletically relaxed modern technique to Las Vegas showgirls (as well as to more conventional students), he has remained in Portland ever since. Sticking it out has not been easy after local arts funding received several jolting setbacks, beginning in 1994. PSU eliminated its dance department, the Oregon and Portland Arts Commissions were folded into larger bureaucracies, and the National Endowment for the Arts did away with individual artists' fellowships. But Bielemeier, with his considerable talent for acquiring costumes from vintage shops and used clothing stores, persisted in making fully realized work and giving employment to many musicians and dancers, including former Oregon Ballet Theatre members Eric Skinner and Daniel Kirk. Dance Project's growing audiences continue to have a very good time, thanks to jazz singer Lyndee Mah, a pure-voiced diva who lends both musicianship and comic talent to any performance; an offbeat group called Three Leg Torso; and Bielemeier's own extraordinary gifts as a performer.

Oslund was born in Ohio but was raised from the age of five in Eugene, Oregon's second-largest city. She believes that returning to Oregon after receiving an M.F.A. in dance at Ohio State University and working in the Midwest for several years was the boldest move she could have made. "It's safer to go where you get the most input," she says. "But frankly, I don't think I ever distinguished a hierarchy, or had the feeling that I was on the edges of something."

Dark-haired, with a slender body that remains in taut performing shape and a strong-featured, high-cheekboned face that might have made her an enormous success in film noir, Oslund received her early dance education at the University of Utah as a ballet major, but transferred after less than two years to Ohio State, graduating in 1971 with a

B.F.A. as a modern dance performance major. In the mid-seventies, she returned to Eugene to form Oslund and Company Dance. Working in Eugene with contact improvisation practitioners such as Alito Alessi, she began to develop her idiosyncratic style by combining the abstraction of Cunningham technique with the weight and balance of contact improvisation and site-specific outdoor performances (much like the ones going on in New York City at that time).

In 1985 Oslund was offered a teaching job at Lewis and Clark College and moved up the Willamette Valley to Portland. Like Bielemeier, Oslund has also been productive--between sixty and seventy pieces. As her personal life has changed, her approach to dancing has also undergone a transformation and her work has become much less narrative in content and far more abstract.

Because hers is a pick-up company, new people are involved in productions all the time. In the thirteen years since the move to Portland, many members of its modern dance community, as well as musicians such as Oslund's former husband, Mike Van Liew, designer Alva Bradford, lighting designer Bill Boese, and a number of writers and artists, have participated in Oslund's visually and musically eclectic multimedia performances.

Oslund's interests are serious and intellectual--the exploration of character and mood through movement is a constant in her work, but she can do it with a light touch, as was evident in her major concert, "Reflex Doll," performed at Conduit in 1996. In that concert, Anne Bell and Bonnie Merrill, dancers who are not precisely in the first flush of youth, were both touching and funny because Oslund's choreography brought out the dignity and earthiness of aging women.

A superb soloist herself, Oslund can be both brilliant and disturbing, as she demonstrated in her 1994 *The Salvation Pieces*, a work commissioned by the Portland Art Museum. She had been sidelined for some months with a back injury, suffering considerable anxiety about her future as a performer. Her agitated movement was nearly unbearable to watch, emblematic of the fast-track stress that is so much a part of today's American zeitgeist; it was powerful and unforgettable.