



Sforzando

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Conduit

by Martha Ullman West

A conduit is a small, confined space, a channel or pipe for conveying water or other fluids, or, a tube or duct for enclosing electric wires or cable.

In Portland, Conduit is the name of a space that is wide and open, an "enormous room" to borrow a title from poet e.e. cummings, a light, airy 2400 square foot studio on the fourth floor of the Pythian Building, in downtown Portland.

In that room, with its tall windows that sometimes reveal a view of Mt. Hood, and where Mikhail Baryshnikov once taught company class when touring Portland with a pick up company of his "friends," Conduit's six core artists, each with a different aesthetic and ruggedly individualistic approach to dance, have come together to make, perform and teach contemporary dance.

The founding mothers of this hotbed of creative activity were Mary Oslund and Linda K. Johnson, long-time friends and colleagues, who more than the others share an intellectual approach to their art. Oslund is an accomplished choreographer, whose talents were recently recognized with an unsolicited \$25,000 grant from New York's Foundation for Contemporary Art.

Johnson, who has been making dances for only a few years, is a phenomenal performer who had a highly successful solo concert last June. Both women are extremely experienced, gifted teachers.

Teaching, in fact, is what led to the establishment of Conduit. In 1995 they needed a place to teach a two-and-a-half week intensive workshop. Coil, Conduit's predecessor, directed by Johnson and located in Southeast Portland, wasn't a big enough space for the number of students they anticipated were hungering for contemporary dance training in the aftermath of the 1993 closure of Portland State University's dance department and the collapse of Dancers Workshop. For two years, there had been "no place to teach, no place for contemporary dance students to go," Johnson remembers.

"So we rented the Body Moves studio [run by Vin Marti and his wife, Ann and also on the fourth floor of the Pythian Building] and we had 18 people show up for the workshop. On the last day, when we were cleaning up, Vin came rushing in and said the photographer who had been renting the other studio had moved out and it was empty."

It didn't take Johnson, who had taken many ballet classes in that very studio, and Oslund very long to decide to join forces and transfer Coil's structure to the new space. Core artists would have two weekends of performance time a season, eight hours of rehearsal time a week, and twice weekly classes. Each would contribute a share of the rent, in the best of all possible worlds to be covered by the pay they received from their students.

But first they had to find a name for an institution they hoped would re-establish contemporary dance as a viable and visible art form in Portland.

Dictionaries were consulted, discussions were held, Kristy Edmunds, director of PICA (the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art) was consulted and finally at dinner one night Johnson said, "what we want is a conduit for contemporary dance to the Portland community" and the space was named.

The next step was to assemble the core artists, the people who would commit their time and energy and talents to keeping the organization going. As it is structured at present, all six artists are artistic directors and there is a rotating executive directorship, held at the moment by Teresa Mathern. Attendance at monthly meetings is required; all major decisions are reached cooperatively and small decisions regarding the day to day operations inevitably come up for discussion.

Mathern, a graduate of PSU and a faculty member in its dance department for some years, also danced with the University's then resident dance company, The Company We Keep. When Conduit was established in 1995, she was still in New York, performing her own work and acquiring an M.A. in Dance and Performance Studies from New York University.

In 1997, Mathern, degree in hand, decided to return to Portland even though she knew,

she says, "there wasn't anything happening for me at PSU. But I also knew that things were starting to pick up in a general way here." She soon realized that Conduit was a major part of the resurgence of contemporary dance and became the sixth, and last, core artist.

The first two weekends in December, Mathern will give her first concert since her return to Portland, two pieces to be performed by herself and Jae Diego, Bridgette Forrest, Jenn Gierada, Dawn Joella Jackson, accompanied by singer Rita Marquez. Attendance at a recent rehearsal of the first, "Re-Member," a trio, revealed an interesting, highly geometric take on the arrangement of moving bodies. The design is shapely and cerebral; the movement occasionally explosive but always highly controlled.

Mathern joined a roster that from the beginning included a company that could not possibly be more different in style or content than hers. The Really Big Dance Company, directed by Michael Menger and Kris Vercouteren, like Keith V. Goodman had been Coil members; both jumped at the chance to be a part of the new organization.

"We have that big beautiful space to work in," says Vercouteren, "rehearsal time, and really a home base. We've been there since the beginning and we've just signed up for the next two years."

Neither Vercouteren nor Menger is currently interested in teaching classes, so they get extra rehearsal time and generate their share of Conduit's rent with the income from their "day" jobs. Vercouteren works 40 hours a week at Pazzo's Restaurant downtown and Menger, who like Vercouteren is a graduate of PSU and basically a theater artist, builds sets, occasionally directs plays and picks up work wherever he can.

The RBDC, which has given a number of shows of its zany brand of physical theater at Conduit, has just established itself as a

non-profit presenting organization and will reprise what it calls its greatest hits at the Winningstad Theater December 3-5 and 10-12.

Such beloved segments as “Cows” and “Das War Ein Richtiger Mann” are included in performances Vercouteren characterizes as fundamentally dance, because it “encompasses what we do: more than any other category, everything we do comes from a movement base.” Comedy and live music are also very much a part of RBDC, which performs again at the Winningstad in June.

For Goodman, who teaches dance part time in the Portland Public Schools, is a dedicated family man, and a choreographer with very wide ranging cultural interests (elements of Caribbean, African and Southeast Asian dance are frequently part of the mix in his pieces) just having access to a superb dance studio in which to make his work and do the teaching that is inevitably a part of his creative process makes participation in Conduit worth the time and effort.

“In the past I really struggled, spending more energy finding a space to work than I did making a piece.”

Since the opening of Conduit, Goodman has presented three concerts in the space, as well as a joint concert with Johnson and Oslund. Trained in Washington, D.C. where he grew up, and in New York, Goodman, whose next concert at Conduit will be the weekend of March 12th, says that while Conduit can’t do everything it wants to all at once, this feels like a healthy time there. “It is certainly one of the things that keeps me in Portland,” he says.

This is equally true of Gregg Bielemeier, who had left Los Angeles to join the dance faculty at PSU in the early 90s, only to have the rug pulled out from under him when the

University gave dance the chop. The supremely gifted choreographer, who like many dancemakers, uses his teaching to try out movement ideas, was ready to give up dancing all together when Johnson invited him to join Conduit.

“Conduit,” he says, “provides a luxurious work space on a regularly monthly basis – I know I have a place where I can go work and the rate [\$300 a month] is still reasonable.” There is, however, a Catch 22 for all the core artists. “The only disadvantage,” Bielemeier says, “is not enough hours of availability, but we need that many core artists to pay the rent.”

Even so, to meet the monthly rent, which was recently increased, Conduit leases studio time to a number of what they term peripheral artists – not for their work but simply because they don’t belong to the core group. Among them are Wendy Hambidge, Heidi Carlsen, who showcased her work there in November, Eric Skinner and Daniel Kirk, Katya Biesancz and Rinda Chambers.

Mathern is behind an initiative to explore the possibilities of becoming a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation, but she is meeting with some resistance. Such a structure would require a carefully worded mission statement, and a board of directors to which the core artists would be at least financially accountable. Both Oslund and Johnson are cautious about it. “We need to be responsible for ourselves, work together within our own infrastructure and not let an institution we don’t control, control what we do,” Johnson says.

Meanwhile, looking back at the many concerts that have been rehearsed at Conduit in the three years of its existence, many of them presented in the space, and the rush of creativity they represent, one is reminded of the third, albeit archaic, definition of its name: appropriately, it’s “a fountain.”