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(excerpted)

Shall We Dance?

Don't know your plié from your pas de deux? Your contact improv from your capoeira? Take a lesson.

By Catherine Thomas

When Jae Diego moved to Oregon, she looked for a dance studio before seeking a job or an apartment. Recalling three-hour commutes from Northern Vermont to Canada for dance classes, she said, "I was afraid Portland would be an arts wasteland." What she found was a dance scene infused with creative energy and dance classes every day of the week.

Portland's classes aren't just for performing dancers. Local dance runs the gamut from fitness to technique to movement-based spirituality, and includes classical ballet, contemporary, ballroom and ethnic – from Irish to Indian. Classes not only tone your body but also teach you "body memory" (internalizing a series of steps); it can take weeks of concentrated practice to remember a five-minute dance routine. The best teachers build body memory by keeping sequences simple.

The Contemporary Dance in Portland has crystallized around Conduit (221-5857). Conduit's core artists – a who's who of local

dancers/choreographers – teach in a gorgeous high-windowed studio. Says one student who has studied with them all: "Some teachers are fabulous dancers, but if their attitude is stuffy, your hackles go up. Conduit's are fabulous dancers and teachers."

Conduit may be one of Portland's most serious training centers for contemporary performance, but it also draws students with no modern dance experience. An excellent sampler class for beginning students who want to build strength, flexibility and body memory without having to remember a complex series of moves is Fundamentals of Contemporary Dance. Each class is self-contained, and the artists rotate instruction so students can drop in without feeling left behind. Students also get a taste of different teacher's styles, from Keith Goodman's capoeira-based class to what one student describes as Gregg Bielemeier's "monstrous movements that devour space." Bielemeier loves improvisation and will try out a move on 30 students in 30 different ways.