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Choreographers' Evening And How It All Started

By Judith Brin Ingber

June 30th celebrates the 30th anniversary of the Choreographers' Evening, the longest running feature in the varied menu of local Minnesota dance.

At the first evening in 1971, overflow crowds arrived at Walker Arts Center. The *Minneapolis Tribune* featured a full page of photos about the event besides one of Mike Steele's early dance reviews. "For those who doubt (how audiences have discovered this very American phenomenon) let me tell you about the 'Young Choreographer's Evening' at Walker Art Center, the first of what promises to be an exhilarating series. The Walker auditorium holds 350 and more than 400 were stuffed inside. Another 100 couldn't get in at all. And it was snowing

.... the audience watched carefully, responded with genuine delight and rose to its feet after the final number ... it got thoroughly involved with the genuinely promising ideas..." Ten years later, Bob Protzman of the *St. Paul Dispatch* called the Choreographers' Evening "one of the most consistently popular and successful arts projects produced in the Twin Cities." How did such a successful venture, showcasing more than 300 diverse choreographers in over 75 programs, put together by more than 50 curators/dancers for consistently avid audiences, come to be?

I approached Sue Weil, then the adventurous performing arts director at Walker

Choreographers' Evening
continued on page 5



Judith Brin Ingber at the first Choreographers' Evening, 1971.
Photo by Alan Friedman.

Dance Coverage in the Star Tribune: A Conversation with Claude Peck

Last December, June Wilson (MDA Executive Director) and Philip Bither (WAC Performing Arts Curator) met with Claude Peck (Fine Arts Editor), Susie Hopper (AME/Features Editor) and Pam Fine (Managing Editor) at the Star Tribune to discuss dance coverage. To continue this discussion for the dance community, Sandra Sullivan (MDA Communications Manager) met with Claude Peck on March 30th at the MDA offices.

SS: I'd like to start out with a little "PR 101," since the inside of a newsroom is kind of a mystery to a lot of us working in the arts. Could you give me a general outline of what happens when a press release lands on your desk?

CP: First, it's good to know that we receive many, many press releases. But if they're dance-related, they should come to me. Most presenters also mail information directly to our primary freelance dance writer Camille LeFevre, at her home

Dance Coverage continued on page 12

Regular Features

Marketplace	4
Performance Calendar	6
Dancing Ear	13

Choreographers' cont. from pg. 1

Art Center. I brought a fresh idea to her: an evening of dance that could merge the different loyal dance troupes, mixing attitudes and styles. I was well acquainted with the dance schools and dance companies in the area. By 1970 there were three major players: the Andahazys, Loyce Houlton and Nancy Hauser who each kept to themselves.**

There was no venue for works by young choreographers. I had recently returned from New York after graduating from Bessie Schonberg's pioneering dance program at Sarah Lawrence stressing new choreography, followed by two years as assistant to the editor of *Dance Magazine*, covering the burgeoning loft performance scene and performances in art museums and other new outlets for new choreography. Why couldn't Minneapolis follow suit, I wondered?

Weil decided to give my idea a try and agreed that I could scout all the different studios, including Margaret Dietz's new Choreogram studio, for dancers willing to work with me to put a show together. It was decided that there would be no charge and the show *** would be at the unconventional hour of 7:00 p.m. instead of the usual 8:30. Weil, it was reported in Protzman's later article, recalled, "that the evening was very snowy so we told the dancers not to take it personally if no one showed up." What I remember was the incredible energy and excitement.

Much to Weil's surprise the foyer was jammed. Only some of those present could possibly fit into the auditorium. One particularly irate left-out patron was Mayme Green, who had been a baby-sitter and caterer for my family. She had grown up in Alabama and had learned to stand up for her rights and began to tell Weil a thing or two. It was at that point that Weil came upon the idea of holding a second show that same night. Since then there have always been two shows, one at 7:00 p.m. and one at 9:15 p.m.

The young choreographers for the first performance showed off dancers and dances from the Hauser company: Gale

Turner (her "US Folk" was performed by nine dancers from the Nancy Hauser Dance Company; Gale later worked with Meredith Monk), Joann Saltzman, and a duet, "Magnetic Rag," by Sara and Jerry Pearson (they later joined Alwin Nikolais's New York company). Other choreographers on the evening included Judy Morgan, Katherine Hearsh, Terrence L. V. Karn (who was a student from Children's Theater) and two pieces of my own, including "Carrying." As a wedding gift to me, Loyce Houlton "loaned" me 11 dancers for that group piece.

Following Sue Weil, each performing arts curator at Walker Art Center has continued to support the evenings (Nigel Redden, Robert Stearns, John Killacky and now, Philip Bither). They have kept to the original format of having a dancer/curator act as the decision maker to choose the repertoire. Once the Minnesota Independent Choreographer's Alliance (MICA) was established, both Walker and MICA created an audition system where anybody could try out for the performances. There was a shift from emphasizing young choreographers to simply choreography in general. The two organizations co-sponsored the Choreographers' Evenings, usually held at Walker though some summers, including 1987, the performances could be seen on the outdoor stage at Nicollet Island. MICA evolved into the Minnesota Dance Alliance, which continues to co-produce the program with Walker. Together the two organizations choose the curators for the shows.

Each curator has made their mark with different kinds of shows. The late Nadine Jette, the head of the University of Minnesota Dance Program who engineered its move to join the Theater Arts Program, curated the second show, and was followed by Charles Moulton, who went on to a national choreographic career. Loyce Houlton curated the eleventh, and Myron Johnson, known for his company Ballet of the Dolls, curated the twentieth. Steve Kimmel, a musician known for his work with Hauser, curated one evening that featured improvised dance with all live music. Linda Shapiro, who directed the New Dance Ensemble, curated one of the shows in 1979.

Candy Bartell, Choreographers' Evening
February 14, 1974
Photo by Boyd Hagen



For the 30th anniversary, Kristin Van Loon and I will co-curate the June 30 shows. Van Loon said her first performance in Minneapolis was at the Choreographers' Evening. "It was Thanksgiving weekend in 1983, the year I moved here, and it was an excellent experience. I've probably performed at least six times and I've also curated once before. I've always been interested in the actual context of being at the Walker. During the rehearsal process I especially notice what else is in the calendar that month for Walker happenings and what's hanging on the walls...it was so thrilling and amazing to be in the calendar with Yoko Ono. (Kristin was seen most recently in the Momentum series this March, sponsored by WAC, MDA and the Southern Theater.) The full audience which greets you when you step out on stage is a very special Walker Art Center audience, which means it is filled with people who enjoy visual art and music and theater. I am always just thrilled afterwards when strangers come up to me in the lobby and give me their insights about my dances. Being able to talk to those audiences is why I keep doing it over and over."

I interviewed a few other longtime members of the dance community about their memories of the Choreographers' Even-

Choreographers' Evening
continued on page 16

Choreographers' cont. from pg. 5

ings. Wendy Morris has curated, performed and been an audience member for the evenings. "As a performer, three of my peak performing experiences were during Choreographers' Evenings. Even when the community was much smaller I always knew I'd see some performing faces and bodies that I did not know."

Georgia Stephens said that the first time she heard of this event was from a fellow dance major at Washington University in St. Louis named Suzanne Costello, who was originally from Minnesota (now Suzanne herself has moved back and performs with her husband Stuart Pimsler). "I think that was because of the Choreographers' Evening. It exposed your work to the public free of charge. Usually dancers had to fork out their hard earned bucks to be seen in performance, to produce themselves. The opportunity to perform in Choreographer's Evening seemed like a miracle. So I moved here and thanks to curator Wendy Morris, in May of 1980 I

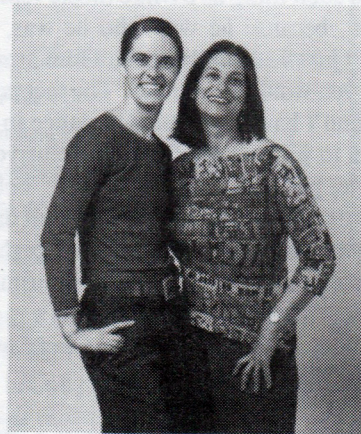
had my first Minnesota performing experience."

Marylee Hardenbergh, known for her site-specific choreographic work nationwide, says "Happy thirtieth birthday, Choreographers' Evening! I like the opportunity to see a smorgasbord of styles on that unique skinny stage. In 1972 I did a piece on Walker's outdoor terrace, and choreographing it made me love the skyline of Minneapolis as a background (which then was just the Foshay Tower and the IDS).

With such a rich history behind it, and so much support from the dance community, the patrons and audiences and sponsors for dance, we celebrate the 30th anniversary. The newest roster of choreographers and performers will bring you yet another exiting and varied program. I look forward to seeing you at the Walker Art Center for the Choreographers' Evening on June 30. Come early so you can be assured of a seat for the shows at either 7:00 p.m. or 9:15 p.m. To reserve tickets call the Walker Art Center at (612) 375-7622.

** I had grown up in the ballet studio of Lorand Andahazy and Anna Adrianova and had even danced on the Northrop stage in one of their yearly Ballet Borealis classical productions, accompanied by Antol Dorati and the Minneapolis Symphony. Nancy Hauser had the longest running modern dance school and had recently moved it to an old knitting factory on the West Bank. This provided studios, a small performing space for her students, herself and her musical sons; the complex became known as the Guild of Performing Arts. Loyce Houlton also fairly recently had switched her alliance as one of the lead dance teachers at the University of Minnesota to directing her own school in Dinkytown. Her company was known as the Minnesota Dance Theater.

***I dedicated the evening to George Amberg who had recently died. He was known for his encouragement of young artists, wrote extensively about dance, had taught at the U of M, and started the film school at NYU.



Kristin Van Loon & Judith Brin Ingber.
Photo by Glenn Halvorson.