

Los Angeles Times | Entertainment

[Return to your last page](#)

Archive for Sunday, September 24, 2006

Whew, it's a Hothouse inside

By Susan Josephs

September 24, 2006 *in print edition E-38*

FOR three weeks just before Labor Day, choreographer John Pennington experienced his own particular slice of heaven. Every day for four hours, he arrived at the same spacious, sunlight-filled studio and churned out a series of solos and duets that had been brewing in his brain for years. "It got to the point where I was dreaming about the pieces at night," he said.

Pennington was one of a small group of choreographers selected to participate in the second annual Hothouse Program, a residency designed exclusively for Los Angeles-based dance makers to develop their craft. Sponsored by UCLA's department of world arts and cultures, Hothouse at first blush seemed a modest undertaking. Ensclosed in the Westwood campus' newly renovated Gloria Kaufman Hall, with its seven pristine studios, the program offered such deceptively simple perks as free workspace, time and the opportunity to network with other artists.

But when viewed as a resource with long-term potential, the residency assumes a much greater significance. Indeed, within the next two months, L.A. audiences will be able to see work that grew out of the program by at least three of the participants (see box).

"The reason Hothouse is so important is that it's not tied to anything but art making," said Rosanna Gamson, one of the most established choreographers in this year's bunch. "Raising the artistic level of dance in L.A. starts if we're all making better art."

Conceived by UCLA choreography professor Victoria Marks, Hothouse as an idea has ample precedent. Marks directed a Hothouse in 1998 for a contemporary dance center in London, and choreographic residencies in the U.S. abound. This year, for example, the venerable Jacob's Pillow in Massachusetts offered a weeklong residency in August for choreographers interested in community-based dance making. Dance New Amsterdam, a multifaceted educational and presenting organization in New York, received a National Endowment for the Arts grant specifically to further its ongoing artist-in-residency program. University of Maryland students had the opportunity to take part in an intensive weeklong residency this summer. And this fall, Stanford University will offer a residency for students to develop work with pioneering postmodern choreographer Anna Halprin.

In Los Angeles in particular, though, the prospect of a continuing annual residency is a huge boon "for all of us who make dance here," said Marks. "Because it's great for artists not only to have space but to have space at the same time. People complain that there's no mecca here, no central place to go, but I don't think that's a problem if you can create links between people and even institutions."

Marks described the “formidable challenges faced by the local dance community”: L.A.’s sprawl, the limited number of producing dance venues and the lack of other resources to facilitate the choreographic process. “There’s also the feeling that this is a one-business town,” she said. “Dance artists often feel isolated, and for our community to thrive, we need opportunities not only to explore our ideas but to be colleagues to one another.”

“Hothouse meets a need that has been present in L.A. for a long time,” agreed Pennington. “Having a residency like this basically says you are valued, that for these three weeks, this is your daily job, your primary focus. This can only elevate our art form.”

Marks selected the seven Hothouse participants from 35 applicants, and she purposely sought a mix of established and emerging artists. With the exception of Leilani Chan, a multidisciplinary performance artist, the others were all contemporary dance choreographers at different stages in their careers. Ally Voye, for example, received her undergraduate degree from UCLA just last year, while Pennington and Gamson have established companies.

Everyone received private studio space for four hours a day. Aside from meeting for lunch on Fridays and showing their work on the final day, they could do as they pleased.

“I tried to look at who was making the kind of work that could best use a boost like Hothouse and how that could be significant to their evolution as artists,” said Marks. “Then I just stepped back and hoped for a kind of alchemy. Organizing Hothouse is like choreographing a dance. You don’t know the shape of it until you just do it and then see what it reveals.”

*

‘A residency at home’

WITH her World Wide dance company, Gamson frequently receives opportunities to perform and conduct residencies outside Los Angeles. In town, however, she does not have her own studio and “generally suffers from a space problem.” Hothouse “gave me the chance to do a residency at home and actually pay my dancers a salary as opposed to just feeding them on the road,” said the 46-year-old choreographer, who relocated to L.A. from New York 10 years ago.

Gamson began with the goal of hammering out a “rough draft” of a full-evening work called “Ravish.” Inspired by the Brontes and their collective genius, she set out to create a dance that would explore “adolescent friendships and the kind of sharing of imagination with others that’s hard to achieve in adulthood. Every day, I walked in there intending to knock out 20 minutes of material, and that’s what we did,” she said. “We worked every second of the residency.”

Pennington, 47, also had a full-fledged plan: to work on 14 dances about “losing, gaining and unrequited love” set to late 19th century/early 20th century songs by the Austrian composer Alexander Zemlinsky. At the end of the residency, he had created nine, which will premiere in November at the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center.

Though he has access to rehearsal space as a faculty member at Pomona College, Pennington often struggles with gathering his dancers to rehearse for a concentrated period. “Mostly, I have these hour-and-a-half rehearsals, and just when you hit your stride, it’s over,” he said. “Hothouse allowed me the time to play and to dig deeper.”

In the studio reserved for him one morning, Pennington radiated euphoria as he took the time to dissect with his dancers a lyrical movement sequence involving standing on one leg and reaching for the sky before plummeting to the ground. “You want to try this?” he joked to a visitor before offering the more serious observation that “the consistency of working here every day hugely impacts the quality of my work.”

While Gamson and Pennington mostly wound up with material according to their blueprints, Liz Casebolt and Joel

Smith, who formed their company last year, found themselves veering off their intended course. As the duo prepared for their debut at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, “we wound up with a different dance than the one we were planning. That was the amazing thing,” said Casebolt.

Called “Popped!,” Casebolt and Smith’s work – a series of dances exploring issues of friendship, collaboration and personal space – definitely seemed to be cooking one morning in their designated studio as they engaged in multiple rounds of mock fighting. Each took turns kicking, pushing and manipulating the other into moving and falling through the space. “We’re trying to avoid the cliches of the big strong man throwing the woman around,” explained the tall and broad Smith.

Unlike some of the other choreographers, Casebolt and Smith, both 29, do not have space problems. Smith has easy access to working quarters as a faculty member of Scripps College, while Casebolt can tap into the resources at UC Riverside, where she’s earning a master of fine arts. Furthermore, it’s just the two of them, and neither considers driving long distances daunting.

“For us, Hothouse was about exposure to other artists,” said Smith. “And to participate in something that supports process.”

Ditto for Cheng-Chieh Yu, an assistant UCLA choreography professor who moved here from New York five years ago. “I miss the feeling of being in New York, working in my studio and knowing there’s other dancers next door to me working,” she said. “Hothouse gave me the chance to experience that.”

Since moving to L.A., Yu, 40, has focused on integrating her modern/postmodern background with her Chinese heritage. A veteran of New York’s downtown dance scene and a former member of Taiwan’s Cloud Gate Dance Theater, she regularly practices ba gua zhang, and she spent much of Hothouse teaching the martial art to her four dancers.

“Normally, I work from the top down, where I have the idea, then make the movement,” she said. “But this time, I worked from the bottom up, where the training of the dancers became my actual material.”

On the last day of Hothouse, Yu showed a series of movement sketches that explored the intersection of ba gua zhang and a contemporary dance vocabulary. Alternating between slow and staccato, the movements of Yu and her dancers remained fluid and projected an aura of ritual and ceremony.

“For me, Hothouse was not about getting material ready to do a show but about fostering the creative process,” Yu said. “We live in such a product-oriented world, but to have that product, you need to have the process.”

Yu seemed to speak for all the participating choreographers when she said: “I feel we are just at the beginning. It would be great if next year, students were around to watch, or maybe we create a festival out of this. This has so much potential.”

For now, Marks wants to facilitate programs where the Hothouse artists visit the world arts and cultures department during the school year and show the work they developed to students.

“I feel like everyone left Hothouse excited, and the hope is we can keep expanding and attract an even more diverse group of artists,” she said.

Smith believes that the Hothouse model could “happen at any academic institution. And L.A. has so many other resources that are not tapped into. So many people here do have money to support this kind of art-making, and if only we can convince them that our work is worth supporting

Satisfied with her rough draft of “Ravish” and with plans to present it next year, Gamson wonders what would happen

if every performing-arts presenter in Los Angeles gave dance artists three weeks each year to “focus on nothing but their dance making. No doubt, the whole level of dance making would improve community-wide. When you go to work with other colleagues on a daily basis, you feel that what you’re doing is important, and this just lifts everybody up. I think that Hothouse is a brilliant model.”

*

Fruits of residency

What: Casebolt and Smith

Where: Highways Performance Space, 1651 18th St., Santa Monica

When: 8:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Sunday

Price: \$15 and \$20

Contact: (310) 315-1459 or www.highwaysperformance.org

Also

What: Pennington Dance Group

Where: Nate Holden Performing Arts Center, 4718 W. Washington Blvd., Los Angeles

When: 8 p.m. Nov. 3 and 4

Price: \$23; students, \$17

Contact: (323) 993-8503

Related Articles

- Taking Aim at Inspiration May 17, 1998
- In This Case, Some Like It Less Hot - Donald Byrd's new work is steeped in Duke Ellington, but two presenters have deemed a portion too racy. Feb 18, 2001
- Getting to the root of dance rights Aug 06, 2006
- A flood of moves about town Jun 22, 2008
- The Twyla zone grows: Prickly as ever, a cult creator expands her pioneering influence Oct 24, 2004

More articles by Susan Josephs

More articles from the Entertainment section

California and the world. Get the Times from \$1.35 a week
