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Dancers join hands, move forward

Touring Project gives California-based artists a pathway to performance.



DUO: Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith rehearse at Metabolic Studio in L.A., in front of a piece of art by Lauren Bon. (Nancy Pastor, For The Times)

By Victoria Looseleaf
November 21, 2008

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Surviving in these tough economic times requires not only thick-skinned fortitude but a mega-dose of ingenuity. But the performing arts, especially dance, teeter on the edge as a matter of course. Consider grass-roots dance companies with limited resources. How else can they gain broader audiences if not by taking their shows on the road?

That, at any rate, is the strategy being pursued by Cid Pearlman, creator of the California Touring Project. Now in its second year, the project was conceived as a way to build community relations and create touring opportunities for smaller troupes at a time of diminishing resources for dance. Last year under its auspices, a handful of California-based dancers and choreographers performed in San Francisco, San Diego and Santa Cruz. This weekend, Los Angeles is playing host to four dance makers appearing under the project's umbrella at the Diavolo Dance Space.

Pearlman, a Cape Cod native and longtime San Francisco resident, moved in 1999 to L.A., where her troupe Nesting Dolls proved a vibrant force. But since 2006, her home has been in Santa Cruz, where she teaches at Cabrillo College and continues making work.

"I started thinking about the Touring Project after I moved here," Pearlman, who earned a UCLA master of fine arts in dance in 2006, said recently by telephone. "I knew I had wonderful resources in L.A. and the Bay Area and that one of the only ways I could be happy here was to use Santa Cruz as a base to network from."

"As [UCLA faculty member] David Gere said to me, 'One of your jobs is to make California smaller.' That was a goal," she said. "So the first year, I contacted Nina Haft from Oakland and Liam Clancy of San Diego to perform with me."

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Pearlman, 45, said she initially dubbed the project California Triple Feature. But she eventually changed the name to better represent what it is -- California artists touring, well, California.

"The strength of the project," she added, "lies in the fact that there's someone on the ground doing legwork in the city we're performing in."

For this second year, Pearlman took over supervising the Bay Area portion from Haft and Clancy and got the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego to present them. After Clancy dropped off the performing roster to spend time with his newborn daughter, Pearlman persuaded Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith, who first appeared with the project last spring, to produce the L.A. gigs.

The pair invited Susan Rose, 62, a former teacher of theirs who chairs the dance department at UC Riverside. The L.A. roster is completed by British-born Yolande Snaith, head of the graduate dance theater program at UCSD.

Casebolt and Smith, who teach at an array of Southern California colleges, met four years ago while auditioning in L.A. for Hassan Christopher's Company of Strangers. Casebolt says they clicked and formed the "contemporary dance/theater duet company" casebolt and smith in 2006.

As for the Touring Project, Casebolt, 40, points out, "Everybody is stretched so thin with time, energy and resources that the partnership has been fantastic. For us to produce a show in San Francisco would be such a challenge, but having Cid on the ground up there was great. L.A. is our turn, so now we're doing everything from the creative to the business ends."

Smith, 31, designed promotional postcards, and the pair undertook the PR for the Diavolo gig. Casebolt says they chose the Diavolo space because they could fashion an evening in the round. The duo's 20-minute piece, "Having Words," is spare, though laced with humor. Danced entirely in unison, it has no accompanying soundtrack but will include some audience participation.

You might call casebolt and smith the Nichols and May of dance teams, but the pair say they are primarily interested in challenging gender representations. "We're trying to tap into a niche that's not charted very often," says Smith, who is gay. "There are many more things to explore in a man-woman dynamic that aren't romantic."

The show also will feature "Powerplays," an improvisational dance for three women made by Rose, and "Re-ordered Around," choreographed by Snaith for four dancers.

"It's exciting to be part of this project," says Snaith, 48, whose credits include choreography for Stanley Kubrick's final film, "Eyes Wide Shut," "because one of the ways artists here can get exposure without forking out a lot of money is by taking the initiative and grouping together like this."

For Pearlman, who in 2001 created the dance laboratory Max 10 at Venice's Electric Lodge, where it runs monthly, audience-building is always on the agenda. And she's gratified to return here for the L.A. premiere of "Fire Sale," her work for four dancers.

"L.A. is the sixth stop for the Touring Project," she noted. "We don't have funding, so we try to make sure we get people in the seats. It's a lot of hard work and responsibility, but mostly it's a joy to be able to create opportunities and to get dancers seen."

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