

FORGING CONTEMPORARY DANCE AND THEATRE

Dance Alloy

Beth Corning, Dance Alloy's Artistic Director, shares her vision of building a modern repertory touring company that showcases great choreographers.

"This job is huge for me, and I still can't believe sometimes that I wake up every day and get paid to do what I absolutely love to do."

- Stephanie Thiel,
Alloy Dancer

Photos: (above) by Cylla Von Tiedemann; (right) Alloy dancers Johnathan Sanchez and Cass Ghiorse, (p.2) Michael Walsh and Stephanie Thiel (p.3) Stephanie Thiel and Maribeth Maxa, by Frank Walsh



BY GINA MAZZA HILLIER

I didn't come to hear the Dance Alloy's new artistic director wax rhapsodic about the ethereal nature of dance. (I'll leave that to the dance critics.) My quest was for a vividly sketched reality check about the rigors of working as a professional dancer, especially in a pop culture prone to TV, videogames and computer screens.

Beth Corning didn't disappoint. On this brisk winter day, the refreshingly irreverent red-head is fighting the flu, but you'd never guess by the exuberance pouring from her as she wittingly philosophizes about contemporary dance and conveys her vision for rejuvenating Pittsburgh's 30-year-old modern dance company.

"The fun thing about dance and theatre, as opposed to TV, is that it's human and vulnerable and provocative in an intelligent way—it's about what makes you think," Corning emotes, every so often slicing a wedge from a foil-wrapped

hunk of cheese that is her makeshift lunch. "With live performances, nothing can be done the same way twice. TV, on the other hand, is redone until it's perfect. There's no humanity at that sub-level. Our job as dancers is to give the audience a visceral experience rather than a spoon-fed experience."

Getting The Company Back On Its Feet

As an internationally acclaimed choreographer and teacher, Corning has what it takes to be the alchemist in charge of transforming Dance Alloy's elemental mix of talent into a stronger, more lustrous amalgam of well-rounded performers. Upon arriving in Pittsburgh from Minnesota in 2003 to steer "a ship that was rudderless," she lunged into tightening the organization financially and artistically. While balancing the practicalities of hiring personnel, fundraising and renovating the company's Neighborhood Dance Center along Penn Avenue in Friendship, Corning staged auditions in Pittsburgh and New York last October in search of a fresh roster of dancers who she could train to be "highly technical and theatrically flexible artists."

"My vision is to build a modern repertory touring company that presents dance theater works of exceptionally high quality. When Mark Taylor was

here, the choreography was mostly his," she adds, referring to the Alloy's erstwhile artistic director of 12 years.

As long-time choreographer and artistic director for Corning Dances & Company (which she founded in 1981 in Stockholm, Sweden, then moved to Minnesota in 1993), she now relishes the freedom to showcase others' works.

"I know a lot of good choreographers and I'm excited about bringing in their work. I've become jaded in dances that are just about technique. Technique comes first but it has to be a vehicle for something other than 'gee, look how these people can move'. I'm very interested in dance theatre. As a choreographer, I'm interested in choreographing that way. As an audience member, I'm transfixed by that kind of work. I would like to bring in theatre artists to start creating works—people like Ann Bogart, an award-winning New York theatre director who does beautifully theatrical movement work on actors."

Corning realizes that integrating theatrical components into contemporary dance can "present a dilemma" from a dancer's perspective.

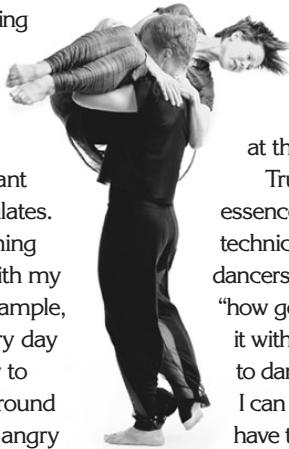
"Young dancers, all they want to do is dance," Corning gesticulates. "They don't want to bother pushing around a prop for 10 counts. With my company in Minneapolis, for example, we once worked four hours every day for a month on figuring out how to move a nine-foot rolling table around the stage. The dancers were so angry at me. Oh, they weren't dancing with a capital D! I said to them, 'go find another company... I want to play with this table.'

"Then we got down to work. I'd ask one of my dancers to 'slide over the table top...okay, you just ripped open your stomach—that won't do, go to the hospital and come back'...or, 'okay, I can't lift that table, but all of us can.' Ultimately, the table was a small yet seamless portion of the hour-long show. It turned into this beautiful work."

Part of what gets Corning jazzed about dance theatre is the experimentation aspect, being able to enjoy the process as well as the end result.

"So much of this generation is about product, not process. Audiences are into product, which is fine, frankly. I don't want to pay \$30 to see a work in progress. It's no longer the 70s, when everyone paid ten bucks to sit on a floor in a loft and have orange paint flung at them—which, at the time, I thought was very cool."

Invigorating the Dance Alloy into an echelon of dance-theatre artists meant finding dancers who were open to creative experimentation, as well. The fall 2003 auditions drew 41 dancers in Pittsburgh and 30 in New York City. Of that number, Corning plum-picked four: Stephanie Thiel and Maribeth Maxa from the Pittsburgh area; Cass Ghiorse from Katonah, NY; and Jonathan Sanchez, a Point Park College student from California.



They join veteran Alloy dancer Michael Walsh. By mid-December, the group of five presented their informal debut at the Neighborhood Dance Center.

True to her sensibility that the essence of good dance transcends technical proficiency, Corning chose her dancers from instinct—not necessarily "how good you are but what you bring to it with your soul. I can't teach anybody to dance but if you have a dancer's soul, I can teach you technique, and then you have to do the rest of the work."

That passionate inner impulse is what keeps dancers shouldering on in spite of the work's inherent challenges, Corning comments.

"We sure as hell don't do this for money, we sure as hell don't do it for compliments, and we sure as hell don't do it to feel good," she says derisively. "Okay! So why do we do this?"

Corning answers her own question: "It's a mentality, something you're born with, something you just are."

Moments Of Grace In An Imperfect World
Working as a dance professional can be cruel on the body and challenging for the

psyche. Yet, constantly striving to new levels of competence while doing that which you love has inherent rewards, as Corning elucidates:

"Being a dancer is like being an athlete [in that] repetition is a huge part of our career. You do a *plié* every single day. You do a *tendu* every single day. You stretch every single day, and the older you get, the more you have to stretch because it's not cumulative. Like any job, the repetition can be grueling, boring, frustrating. You race against yourself every day, plus, you're in competition with the person in front of you who might be doing it better because you'll lose your job if you're not good enough."

"In terms of it being this glorified, graceful, wonderful way to live . . . well, that is what we work very hard to make you think. It's an unspoken part of the job. We want the audience to say 'wow, just look at that body and what he or she can do! That must feel glorious!'"

"The fact is, it f---ing hurts! It DOESN'T feel glorious. You're thinking *get your hand out of my crotch, or if my hip stays in place for this performance I'm going back to church, or, I hope I don't throw up, or whatever* it is you're thinking to get you through the performance. You are NOT gazing at your partner with love and lust. You're too busy thinking *count one, count two, count three*.

RESURRECTION OF THE ALLOY: 40 YEARS OF DANCE

Join the Dance Alloy for a gala performance that offers both a retrospective and futuristic look at this Pittsburgh-grown dance company. The evening will include works by the Alloy's various choreographers and dancers both past and present. The premiere promises a taste of the Corning's renowned dark wit and dance theater esthetic.

A 70's-themed Black Tie/Champagne Benefit – with live music and a strolling dinner catered by Whole Foods and a variety of local restaurants – will be held in the theater's lobby after the Saturday evening performance.

April 9 through 12
Kelly-Strayhorn Community Performing Arts Center, East Liberty
Showtimes 8pm everyday except Monday, which is 7pm.

"In terms of [dance] being this glorified, graceful, wonderful way to live . . . well, that is what we work very hard to make you think. It's an unspoken part of the job."

"Our job as dancers is to give the audience a visceral experience rather than a spoon-fed experience."

“And yet, every once in a while, you’ll look up and catch your partner’s eyes and you’re transported and you go, ‘oh my God, this is what it’s about’ and then you’re lost again in *count one, count two, and I’ve got to get my leg up.*”

“When those [few seconds of bliss] come, they are like the biggest drug hit you could possibly ever have—that moment of doing it right, that moment of grace, all those things that make the audience [gasp in delight]. It is indeed the benefit we reap as dancers—there are so few of those moments but the high is enough to get you through to the next hit, which may be six months later, if you’re lucky.”

“On the other hand, without being totally pessimistic, when I step away from all this and remember that I’m doing something I was born to do, I realize I’m one of the luckiest people in world to have this job.

Not that it makes it any easier, because of course you’re going, ‘oh shit, here I am dancing my ass off and there are people being killed overseas. What the hell am I doing spending \$60,000 to put up a four-night performance! Do you

know how much \$60,000 would help somebody?’” Corning asks herself, emboldening her words with a flourish of arm movements. “You’re thinking, *so I was born to do this but what a RIDICULOUS thing to do!*”

Just then, dancer Stephanie Thiel floats into the room in search of a videotape, and stays to offer her thoughts on following one’s dharma.

“This job is huge for me, and I still can’t believe sometimes that I wake up every day and get paid to do what I absolutely love to do. I’m the most blessed person, especially after all this time. I’m 33 and the mother of a 12-year-old daughter. I didn’t go to New York [in my 20s]; I decided to be a mom, but I kept putting myself in places where I’d be involved in dance.”

“She’s a beautiful dancer,” Corning gushes.

Thiel beams from the inside out. “This was my first audition ever for a company. Maybe it was meant to be. I’m not taking it for granted.”

The Art of Transcendence

Corning confirms that it’s this soulful dedication to the language of the body that ulti-

mately results in the art form’s evanescent beauty and ability to inspire an audience.

“What I strive to do with my dancers and the choreography I choose to present is for the audience to have a visceral and transcendent experience. If they’re sitting there lost, if they don’t GET IT, then I’ve failed as a choreographer.”

Because dance is live art, sometimes the unexpected happens while the audience is immersed in bringing their own poetic reactions to the work being performed in front of them.

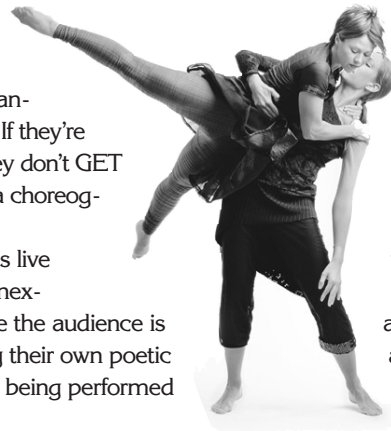
“The audience expects and assumes that they’re going to see perfection,” Corning suggests. “When a dancer falls or makes a mistake on stage, a whole new experience is introduced to the performance—and that is, a level of vulnerability that they did not come to see. They came to be transported. They did not come to see reality. When a dancer falls out of a turn or a lift, suddenly the whole timbre of

the performance shifts. It’s so psychologically upsetting to an audience, and they will worry about that dancer for the rest of the show.

“This is why I work very hard to teach my dancers that whatever happens is right. If you fall, you’d better make that fall SO fabulous [that it becomes] a great piece of choreography. But if you fall and say, ‘oh shit’ and stand up, then when you walk offstage I’ll be waiting there with your [resignation] letter. I can’t have dancers who cannot control their artistry.”

“Even though we’re human,” Stephanie interjects.

“But that’s the whole thing,” Corning clarifies. “We control it because we ARE human, and because the dancing that we’re doing is human dancing. That’s what separates us from athletes. An athlete has to make that high



bar. If he doesn’t, there’s no disguising it. But if a dancer misses that high bar, it could be intentional and part of the theatricality of the work. That’s the difference between being an athlete and an artist—there’s a humanity behind the artistry, as opposed to being this fine oiled machine. Dancers should be fine oiled machines AND portray a humanistic side to the work.”

Corning concludes that an audience’s typical reaction to a dancer falling on stage speaks volumes about the benevolent nature of humanity.

“It means we’re inherently compassionate beings. Audiences want to see good work, but they also come despite themselves to cheer you on. They’re rooting for you on some level, and dancers can feel that empathic connection.”

As we end our discussion, Thiel departs to study videotapes of choreography before tomorrow’s company class, and Corning dashes off, tissue box in hand, to review architectural designs for the Neighborhood Dance Center’s renovation. I’m left alone in the boardroom to gather my notes and quietly contemplate that nothing defines dance so accurately as the living of it.

Gina Mazza Hillier is a freelance writer, editor, and author of a book on health intuition. Contact Gina at inspire@zoominternet.net or www.ginawriter.com.

DANCE ALLOY SCHOOL: DISCOVER YOUR INNER DANCER!

The Dance Alloy School caters to individuals of all ages and all levels of ability. It offers a variety of dance and movement classes, from traditional dance techniques such as ballet, modern and jazz, to dance and movement styles that are currently the rage: yoga, pilates, hip hop, salsa/meringue, Argentine tango, middle eastern, big band social dancing and creative movement.

Classes take place at the Dance Alloy’s professional dance studios at the Neighborhood Dance Center in Friendship and at the Carnegie Museums in Oakland.

Contact Madelon Tieman, education director for details 412.363.4321 or mtieman@dancealloy.org