



“ Movement is just an illusion... ”

Contact Work

Zenon Dance Company puts modern art within everyone's reach.

BY EVE DANIELS

Linda Andrews seems a little out of her element. From her untailored dress and practical shoes to her New York-style candor, Andrews doesn't come across as your average downtown drone. Not downtown Minneapolis, at least. Over the construction job that pounds and drills across Block E's outdoor patio, the 55-year-old go-getter sips her tea and struggles to put modern dance, the art form she's devoted most of her life to, into words.

"It's whatever you bring to it," she says at full volume, competing with wind, lunchtime traffic and the AC/DC tune that blares from the Hard Rock Café loudspeakers. "That mind-body connection, you know. It causes the viewer to really think, to really feel some emotions, to maybe even change how they view the world."

On this mild day in late September, white collars, shoppers and wayward teens gather in the courtyard, a recently gentrified space just around the corner from Zenon Dance Company headquarters. Since founding the troupe in the early '80s, Andrews has watched up close as this city block morphed from booze joints and smut shops, to a vast and vacant lot, to the mall-esque entertainment complex that it is now.

While Zenon is Andrews' longest-running company, it isn't her first. In 1979—with a degree in dance and drama, some real-world marketing experience, and training from a premium blend of New York institutions (Martha Graham, Juilliard, Alvin Ailey and Merce Cunningham, to name a few) under her belt—Andrews launched Ozone Dance School in the Minneapolis Warehouse District.

Thanks to a combination of artistic hunger and disco fever, both students and spectators flocked to the Ozone studios, then located in the historic Wyman Building. "We were part of that renaissance of the Warehouse," says Andrews. "We were really different and experimental; the dancers would be like moving mannequins in the window. I used to have standing-room-only audiences coming in trying to catch the performances."

Steady returns from concerts and classes allowed Andrews to start two grassroots dance companies: one devoted to modern, the other to jazz. She merged the two troupes in 1982 to create Zenon Dance Company, despite opposition from funders. "I don't know why, but the people in power said I couldn't combine jazz and modern, and I just said, 'I'll do what I want to!'" In order to draw exceptional choreographers to the once-middling Minnesota dance scene, Andrews traveled to and from New York; she was among the first artistic directors to commission the likes of Bill T. Jones, Doug Varone and Bebe Miller, some of today's most sought-after choreographers.

"NAVIGATION," CHOREOGRAPHY BY MATHEW JANCZEWSKI, ZENON DANCERS PICTURED: DEVIN CAREY (LIFTING) AND TAMARA OBER; PHOTO BY DOUG BEASLEY



Almost a quarter century later, Andrews still does what she wants to. "It's just sheer stubbornness, damn it," she says wryly, pounding her fist on the patio table. "There's no reason that we should have survived for this long." Ousted by high rents, much of the creative element of the Warehouse District has shifted to Northeast Minneapolis. But Zenon dances on in the heart of downtown.

Back at company headquarters, on the fourth floor of Hennepin Center for the Arts, the troupe runs through a new piece by local choreographer Mathew Janczewski, one of two world premieres they'll stage this month at the Southern Theater.

While the working title, "I Need You Now to Abandon Me," doesn't quite roll off the tongue, it does capture the gist of what's going on: Seven dancers—four women, three men—gather at the center of the floor like a close-knit tribe, then scatter as if a rug was pulled from under their feet. Further description of the piece and the sense of urgency it evokes might come off as too rigid, too meandering or just plain bull. And this is just a practice round, sans score by maverick composer David Lang. No doubt the end result should be something to see.

Originally a Masonic temple, builders laid the cornerstone of this Sixth & Hennepin landmark in 1888; stars, planets and other esoteric symbols of the secret order remain embossed on the studio ceiling. During the downtown arts revival of the mid-1970s, community leaders restored three floors of the eight-story building to their original size for use by performing arts companies. When Hennepin Center for the Arts was established in 1979, Zenon Dance Company, the Illusion Theater, James Sewell Ballet and

some 15 other local arts organizations took advantage of the large studios, affordable rent and central location.

Artspace Projects, a Minneapolis-based arts real estate developer, took over the building in 1997, securing its future well into the 21st century. In 2007, Hennepin Center will become part of the Minnesota Shubert Performing Arts and Education Center, a three-building complex that will house the renovated Shubert Theater and a new glass-walled atrium connecting the two buildings. Andrews hopes to play a key role in developing the new center as a flagship facility for dance in the Twin Cities.

The troupe huddles with the choreographer, laughing like a tight circle of friends, free of the competitive, ego-driven behavior one might expect from a disciplined group of accomplished artists. At the back of the room, Andrews offers a primer on the company's creative process:

"The choreographer comes in with some movement ideas, they may have music, they might ask for a theme or a core idea, but often they just improvise. They work with the dancers for about three or four weeks. When they leave, I coach the dancers separately, remind them what the choreographer said, work on the style, emotion, technical things, but I also stand back enough for them to develop as individuals. I have to give the dancers full credit because they're so versatile and so experienced. When you really know dance, you can tell if a company has been together for a long time because of the emotional connections on stage."

This rock-solid chemistry is what Janczewski, founder of ARENA Dances, values most about the Zenon troupe. "My company usually picks up dancers, so it's really nice to have such skilled dancers who work together so much," he says. "I can say something to them and they can just throw themselves into it."

Once Janczewski leaves the studio, the company will jump right back into rehearsals with Twin Cities choreographer Uri Sands, co-founder of TU Dance. Deemed one of *Dance Magazine's* "25 to Watch for 2005," Sands' challenging, modern piece features both a duet and a trio. Zenon's fall program also includes high-energy repertory works: "Blessing of the Earth," a sensual modern trio by Wynn Fricke (the Minnesota Dance Theater's new choreographer-in-residence and a former Zenon member); and "Sodade," a jazz sextet by Minnesota choreographer Cathy Young.

In the two-plus decades since Zenon's inception, Andrews has attracted and retained some of the nation's top talent, largely due to the company's yin-and-yang design: While the dancers enjoy full-time job security, with annual contracts of 30 to 36 weeks, they also live life on the wild side. "It's never boring because there's always new energy and new faces to work with," says Christine Maginnis, an original Zenon member.

For Maginnis, 46, dancing has actually become easier with age. "I started as a bundle of muscle and energy, pretty unrefined, and I had a huge transition around year 10 or 12 when I realized I didn't have to put so much energy into it, to use my bones instead of my muscles. Maybe I can't jump as high, but with maturity there's a lot more depth that can come out in your performance."

In her five years with Zenon, Tamara Ober says she has evolved both as a dancer and communicator. "Working with so many different artists, we have to learn how to come together and problem solve and be creative. I guess what we're really doing is working for deep levels of communication that is so lacking these days. I really appreciate dedicating my life to that."



"LIMBIC WALTZ," CHOREOGRAPHY BY CATHY YOUNG, DANCERS PICTURED: CHRISTINE MAGINNIS (FRONT) AND FELLOW ZENON MEMBERS; PHOTO BY JEFFREY AUSTIN

What compels a person to start a dance company rather than simply joining one? "Someone has to take charge," says Andrews. "But I often wish that somebody else had done it because it's been so hard."

Aside from the occasional influx in pop culture—from *Solid Gold* to *So You Think You Can Dance*—modern dance has yet to attract a major following. "Dance is the bastard art form in terms of funding," says Andrews. "It's difficult for all dance companies to get funding, but I think it's easier for ballet to draw bigger audiences because modern dance is a more abstract form and it takes longer to build those audiences. I think that impacts the funders' beliefs."

Yet even in the face of budget cuts and scant public attention, Zenon continues to reach out to new audiences. In line with Zenon's broad-minded mission, Ober, Maginnis and the rest of the troupe are trained as "teaching artists." Along with the most comprehensive dance school in the Twin Cities (offering lessons in modern, jazz, ballet, tap, hip-hop, break dancing and more), the company has developed a residency program that reaches children and young adults across Minnesota, including at-risk and deaf or hard-of-hearing students.

The company tailors each weeklong residency to meet the needs of the hosting organization, incorporating contact work and artistry with school curriculum or community goals. They begin with a performance and discussion, followed by classes in which they choreograph new, original work, bringing the students' ideas into play. At the end of the week, the dancers and their young apprentices culminate with a showing for the parents and the community.

The first time she worked with deaf children, Andrews admits she was a bit concerned. "I wondered how we could work with children who couldn't hear the music. But deaf children are like dancers," she says. "They watch and they pick things up visually and they scream with their bodies."

Andrews, a mother of two daughters, considers the residencies as much a passion as dance itself. "They allow the kids to be expressive and to get positive feedback and increase their self-esteem, especially for girls. Women are basically beat up in the media, and they're really young when they start to feel inadequate. To learn that your body is more than just for looking at, that it's for connecting and supporting and lifting, it gives them a feeling of empowerment."

Certainly, unbridled movement across a floor tends to get a reaction. Stirred by the Wall Street Crash, the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War, modern dance innovator (and Andrews' hero) Martha Graham brought important issues to the masses through dance. Graham's distinctive style reflected the art of her time, just as Zenon's style reflects modern society's need for real communication—in our schools, in our neighborhoods, even in places that may seem a little out of our element.

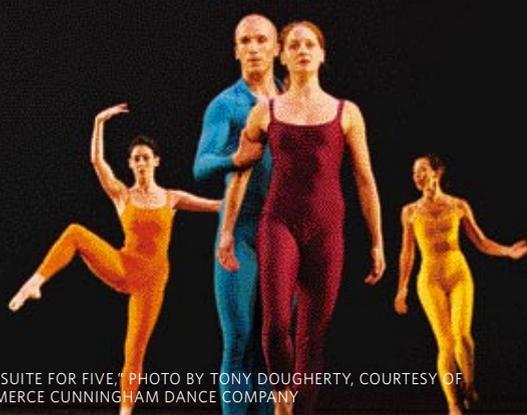
"American modern dance is exciting because it's sort of a microcosm of the real world; different body types and different personalities bringing who they are to the company," says Andrews. "And because we're modern, we're free to go anywhere."

Power emerges as a common thread in the history of Zenon Dance Company. Physical power, the power in movement, staying power, the power within a particular shape. "My middle initial is Z," says Andrews, "but I also grew up watching *Zorro* movies and, to me, Zs are so graphically strong. I didn't know this when I named the company, but a professor once told me that there was a Greek philosopher named Zenon who believed that movement is just an illusion. And the root word means 'strange,' so I thought, oh, this is *perfect*." **W**

INFO

Zenon Dance Company's Fall Concert

November 17-27, performance times vary
Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Avenue S.,
Minneapolis, 612-340-1725



"SUITE FOR FIVE," PHOTO BY TONY DOUGHERTY, COURTESY OF MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY

More Dance This Month

Minnesota Dance Theatre: *Widening the Circle*

November 3-6, performance times vary
O'Shaughnessy Auditorium, 2004 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul, 651-690-6700

Merce Cunningham Dance Company: *Split Sides; Native Green; Suite for Five*

November 4 at 8 p.m.
Northrop Auditorium, 84 S.E. Church Street, Minneapolis, 612-624-2345

Moscow Ballet: *Great Russian Nutcracker*

November 6 at 3 p.m. & 6 p.m.
State Theatre, 805 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, 612-339-7007

Choreographers' Evening, *curated by Mathew Janczewski*

November 26 at 7 p.m. & 9:30 p.m.
Walker Art Center, 1750 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, 612-375-7600

James Sewell Ballet: *Amahl and the Night Visitors*

November 26 & 27 at 7:30 p.m.
State Theatre, 805 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, 612-339-7007



"SACRED SLEEP," ZENON DANCE COMPANY, CHOREOGRAPHY BY TERE O'CONNOR; PHOTO BY DOUG BEASLEY