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April Issue



Sixteenth Position - Eighth Movement

Odyssey Dance Theatre – A Thriller



by Lisa M. Browder - Wednesday, March 23, 2005

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Many early dance companies were labeled as "serious," and therefore more likely to succeed, according to the gravity of the program. The overall tone was somehow indicative of the effort involved and benefactors favored a "serious" company with specialized dancers. Humor, therefore, was used sparingly. Over the decades, as entertainment choices proliferated, the public demanded more versatility. Dance moved toward ballet companies that experimented with modern dance or modern companies that dabbled in jazz. That was great for the snobby aficionado but it still ignored a vast

untapped market – namely, those who thought dance was unintelligible and primarily existed for the sake of other dancers. Then about ten years ago, along came Odyssey Dance Theatre, blown in on a silky, cool breeze. It started opening windows in the dance world, cleaning out the cobwebs and spinning a new creation. Odyssey sets itself apart in two ways: by its humor and by its requirement that each dancer be equally proficient in contemporary, jazz, hip-hop, tap, Irish Highland, ballroom, ballet – why, name it and they do it. Odyssey Dance Theatre, quite simply, is a thriller.

Its growing reputation is due primarily to the vision and acumen of its Artistic Director and Founder, Derryl Yeager. "I think one thing that seems to be missing in a lot of dance today is humor. We have plenty of angst-driven dancers who are exposing and exorcising their demons onstage but very few have the capacity or inclination to use humor to get their point across."

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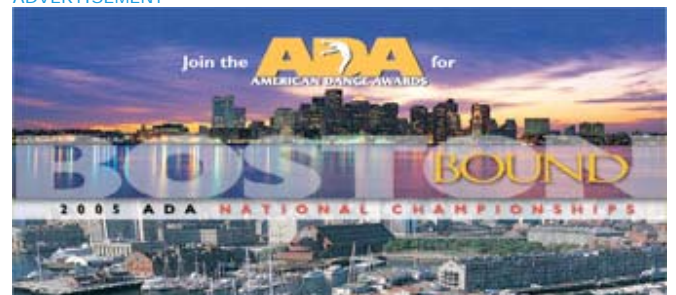
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"My concept was to start small and then build up as we could afford. Since we were the new kids on the block, funding was pretty much nonexistent. We relied on ticket sales to make our way. I knew we needed a large show that would be like a 'Nutcracker' for ballet companies, something that would bring a large audience in, and significant income. That's where 'Thriller' came in; we

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created an amazing show from a series of Halloween-themed vignettes and it has become a smash hit. It supplies the funding for the rest of the season."

"I believe the thing that makes 'Thriller' unique is that we take all your favorite Halloween characters and place them into different tongue-in-cheek settings and contexts. There is a lot of humor in the show, laugh out loud humor that the audience loves." Nothing is left out, from Jason impersonations, to skeletons, to the use of chain saws. As the dancers tell it, the program is a scream and always gets a standing ovation.

But it's also only one standard in a company that prides itself in a rich and varied season. In addition to "Thriller," there's the Christmas variety show, "Joy to the World" (replete with tap dancing Fosse-like reindeer), "The Dance" (based on the book Christmas Box by Richard Paul Evans), a Beatles anthology aptly entitled "Let It Be" and the spring repertory "Shut Up and Dance."

"As much as 'Thriller' is irreverent and twisted Halloween humor, 'Joy to the World' is more reverent and thoughtful. 'Joy' has its fun, funny moments too, but it has a more joyful and sincere tone. We have all your favorite Christmas sacred and secular music all blended together in a variety show format."

"'Shut Up and Dance' is where the dancers and choreographers get to stretch the envelope and really show off their abilities and different styles in smaller repertoire-style works. We again stress accessibility but we are not afraid to explore more innovative choreographic styles of movement. The title says it all. Dance is an amazing form of expression that doesn't require manuals and textbooks to understand. It communicates to all and across all boundaries."

Well, yes, if you find the right mix to communicate across that boundary. And humor bridges the gap, attracting young and old, male and female. "One of the comments we get most often from men who are dragged kicking and screaming to a dance performance is, 'Well, I don't like dance, but that was cool!...In today's MTV world, the attention span is so short that I like to have a little something for everyone.'" And to be sure, there are no zombie-like stares at Odyssey's performances.

"Too many dancers think they're doing 'art' but if you don't entertain, you've defeated yourself." Derryl's dancers agree and appreciate the fact that at some point in every show, each artist will get to shine in a piece that plays to his or her strength. Eldon Johnson, an eight-year veteran of Odyssey Dance Theatre said, "I became an artist as opposed to a hired dancer." Odyssey's concert work ensures that no one is relegated to the back row for years on end until they "move up" the ranks. Eldon believes that a company that sticks to one style limits both the dancers and its audience. He said Odyssey constantly looks for new styles and then sets out to conquer them. If they see a style they haven't done, they'll locate the choreographer and invite him/her to work with the company. He thinks Odyssey's diversity pulls the audience into the web, spinning dance in a new direction. By mixing it up, they please everyone. Don't like tap? Okay. Here's some hip-hop. Not into that? Wait – the jazz is next. No one has time to get bored.

Another company member, Julia Miller, has been with Odyssey for six years and is staunchly loyal. "I would probably do it for free." (Well don't tell Derryl). That, however, is the sort of attachment that a company director dreams about, because any dancer who loves the company that much will give 150 percent. Julia not only gives to, but also gets 150 percent from the challenge of different dance styles. They give her added, marketable skills and keep her appreciation of the company fresh. "A lot of things make us different. We're this big surprise from Utah...Derryl has very good intuition about people and this company. People should know that Derryl has done this basically himself."





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So who is Derryl? He's Odyssey's Artistic Director and Founder. "I had had my own company in the back of my mind for years because I loved the concert dance environment - where dance was the major focus and means of expression, not just step touching behind a barely gifted star." As he sees it, lame background work sinks its fangs into a dancer and sucks out the artist, leaving behind a predictable, bored shell. He sees Odyssey as the antidote. "If you love concert work, there's no better company to be a part of."

Derryl originally called his troupe the Utah Contemporary Dance Theatre but found he had trouble booking concerts. Being an astute businessman, he sat down and analyzed the problem. Too many people thought the name sounded like a modern dance company and it restricted him to audiences who expected an avante garde program, something the average layman could care less about. The solution seemed simple: change the name to better reflect the direction of the company. "I had seen the definition of 'odyssey' at the Odyssey Cafe in Denver where it said an odyssey is 'a journey filled with notable experiences.' I thought, 'That's what we do!' Our performances were very eclectic and entertaining, always taking an audience to different places. We bring them along on this amazing ride. Odyssey Dance Theatre was born."

Derryl's own journey to Artistic Director was a rich experience, full of music, dance and drama – all the things that engage the soul and push a born leader to the front of the pack. "I started dancing at my high school in Amarillo, Texas where I got involved in the school musicals...I found I had a natural aptitude for it and even excelled at it and so at the suggestion of my teacher there, I went to check out some dance classes."

"What I discovered was that dance was extremely challenging – not only physically – but it challenged me artistically." After only six months of training, he was awarded a scholarship to the San Francisco School of Ballet summer program. On his way to San Francisco, he stopped in Utah to take a look at Ballet West and liked what he saw. He entered the University of Utah ballet program that fall and eventually graduated with a Masters of Fine Arts – and summa cum laude, thank you very much.

He went on to a twenty-year career that included dance, choreography and directing. He worked in theatre, film, television and on Broadway. He was a Principal Dancer with Ballet West for six years and charmed audiences in such Broadway musicals as "A Chorus Line," "Dreamgirls" and "Cats." Finally, Derryl decided he was ready to tackle his own company, a long-held dream. "I had a wife and five kids...and after spending ten years in L.A., I wanted to bring my family back to Utah to have them

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live in a better environment. After moving here, I saw that there was this huge pool of talented dancers who could do everything – ballet, jazz, tap, hip-hop, ballroom – and would be working regularly if they had decided to move to New York or L.A. And I thought it was a shame to see that talent go to waste.”

Of course, launching a company required capital. Many a dreamer can visualize a finished product but can't conquer the business details between points A and B. Derryl's success was not a stab in the dark. "I'm lucky that I have a left brain and a right brain capacity...We have gone from nothing to a budget of over \$800,000 per year in ten years. Seventy percent of our income comes from ticket sales. The rest is from individual donations, foundations and the Salt Lake County Zoo Arts and Parks program." But, he said, "The other thing you need is tenacity to hang tough through the hard times."

The amazing part is that his dancers all want to hang tough with him. "Dancers are currently paid on a weekly salary ranging from \$300 per week to \$600 per week, depending on seniority and status. The company is still looked at as an ensemble group, but the pay structure does somewhat reflect a corps/soloist/principal format. Currently there are twenty dancers in the company and the contract is typically between 30-38 weeks per year with national and international touring."

Now here's the thing: In an interview, any smart dancer is going to profess his or her undying love for the company. But with a question like, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" – many will talk enthusiastically about Broadway, or choreography or family, but seldom the company they're already in. Not so Odyssey's dancers. Julia, for one, said, "I can see myself still doing Odyssey in five years." That says a great deal about the dedication and camaraderie that Derryl has created. As he said, "One must be pleasant to work with. I don't care how amazing you are; if you're a pain in the butt to work with, forget about it. I'd rather have someone less talented without the baggage."

"I look for dancers who can do it all – ballet, jazz, tap, hip-hop, ballroom, pointe, tumbling – but I also look for great attitude and good work ethic." His own daughter, Veronica Yeager, left a national tour of "Footloose" to return to Odyssey. She's been with the company for seven years and had the ultimate praise for her father. Asked why she hadn't chosen L.A. or New York for her career, she said, "Atmosphere. I don't like having to deal with crabby directors. Dad is very positive and creates a great atmosphere."

He must be doing something right because guest artists have begun to flock to Utah to choreograph for Odyssey. "Sometimes dancers take themselves out of the market by being too specialized...We are not hampered by stylistically-handicapped dancers, so really anything is game. We have had numerous world-renowned choreographers come and really enjoy working with the company because of their ability to do anything and yet have a strong technical background." Past choreographers have included Mia Michaels, Alex Magno, Liz Imperio and Roni Koresh. "I've never had a choreographer come in and go, 'OK, plan B' because dancers can't handle their style."





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And the dancers love the constant stylistic challenge. "My hope when we create a new piece is that it will become a new staple in the repertory that audiences would like to see again and again...As a director, I look for a piece that has a good beginning, middle and end...Even abstract pieces have elements that take an audience on a journey, but it doesn't have to have a story. It just has to have a direction."

"I look at the concept and music of the piece as the underpinning of what makes a good piece for the company. Concert dance is a lost art in the jazz world, where competitions are king. I find it very difficult to put a choreographic idea into two and a half minutes. Usually by that time, I'm just getting started. Odyssey provides a unique opportunity for choreographers, typically hampered by competition time restraints, to explore beyond and create works of more lasting meaning and depth. It's also amazing how hard it is for choreographers to find a voice beyond that time period and as the Artistic Director, I help guide them through that process and help mold their overall concept and idea. I'm never looking for something specific; I just know it when I see it or hear it."

Or when he imagines it. "I also see another full-length project or two in the future. One dream is to create a full-length version of 'It's a Wonderful Life' for the holiday season. It would be a ballet-meets-Broadway production that not only provides wonderful dance moments but also touches the heart."

With the company beginning to attract international attention and Derryl being pulled in fifty different directions, who knows when he will have a chance to create new works? Odyssey's dance season in the past has included tours in Mexico, Costa Rica, Korea and all over the United States. This April, they are adding Europe. Odyssey is being presented by Konzertdirektion Landgraf in the "Souls in Motion" tour. The itinerary includes Germany, France, Switzerland, Austria and Luxemburg.

So here we have a company that's already attracted a large, devoted following due to good marketing, multi-disciplined dancers and a humorous program that appeals to both highbrow and blue-collar audiences. All they need is a little more publicity to make them a household name. As Julia said, "If we had the funding to advertise and to tour more, people would see what we're all about." Veronica concurs. She said, "I want people to know about it more. I want it to be really big...It really is an awesome company. I love to go to work. Not many people can say that."

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If you're feeling stuck in a bland, ghostly dance career or just want stylistic challenges that constantly pique your interest, set your sights on Orem, Utah for May 7 when Odyssey Dance Theatre will be holding company auditions. If you need more information, call (801) 495-3262 or check out the website at www.odysseydance.com. As Derryl sees it, "Our time is starting to come." Yes, indeed. He's tossed new ingredients into the cauldron, turned up the heat and made the dance experience for artist and audience alike into a thriller. •

