



**MAGAZINE ONLINE**

## **From an Acorn Grows a Grand Oak - CityDance Ensemble's Power, Passion and Purpose**

**By Judith Lynne Hanna, Ph.D. - Thursday, August 23, 2007**

From a small group of part-time non-paid pick-up dancers in 1996, Artistic Director Paul Emerson, Executive Director Alexandra Nowakowski and a relentless management and artistic team has nurtured the Washington, D.C. metro area's CityDance Ensemble into an exciting first-rate professional company and a powerful multifaceted arts organization. There were bumps in the road and a few crevices. But the company has persevered with unending energy, curiosity, imagination and obvious delight in and commitment to dance.

Emerson, who came late to dance at 27 while working on Capitol Hill as a Legislative Director specializing in defense and foreign policy, and Nowakowski, whose career is in the business world, have an unusual take on the business, as well as the art of dance. They have banked on the promise and potential of a repertory dance company that is not dependent upon any one artist's -- or manager's -- vision.

CityDance Ensemble's stellar June performance at the Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, where the company is the resident dance partner, was a pinnacle of astonishing growth. On a 42 week contract, the eight full-time dancers -- Bruno Augusto, Alicia Canterna, Kyra Jean Green, Jerome Johnson, Eileen Beth Mitchell, Ellen Rippon, Florian Rouiller and Alice Wylie -- are all well-trained (at Kirov Academy of Ballet, D.C., Juilliard School, National School of the Arts in Cuba, Joffrey Ballet School and university dance departments). The performers showed strong technique, speed and artistic expression in a program of outstanding choreography.

Washington Post critic Pamela Squires got it right: "Emerson has taken his company in 10 years from so-so to wow...it was delightfully clear that he had fashioned a fully professional company in every sense. Finally, we have a home-grown modern dance company that can compete with the best."

The "CityDance Celebrates Women in the Arts" program honored the legacy of female pioneers with Sophie Maslow's 1941 choreographic masterpiece "Dust Bowl Ballads." The program also showcased the talent and energy of women who promise to bring dance into the 21st century as a fresh and vital force. Modern dance began with the vision and passion of women as was CityDance Ensemble (Tara Pierson Dunning, Artistic Director, and Teri Jo Brown, Associate Artistic Director). CityDance honored its founder with the restaging of Dunning's "Endless Cycle," the first work ever created for CityDance.

Company member Green, a 2006 Juilliard School graduate in dance created (with fellow Juilliard graduate Idan Shirabi) and danced in "Bubbles" with Johnson, formerly a New York City Ballet company member. Green surprised with balletic movements perkily titled off center. White Oak Dance Project veteran Susan Shields's "White" was a world premiere. The use of stillness and quick changes of direction were mesmerizing. Another world premiere was Meisha Bosma's "Souvenirs." Harumi Terayama's "Contained Infinity" and Emerson's "Han" rounded out the evening. CityDance Ensemble's trip to Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina in summer 2006 inspired Emerson. Han is a Korean word that connotes a state of sadness so deep that there are no tears, yet there is still hope. Built with a live score, the work is a part of the company's signature "Originals Series," of live and original music.

CityDance Ensemble, Inc., is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization with four distinct divisions: the professional company that performs nationally and internationally, dance outreach education, in-studio dance instruction, and FilmWORKS (dance-on-camera). Emerson and Nowakowski are responsible for the vision of the entire organization and lead the staff in its implementation.



The performance world of CityDance continues to expand. It launched an “In the Studio Series,” informal performances at the Music Center at Strathmore. CityDance has also developed an artistic partnership with the Shakespeare Theatre Company, thereby securing performance space at the Lansburgh Theatre in the Harman Center for the Arts in downtown D.C. That partnership opened the doors to the company’s first-ever downtown season -- a three concert series that features the world premiere of its family show, “Jungle Books” in December.

CityDance Early Arts offers in-school performances, curriculum-based school residencies and after-school dance education programs in D.C., Maryland and Virginia. On average, 30 Early Arts teachers instruct 450 students per week and work with or perform for more than 25,000 students a year, with a special commitment to reaching under-served neighborhoods.

DREAM (Dream Research Evaluate Act Motivate) is CityDance’s own after-school dance, creative writing and financial literacy program for at-risk youth. It brings the arts and lessons of self-discipline, self-esteem and community-building to third through sixth grade students at ten schools. CityDance is the largest provider of the national D.A.R.E. Dance Program in the area. It is an innovative effort to fight drugs and violence by providing alternative after-school activities. In addition, CityDance directs the dance program for The Madeira School in McLean, Virginia.

CityDance’s two In-Studio Education Centers offer more than 80 classes in 20 different styles of fitness and dance to students ranging in age from 18 months to 80 years old. The Center at Strathmore, opened in January 2005, offers a full range of class and workshop offerings, as well as the pre-professional training program. CityDance Select, launched in the fall 2006 is for serious dance students, ages 10-17.

Opened in partnership with The National Music Center in 2007, the CityDance Center at Mt. Vernon Square, in downtown D.C., with its artistic partners Culture Shock D.C. and Gottaswing, offers weekly adult hip hop and swing classes. CityDance and Smithsonian Associates also offered summer youth camp programs at the facility to 100 children ages 3-14.

CityDance FilmWORKS aims to make dance accessible to new audiences. FilmWORKS has created a dozen original films and two major multi-media (dance, film and music) works. Partnering with Dance Film Association of New York, the Music Center at Strathmore and Dance Place in D.C., FilmWORKS has hosted three international dance-on-camera festivals. Its films have been shown in introductory dance courses at George Mason University as well as on the Millennium Stage at the Kennedy Center and at major dance-on-camera festivals in London, Los Angeles, Berlin, Sydney, Japan and Brazil.

CityDance is not resting on its laurels. It continues to reach toward the heavens. On the agenda is the launching of CityDance Conservatory at Strathmore, a world-class education program designed to train gifted pre-professional students ages 10 to 17. Lorraine Audéoud Spiegler brings 25 years of experience to the position of Director of Studio Education and the Conservatory.

Artist-in-residence with the CityDance Ensemble since the 2002-2003 seasons, Rasta Thomas, an international dance star, principal at Dance Theater of Harlem and in “Moving Out” among his many credits, will join CityDance as Senior Artistic Advisor for the 2007-2008 seasons and also perform selected roles. In 2008-2009, Thomas will assume the title of Company Director and play a central role in its day-to-day operations. Emerson believes “Rasta is not only one of the great dancers of his generation, but also a gifted and astute judge of talent in today’s dance world. He is the right person to carry CityDance to the next level and further our goals of becoming a world-class dance company.”

As Emerson puts it, “Great dance permeates the consciousness, quickens the pulse and touches the soul. It’s the oldest and most elegant performing art and it needs to be seen, experienced and tried. As a resident of the nation’s capital, that’s our goal, our mission and our reason for being.” Check out: [www.citydance.net](http://www.citydance.net).

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