

## Dance Goes Green

Long concerning itself with social issues, modern dance is increasingly incorporating environmental themes into its works—both artistic and otherwise

By *Emily Macel*



Twelve large blocks of ice are suspended from the ceiling as dancers leap and pirouette beneath them. One dancer rolls out an ice sculpture of a bird on a silver cart and performs a duet with the cold creature. All the while, drip...drip...drip. The ice is melting, creating small puddles of water on the stage. This is a scene from Brenda Way's piece *On a Train Heading South*, a commentary on the melting polar ice caps and global warming.

The dance community has long been interested in social activism through artistic expression—creating performance pieces with messages about war, women's rights, and racism. Now more than ever, environmental themes and concerns are being added to the repertoire at dance companies nationwide. The goal stated by many company directors, choreographers, and dancers is to raise public awareness of environmental issues, and to educate audiences through their art form.

CityDance Ensemble of Washington D.C. is committed to environmental education through both its performances and outreach programs. In March, CityDance will present a program called *Carbon* as part of an annual series focusing on issues of climate change. The concert includes *Thirst*, choreographed by Christopher K. Morgan; *The Mountain*, choreographed by Jason Ignacio; and Way's icy piece (which the group performed this year as well).

Paul Gordon Emerson, artistic director of CityDance, says, "Some of the greatest dances ever made were made about social issues, about the need for change." He says of his company's approach: "You get people involved by putting them onstage, motivating them in the classroom, inspiring choreographers, composers, set designers, and more to think about an issue, to express it in ways that we don't have in daily life and to do it in a way that turns on the [creative] light bulb. So it's communal, societal, participatory, educational, and entertaining all at once." Recently the company won the Greater Washington Board of Trade and Washington Business Journal's first annual Green Business award in the category of Outreach/Education.

Emily Johnson's personal interest in environmental activism is at the core of works she creates for Minneapolis-based Catalyst Dance. "It's a deep passion of mine," she says, "whether overtly or just embedded within my work and my view of the world." When she created *Heat and Life* in 2003, her goal was to inform her audiences "how the rules that other people make can affect us and the quality of the air, the land we live on, the water we drink." After the work premiered, she embarked on a national tour that would place the site-specific piece everywhere from the farms of Nebraska to inside of an old soap factory in Minneapolis. The Alaska native used her home as a source of inspiration for her work on the spit/slucce we are outlaws, which was performed on a narrow strip of land that juts out into the sea—a spit—in Homer, Alaska.

Of using her art as a way to raise consciousness about the environment, Johnson says, "Art-making is a very socially empowering act and you have a lot of responsibility as an art maker to be present in your world and to be present in your art making."

Entire festivals now center around these issues as well. New York City's Solar-Powered Dance Festival uses the sun's energy

to power the music system. Other green festivals that put the environment in the spotlight are Florida's Sarasota EarthDance festival, Colorado's EcoArts Festival and the SEEDS Festival (Somatic Experiments in Earth, Dance, + Science) in Massachusetts.

In addition to these efforts, more and more dance companies and schools are going green in the spaces where they perform and give classes. Point Park University in Pittsburgh opened an environmentally-friendly dance complex in 2007, and was awarded the NC-Gold level certification by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design [LEED] this fall. The building boasts large windows to maximize natural light; convection and radiant heat systems; a high-performance HVAC system; paints, carpeting, and other interior elements that reduce indoor air contaminants; Forest Stewardship Council-certified floors; and an Energy Star-rated roof. Moreover, 25% of the building materials were manufactured within 500 miles of the University, and 85% of the demolition and construction waste was diverted from landfills.

And Greenbelt, Brooklyn's first Gold-registered LEED residences, incorporates a dance-performance space into its design. Dance artist Jonah Bokaer saw Brooklyn's condominium boom causing a loss of affordable studio and living space, and conceived of a green building that would subsidize a theater. The idea appealed to John Jasperse, whose dance company was operating out of a loft in Brooklyn until they lost their lease; now the Center for Performance Research [CPR] is on the ground floor of the five-story building. Construction used 40% recycled or rapidly-renewable materials and provided for fresh filtered air and finishes without harmful chemicals. They also plan to install LED theatrical lighting fixtures, which use a quarter to an eighth of the energy of conventional lighting.

Jasperse says Greenbelt and CPR "combine the idea of sustaining dance artists along with a kind of environmental responsibility embedded into the mission. We're trying to solve many different problems at once."

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