

Loss: the principle of dance and performance in Regina

Victor Jerrett Enns

(Editor's Note: Written in 1991, *Loss* is a look at the early careers of Regina contemporary dance artists, including NDH co-founders Dianne Fraser and Robin Poitras, and Marnie Gladwell, who shared with Floyd Favel Starr the position of NDH Artist in Residence during the 2001-02 season).

Saskatchewan has its share of failed dance companies. New Dance Horizons, a company created by Robin Poitras and Dianne Fraser, has played a vital role in trying to reverse the legacy of loss, which has become a repetitive theme in the Regina and Saskatchewan dance community.

Professional dance and performance in the Western European manner in Regina is usually traced back to Marianne Livant who came to Regina from New York when her husband accepted a teaching position at the University. Livant, a dancer, dance educator, and dance therapist, was one of the founders of the now defunct Regina Modern Dance Works. Soon after her arrival she formed the collectively-based Regina Modern Dance Workshop as a part-time venture. The initial philosophy of this company, formed in the early and mid-seventies, stressed the importance of dance in education, and in the community. It had a very "grass

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roots" approach.

Eventually Marianne Livant met Maria Formalo who had come to the community with her strong technical and professional dance skills. The Dance Workshop began to transform itself into Regina Modern Dance Works, with a professional contemporary performance emphasis and paid staff.

The company made an impression on the dance community, and attracted public interest. Eventually Maria Formalo and Keith Urban took over the company, and mounted increasingly ambitious work, touring Saskatchewan with members of the Regina Symphony, for instance. Eventually, due to debilitating financial and administrative problems, the company folded and Formalo and Urban left, in 1981, for Alberta. Although a school still functions under the Dance Works name, the performance company is long gone. Marianne Livant has also left the province to go to B.C.

Saskatchewan Dance Theatre, a professional company with eight dancers, was formed in 1974 in Saskatoon by Lucia Pavlychenko. The Dance Theatre presented performances throughout Saskatchewan, and lasted about two years.

Marie Nuchka-Blocka, a Regina dance teacher, formed Saskatchewan Theatre Ballet soon after the demise of the Dance Works performance company. The new company combined the talents of three professional dancers, Nuchka-Blocka, Lorne Matthews and April Chow, along with five unpaid apprentices.

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Initially successful in presenting a mix of classical, jazz, and ethnic dance, the company folded due to financial and administrative difficulties. Marie Nuchka-Blocka left the province soon after.

The importance of being solo, and the tradition of interdisciplinary work in Saskatchewan

The departure of Formalo and Urban left a gap in the contemporary dance community, which was filled by individual dancers who may have come through Dance Works, or had other dance training. Often these individual performers would join with artists from other disciplines. Connie Wemikowski and Marnie Gladwell, for example, were able to do some work independently.

Marnie Gladwell worked with Denis Nokony, Richard Gustin, and Michael Morrison to accompany an exhibition of Nokony's at the Mendel Art Gallery in the early 80s. She also worked with percussionist Jeff Bush and writers Loma Crozier and Patrick Lane in a performance at the Mackenzie Art Gallery.



1. INTEMPCO, 1989. *In Temporary Company*

New Dance Horizons

Robin Poitras and Dianne Fraser were two other dancers that had been exposed to the influence of Regina Modern Dance Works.

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They left Saskatchewan in the late seventies and early eighties to expand their dance training and their contact with the contemporary dance and performance community in Canada. Robin received a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Special Honours in Dance from York University where Terrill Maguire was a teacher. Robin followed this up with study at Duke University and at the American Centre in Paris. Back in Canada, she participated in the Bill Evans Summer Institute of Dance in Winnipeg in 1984, before settling in Regina.

Dianne Fraser received her initial training from the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's general school and Professional Programme. She continued her training in Toronto with Toronto Dance Theatre's Professional Programme where she was in contact with Terrill Maguire, and in York University's summer dance programme. While in Toronto she also participated in several short, intensive study periods with Ameila Itcush. She also participated in the Bill Evans Summer Institute of Dance in Winnipeg in 1984.

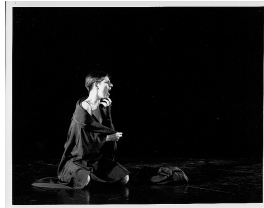
Both Robin and Dianne wanted to continue their dance training and dance performance in Regina. Outside of scattered, independent and multidisciplinary work there was not a whole lot to tap into. They needed to find a structure, an environment and the resources to learn, to work, and to make art. In 1986 they established New Dance Horizons to meet those needs with the conviction that the creator/artist must have control of the work, thus emphasizing their belief in the primacy of the individual and

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the individual artist.

They created three essential programs: the Performing Series, presenting the best in contemporary Canadian dance; Creation Production Projects (later INTEMPCO) to facilitate the creation of new work; and the Learning and Teaching Series to provide intensive dance workshops in the community.



2. INTEMPCO, 1989. *In Temporary Company*

The Performing Series presented an astonishing array of talent in performance in the first season (1986 - 87). Terrill Maguire performed her work, "Confessions of a Romance Junkie", and Marie Chouinard presented "Space, Time and Beyond" in red body paint. This was followed by work created by six Saskatchewan choreographers; the season concluded with "Human Eclipse", a set of duet works by Robin and Dianne.

This ambitious first season of performance, creation and intensive workshop experiences, undertaken with no resources beyond their own energy, drove the pair to the brink of exhaustion. The heavy administrative and curatorial needs of the programme, together with the creation of new work, was intense. After a brief rest to restore their energy they decided to continue.

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Robin Poitras and Dianne Fraser work well together and they have tried to retain a high degree of flexibility in the organization of New Dance Horizons, without setting up a demanding infrastructure that would drain resources. This initially seemed necessary in order to meet the demands of the art, and was in keeping with the development of independent dance in Canada. It was and continues to be necessary for survival, as shown by the poor track record of previous efforts to establish and maintain a professional dance base in Regina.

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Victor Jerrett Enns is a writer and arts advocate living in Winnipeg. *Jimmy Bang Poems* was published by Turnstone Press in 1979, *Correct in this Culture* by Fifth House in 1985. He has since completed two as yet unpublished manuscripts, *Lucky Man* and *Involuntary Tongue*. His writing has appeared in *BorderCrossings*, *Grain* and *Prairie Fire*, and in the online magazine *RedNeck*. He is now working on another poetry collection, *The Jimmy Bang Blues Project*. One of the founders of the Manitoba Writer's Guild, he is also the founder of *Windscrip* (published by the Saskatchewan Writers Guild) and more recently *Rhubarb* magazine (published by the Mennonite Literary Society). He has been Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild, Globe Theatre, and the Manitoba Arts Council. He is currently Executive Director of the Winnipeg Film Group.

Photo Credits

1. *In Temporary Company*: 1989, Choreography: Jo Leslie
Performers: Dianne Fraser, Connie Moker Wernikowski
and Robin Poitras, Photographer: Don Hall.
2. *In Temporary Company*: 1989, Choreography: Jo Leslie
Performer: Jo Leslie, Photographer: Don Hall.