

New Dance Horizons A Look Back and Forth

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F or a hushed moment as lights reveal the broad new 'University of Regina stage, some 300 audience members stare back at a woman (Diane Fraser) wearing a man's suit, standing on an oversized chair. Another woman (Robin Poitras) sits on the floor, legs extended, contemplating a tiny doll. Then the sound of humming fills the air, as shafts of hair fall from the rafters onto the chair and stage floor. Musician Erich Kory, seated near the wings on the right, draws the bow across his cello to provide a live score tempting Fraser down from the chair onto the stage floor.

This scene from Poitras' *Blue Room*, inspired by Frida Kahlo's paintings, opened New Dance Horizons' retrospective *A Look Back and Forth*. *Blue Room* encompasses two studies premiered as *A Few Small Snips/The Two Fridas* during the company's inaugural season (1987). The initial separation of the dancers introduced concepts such as duality explored through the work, and lent extra significance to moments where the dancers interacted.

The second work in this 10th anniversary performance, held October 10, was Poitras' and Marnie Gladwell's *Action Transferred*, which also premiered during the first season. For this

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remount, visual artist Brian Gladwell (Marnie's brother) created a new forest-like set of raw sonotube columns with concrete bases, through which Gladwell and Poitras vigorously interacted.



1. INTEMPCO, 1987.
A Few Small Snips / The Two Fridas

The third work of the retrospective evening, *For the day was brief and the day was all*, was choreographed by Daniel Léveillé for Poitras in 1987 and premiered in 1988. In it, Poitras moves around and along a series of five chairs, transforming her facial expressions through emotional patterns. She has performed the piece across Canada, and cites Léveillé as a major artistic influence and inspiration. "There's something about doing this piece that makes the changes in one's life apparent," she added.

With no permanent company of dancers, New Dance Horizons has thrived and grown with the passion of artistic director Poitras and independent dance-artists like Fraser and Gladwell. Remounting these three works for the one-night performance allowed the three

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dance-artists to consider their personal artistic journeys, as well as that of the company Fraser and Poitras founded a decade earlier.

Over coffee in the restaurant beneath their downtown offices, a few weeks after the retrospective, the three agreed the 1997 performance benefited from the philosophical and physical changes each had experienced over the ensuing years. They called it a "ripening", or a natural evolution in personal philosophy reflected in their work. "It takes you ten years to travel enough distance to be able to look back", Poitras remarked.

"You don't really understand a work until you try to reconstruct it", added Gladwell. Rehearsal was a process of "debate between what it was and what it could be, whether you trust what it was to be complete and unified". Since each work had its own life 10 years ago, they were tempted to add or change elements. But even small changes rippled across the entire piece, Poitras agreed, and often found they had to go back to the original approach.

"The body carries its own memory," Poitras explained. "In the process of reconstructing, recovering dance from the past, the body's memory is as important as the mind's. From ghostly pale blueprints, muscle memory comes into play, releasing movements from the body's library of vocabulary".

During the original developmental process, Fraser had been involved in company administration as well as dance and choreography. She resigned as co-artistic director in 1991, after

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the birth of her first child. This time, she had the "real luxury" of concentrating on dancing.

Looking back, Poitras and Fraser remembered the company's first season as an exciting time when they did more dancing than presenting. *Blue Room* was an appropriate opening for the retrospective, especially as it premiered during *Human Eclipse*, a group show including a poetry reading by Victor Jerrett-Enns and the first of NDH's characteristic collaborations, crossing disciplines into performance art, theater, music and visual art. For this remount, Robin also collaborated with her husband, renowned visual artist Edward Poitras, who represented Canada at the 1995 Venice Biennale. He has to date designed several critically acclaimed sets for the company.

Program notes suggest all three works explored "memory, time and the ephemeral nature of dance..." Some transforming elements included new sets and soundscapes for *Blue Room* and *Action Transferred*. Poitras said both were "reconstructed in silence...like a meditation." Later they added Kory's live music and performer, and musician Don Stein's original soundscape to the latter, and Poitras admitted, "It took a while to open up and respond to the sound."

Another transforming element, not entirely unexpected, involved physical changes in the dancers. "There are different desires in the body," suggested Poitras. "You might not jump as high or you might get cramps in your legs that you don't remember getting 10

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years ago." "But your movement vocabulary becomes richer," added Gladwell. "Richer and in some ways simpler," Poitras agreed.

The process of remounting made them more aware of the broader expansion of approach, influences and philosophy, rather than of actual changes in themselves or in the work. In some ways, this also reflects the evolution of the company over the last decade.

Co-founded in 1986 by Fraser and Poitras, NDH was really born out of their desire to perform their own work and present other dancers and choreographers from Saskatchewan and across Canada. Fraser had studied with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers and Toronto Dance Theatre. She began teaching at Regina Modern Dance Works school in 1981, but longed to perform again. Poitras, a graduate of York University's Dance Program, then taking classes at Dance Works, shared an eagerness to perform, as did Gladwell and other teachers in the school.

Dance Works had supported a professional contemporary dance company from 1974 to 1982, but it folded for financial reasons, according to Barb Cameron's *A History of the Professional Dance Companies that have existed in Saskatchewan Since 1905*. By 1986, Dance Works school still hadn't recovered enough to help its teachers develop a new production company. But if professional dance had proven a risky business in Regina, Fraser and Poitras

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remained undaunted. They resigned from Dance Works to develop a season of original works.

"At that time we were interested in the total artistic process - to create, perform, teach and learn," explains Poitras. "We needed a context for the work we wanted to explore." Securing only \$5,150 from various sources that season, they managed to mount four productions with eight premieres, including Marie Chouinard's *Xiao* performed by Poitras and Fraser, and two group shows. (By contrast, NDH secured \$160,000 in 1996, allowing Poitras to develop a 10th anniversary season, including a presentation of Chouinard's *Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and *The Rite of Spring* at Regina's prestigious Saskatchewan Centre of the Arts.)

Three streams of activity quickly developed: creation, education and performance, with creation at the core. These streams often flow into each other. In the first season, for example, Chouinard performed her own work *STAB* and offered public workshops as well as creating *XIAO*. During Léveillé's remounting for the 1997 retrospective, he also taught a university theater movement class. Over the years, New Dance Horizons has brought to Regina such other dance artists as Davida Monk, Gilles Simard, José Navas, Jocelyne Montpetit and Lee Su-Feh. In addition to performing, these artists have taken part in workshops, lectures and residencies serving Regina's amateur, professional and university dance communities. In its 10th anniversary season, NDH's own one-year residency at the University of Regina culminated in *A Look Back and Forth*.

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The only professional contemporary dance company in Saskatchewan, NDH also premieres at least one original work each season through its creation-production company "INTEMPCO" (from "in temporary company" by 1991). INTEMPCO brings local and national artists together, even across disciplines, to create new works. NDH also boasts the longest running performing series, featuring INTEMPCO work along with local and guest contemporary dance artists.

Although the struggle for funding continues, the company is more securely established than ever before. Poitras credits the help of full time administrator and production coordinator Michael Toppings, an experienced board of directors, ongoing civic, provincial and national funding, and the company's status in the community with firmly rooting NDH in the local and national dance community.

NDH has gained recognition in the community and national exposure through touring. Poitras plans to continue the three streams of activity, and expand the company's creation base. In future, for example, INTEMPCO may produce its own remounts or guest repertory work as well as new creations, "in a continued looking back and forth at contemporary dance practice."

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Photo Credits

1. *A Few Small Snips / The Two Fridas*: 1987, Choreographed and Directed by Robin Poitras, Performers: Dianne Fraser and Robin Poitras