

Round Legs, Square Wholes **Greg Beatty**

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Since 1991 New Dance Horizons has operated Intempco, a project-specific company designed to facilitate the creation and production of original contemporary dance in Regina. Participants, drawn from across Canada, receive valuable administrative, promotional and technical assistance in such area as light, sound, and set and stage design. This year's offering, "Round and Square Dances," included contributions from choreographers Susan McKenzie, Floyd Favel Starr and Tedd Robinson.



Round and Square Dances, Robin Poitras, 1998
Photograph by Don Hall

Upon first learning of the production, I assumed that it would juxtapose aboriginal and settler dance forms to examine the intersection of these two prairie cultures. What emerged instead

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was an explanation of the unique nature of the performance space-Regina's Globe Theatre. Nominally classed as 'theatre-in-the-round,' it actually possesses a square stage. Instead of working from the traditional proscenium theatre's one-point perspective, therefore, the choreographers had to envision their pieces from the perspective afforded the audience.

First up was McKenzie's proverb, danced by Robin Poitras and Ron Stewart. It was a reworking of The Silke, her 1978 solo composition inspired by American dancer Loie Fuller (1862-1928), who was credited with introducing an element of theatricality into modern dance through her elaborate costumes and lighting. In proverb, Poitras and Stewart were swathed in 37 meters of white silk. While the Globe stage is small, it has an expansive vertical which McKenzie used to great effect. Attached to the dancers through a harness, the flowing silk served as an extension of their bodies, allowing them to create a stunning architectural and aural landscape. Physically demanding, proverb seemed at its core to be a meditation on the fragility of life. When the dancers wrapped the fabric tightly around themselves, they resembled chrysalises from which they later emerged to test the strength of their wings. A frenetic central passage was evocative of sexual interaction between them.

Stewart and Poitras, with the former "flying higher" than the latter, but eventually expiring as Poitras continued to dance around him. Reinforcing this notion of birth and death was the lighting, which recalled the transit of the sun across the sky, and a percussive

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soundscape, which offered a chaotic mix of clock-like ticks and chimes. While the potential for catastrophe certainly existed with the wildly undulating silk, there was only one minor mishap when Stewart's robe contacted a front row seat.

Danced by emerging artist Jessica Hung, Star's 1000 Moons was intended as an homage to his grandmother, who lived on the Thunderchild Reserve near Meadow Lake. While Starr is best-known as a playwright and director (*Lady of the Silences*, *The House of Sonia*), his productions invariably incorporate a dance sequence which serves to advance the narrative.



Round and Square Dances, Robin Poitras, 1998
Photograph by Don Hall

As a measure of time, 1000 lunar cycles constitutes approximately 80 years. As the piece opened, Hung was shown gathering wood in the forest for fuel. Bent by age, she later used one of two branches as a walking stick, while carrying the other on her back. After arriving home, she propped the branches against each other to suggest a teepee or cabin, at whose threshold she knelt, staring out

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in a poignant evocation of loneliness, desire and fear. Later, Hung struggled to carry a pail full of stream water which she was swinging exuberantly by the end of her journey across the stage. The remainder of piece was infused with similar vitality. Through quotes from ballet, modern dance and the humble waltz, Starr crafted a portrait of a woman nostalgic for her lost youth.

Equally valid was the metaphorical notion of Starr paying tribute to his grandmother's youthful spirit, which presumably continued to evidence itself despite her age. Given Starr's ancestry, and his use of Cree in the soundscape, an aboriginal reading was inescapable. Although this was undermined by Hung's Asian ancestry, it suggested a cross-cultural lament for the manner in which elderly people are discarded once their productive capacity diminishes. In aboriginal culture, elders were the transmitters of specific knowledge, and Starr seems to be advocating renewed respect for their wisdom. Formally, 1000 Moons was less dynamic than proverb, although it did possess more explicit narrative content.

Poitras returned to dance solo in Robinson's *The Sound a Circle Makes*, the most minimal of the three works. It opened with her dressed in an elaborate, hooded, white paper gown. Proceeding from one corner of the theatre, she made her way diagonally across the stage on a line articulated by red cord. While a techno-disco song boomed overhead, she stared ambivalently towards the audience, clearly aware of their presence but declining to submit to their gaze. Watching her, I was reminded of the type of "runway"

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display that occurs at a fashion show or gala event like the Academy Awards. Midway across the stage, she slipped the hood from her head and through a moderately laborious process (which ultimately saw her kneel on the wadded paper) she shed the gown, revealing a clingy dress beneath. In the next segment, Poitras donned a pair of customized platform shoes and bisected the cord with a second diagonal walk. Akin to an umbrella that tightrope walkers might use to keep their balance, she held aloft in her right hand a square sheet of paper. Several times she stumbled, causing a certain amount of apprehension in the audience. But upon traversing the stage, she pivoted and hurriedly retraced her steps, exposing her earlier difficulty as a fraudulent pantomime. In the final segment, Poitras again walked along the cord, this time in the clunky shoes, before slipping them off and running joyously in a circle. Clothes, shoes and other accoutrements of beauty do allow women to express their identity. But as Poitras whirled around the stage, it was obvious, that for her, true freedom lay in escaping the dictates imposed by fashion.

"Round and Square Dances" was presented by New Dance Horizons at the Globe Theatre, May 14 to 15, 1999.

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Greg Beatty is a Regina-based freelance critic with a special interest in the arts. With the assistance of a Saskatchewan Arts Board grant, he is currently compiling an anthology of his writings with the goal of offering an overview of visual art practice in Regina during the 90s. He is also a contributing editor for the Regina alternative newspaper Prairie Dog, and is scheduled to host Arts (W)rap on Regina's community radio station CJTR.