

CHOREOGRAPHY

by Rebecca Kelly

Rebecca Kelly, Artistic Director of the Rebecca Kelly Dance Company since 1979, has created over 25 choreographic works, including evening length story ballets, abstract lyrical dances, funny pieces, and suites of social dances. Her subject matter has included druids, diplomats, winged creatures, monkeys, manners, alcoholics, tempestuous love, sex, break dance, violence, life and the scheme of things, camping trips, and most recently moving violations. The following are her thoughts and musings on the choreographic process.

How do you choreograph? What is your method? Do you write it all down on paper first? Do you hear a piece of music that inspires you? How do you remember your steps? How do you know what to do? Where do you get your idea? Do you ever run out of ideas? These are the questions every choreographer is asked over and over again. Many of the answers to the same questions change after each new work is created. Because each dance comes to life in its own unique way.

I find that being decisive, and being able to come to decisions quickly is helpful. Even making many rapid decisions, discarding some, and changing others is much better than waffling around unable to come to conclusions. I have no fear of having a bad idea or throwing it out, or coming up with a terrific phrase of movement only to discard it because it's in the wrong context. Ideas and movement are almost the only things about living in New York that are totally free. But because time is not free, I learned to work fast, in order to have more time to see what works and what does not. Some dances are created because I want to explore a way of moving. These dances are free of certain intellectual constraints. Sometimes I don't even want to know what the dance is about. I "feel" and recognize my way through these pieces. Music is important to me. It is essential that there is a sensitive relationship between the dance and the music.

One of the most frightening times is just after the completion of a work. I'm not talking about the immediate obvious anxiety about how the public will receive it. It comes after that. For a moment there is a blank, not a lack of ideas, but a hesitation to go back into

the fray. Choreography is a tumultuous, alive kind of experience. One becomes totally absorbed in shaping an idea, a way of moving. It can be wildly exciting or wildly frustrating. There are long uncertain periods when you have no idea if you are making the right choices, if the work makes any sense, if it is worth all the extreme effort of communicating so hard, first with the dancers, and then with the audience. Perhaps it is just that the prolonged period of trying to do this one thing. The concentration, the sustained effort at communication that is so awesome. So when a new piece is finished, part of me dreads to go back into that place again. But inevitably I'm drawn in, lured by a piece of music, or a restless feeling, an observation or an idea, by the enthusiasm of my dancers, or just by a feeling that resists definition. I just have to create dances. That is what I do.

Generally ideas swim around in my head for weeks and months before I begin work in the studio. There is an incubation stage that is vital to each dance. Some ideas take over a year before they are actually executed. Working choreographers have to choose among several ideas rattling around in their heads what they are going to produce. Sometimes schedules and budgets play the dominant role in which idea becomes choreography.

Since my work varies so much, the way in which I create each dance varies a great deal too. My narrative works, elaborate sagas, begin with a written script. I work with an outline for thematic organization but fill in the chapters and paragraphs with movement. As the story begins to leave the page and fill the studio, I am always amazed and intrigued to find the story develops a life of its own and begins to tell me what it is about. And then choreography is no more than *recognizing* the right steps. Sometimes I feel that I'm only responsible for the original idea, but once the dancers all have a chance to work with it, it becomes all our creation. We call it getting *inside* the dance. Maybe that is the muse.

How did I create MAD DOGS AND DIPLOMATS or DREAM DRIVEN or MOVING VIOLATIONS? I ask myself that very question after each new work premieres. I look at the finished piece and sometimes can no longer relate to the choreographic process. I can't remember how I did it.



I can't believe I did it — went to all that effort. I can't remember how I knew what to do next. How I dared to tackle such a big project. A finished work is a thing apart from me. And yet many months were involved in its making, in fact, even before any steps were set. The idea was in my mind. It consumed my every waking and sometimes sleeping moments. But once a piece is performed the creative process for that dance ends. I begin regard it in the same way as a member of the audience from the outside. That is, from the outside, an intellectual, conscious experience. But the creative process works on other levels, subconscious and kinetic, which aren't remembered like other memories. I think that is why choreographers can feel "alienated" from their creations.

How do I remember it all? Really, what I have to remember most is the driving idea. I'll begin to invent some steps, some phrases. I'll be searching for the mood, the look of the new piece. These steps are the essential vocabulary of the new dance. And these I have to find by myself, alone. But once they are taught and the dancers can "feel" them and see them in action, I see where to go next. The process builds upon itself. I have come to rely increasingly on video to document a day's progress on a new work, and to mull over it later after the dancers have gone home. Then I take notes and make changes. But I rely even more on the kinetic and mental memory and require and rely on the alert memory of my dancers.

My dancers are the most important of all. How they respond to the movement and ideas are crucial. They affect everything. They are one's first critics, audience, and guinea pigs. And they are one's reward. Choreographers are usually in a vulnerable state. They share personal ideas and attitudes with a group of people, exposing themselves to friction, misunderstanding, ridicule, but also to the immeasurable reward of inspiring another individual, finding a common truth. It is an intimate situation. Many people would avoid that kind of confrontation. The vulnerability would just horrify them. Choreographers don't let that get in the way. They just move along with all the awkwardness and fulfillment that comes with the process of creativity. •

Working with a Company/ Emotional Endurance and Discipline

By REBECCA KELLY

So you made it through the audition and you were asked to join a company. You are thrilled. You're not on your own anymore. You are part of SOMETHING. You can't wait until rehearsals start. And once they've started you are immensely stimulated. There's so much to learn. It's all new. There are other dancers who know the material so well. "How will I ever catch up?" you ask. You can't wait until you KNOW what you are doing so you can really perfect your dancing and your expression. Each day is a wonderful challenge. It is like a new romance. And like a new romance, there is an inevitable change.

At some point the newness is gone. With it goes a certain excitement. Now you know the choreography, you know the other dancers, you know the artistic director won't bite. But now the real work begins.

Getting to know yourself in a professional setting takes time. Becoming seasoned as a performing artist includes dancing beautifully on days when you'd rather be asleep, understanding how your behavior affects both the director and the other dancers, being cheerful in rehearsal when the landlord is threatening to evict you. It includes realizing that on stressful or physically taxing days it is wise to get a good rest the night before, and if you don't, not to share your overtired mood with your fellow dancers. Maturing as an artist starts while performing repertory works which are familiar to you, realizing the constant challenge to search for new and better ways of dancing your roles. It means learning how to work in a group and include in your perspective, goals larger than your own personal accomplishment. Nobody told you dancing was going to be easy.

As an artist the idea is to bare your soul, your physical prowess, your courage, your drama. YOUR SELF to your audience.

How do you prepare for this in rehearsal? You learn to control your emotions so that you can channel them or their energy in your dance. So let's say you come into rehearsal and you've had a sleepless night arguing with a boyfriend who isn't earning his share of the rent. You are tired and angry. Life seems unfair. Just now New York doesn't have enough green trees. You hate waitressing. You could be surly to the choreographer. Balk at new movement. You could be sluggish and cause all your colleagues to ask you what is wrong. You could get quite a lot of attention and waste a lot of people's time. But stop! You have a chance to drop all that emotional baggage outside the studio door. Use that anger to create an energy that feels positive. You can leave the details of your life behind for a couple of hours, and obtain immense satisfaction from knowing that you can be doing something valuable and right.

At some point in your career you knuckle down and realize that the biggest insights are going to come from yourself and the best teacher will also probably be you. You may also discover you are the most exacting and formidable instructor you've ever had. Most of your teachers don't get as fed up as you do at your mistakes. Most of your teachers aren't as disheartened as you by your failures. Nobody truly cares as much about you and your dancing as YOU.

So, you are starting your next period of

rehearsals with the company you've just joined and the romance is over, but the real relationship with the work and with yourself as a performer is just starting. You are beginning to discover your "role" in the company.

The glamour and urgency of newness is gone and familiarity with the work could threaten to become drudgery. But here is when you take the time to look carefully at your progress and development. This is when you really begin to grow.

And these are the questions you must ask. Are you inspiration for the other dancers? Or for the choreographer? Are you the one who gets all the partnering parts, or the petit allegro? Do you think you can handle more than the choreographer gives you? Or are you the trouble-maker? Do you think you get along well with the other dancers? Are you being rewarded for your interest and talent with good dancing parts? Does the choreographer seem to enjoy working with you? Watching you? Do the other dancers respect your work? Are you always putting out one hundred percent during the hours you rehearse? Are you doing a professional job? Do you understand the goals of the organization you are now part of and know your own role in it?

These are the questions that should be asked. And these questions can be answered by you.

REBECCA KELLY
DANCE COMPANY

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Notes on Dance

DANCE PAGES *winter 85.17*

The Audition

by Rebecca Kelly

Why audition? To see how you compare to other dancers in a competitive situation, to test yourself under pressure, to find out more about a particular company, for the excitement of the experience, because you desperately want a job dancing, because you genuinely want to dance with a particular company or choreography.

How do you prepare yourself? What can you do to make the artistic director choose you? How can you be sure you will perform well at an audition? How can you demonstrate the skills you have? Auditioning is a painful experience for most dancers, disappointing for all but the single dancer who gets chosen. But it is a valuable experience for all who go through the process.

Dancers audition to get jobs. But what about dancers just beginning to audition? This is a process on which you don't want to spend a lot of time — it is depressing to try and not to succeed. So let's examine ways in which to be most efficient and productive about it.

WHAT COUNTS: The first cut in an audition has to do with weight. Face it. If you are hoping to perform with a professional company you must be a professional weight. Don't fool yourself into thinking that anybody is going to look past your weight issues no matter how beautiful the underlying technique. The audience has no mercy. Nor should you expect it of the artistic director. Your weight is your own responsibility. Don't dream "if only I could dance for xxx, then I'd be working so hard and be so involved, I'd shape up." Your weight is a reflection of your ability to understand and maintain the self-discipline necessary for a performance athlete. YOU are in control whether you like it or not.

APPEARANCE: Dress neatly, revealing your body and your line, no leg warmers, shirts or sweatpants at an audition. You shouldn't look like you have something to hide. Extra clothes are warning flags. You don't want to disappear into a crowd of dancers, but you don't want to look like everyone else. So prepare yourself with flare. Make-up is optional, wear a flattering leotard. An eager look on your face will call attention to you. If you can reveal in your face and body as you audition that you enjoy what you are doing, it lends glamour and a sparkle to your performance. And *that* makes you stand out from the others. But also note company members' style of attire.

ABOUT MISTAKES: Let them go! Don't get bogged down in censoring your performance. We know you feel badly when you make a mistake, but you don't have to say by your demeanor that you are sorry. It's not appropriate. If steps are hard, treat the error as you would in performance — don't draw attention to it, don't get depressed. Just dance on. You're not going to be chosen for showing how hard you try; or for how much this means to you. You will be chosen for what can be seen about you as you perform, and how you handle the learning process under pressure. Learn to wear a look of pride and confidence. It inspires the same feelings in the observer. If you can show enthusiasm, your audience will feel enthusiasm.

FAMILIARITY: If you know someone in the company or the choreographer, it might help. A choreographer has to examine a lot of strangers and attempt to find someone who attracts her/his eye. If you have been training with a company and you want to be in the company, let it be known. Familiarity is an asset. Given a choice choreographers prefer to work with people they know. There is less risk in the relationship over time. But there could be a drawback. Sometimes a familiar face is taken for granted, even overlooked in an audition. Don't permit this to happen to you! Let the choreographer know of your interest, then challenge yourself to new heights within the audition so the choreographer takes a fresh look. Get to know the company's work so you are aware of what the choreographer likes. If possible take class with the choreographer or members of the company.

TRY MORE THAN ONCE: If you don't make it the first time you audition, try again. Don't be discouraged. You will probably do better at the next opportunity. And you never know what notes the choreographer wrote about you. You do have the advantage of knowing the choreographer will be pleased by your continued interest. It will be noticed if you are getting past the initial cuts.

SO WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO LOSE? You came to New York City to dance. You have to try your hardest to make that happen because the market is glutted. Female dancers are a dime a dozen. Men seem to get jobs and often they simply aren't as good as women. Well, nobody said it was going to be fair or easy. It's the way of the market right now — supply and demand. Don't be passive about the process. It is not based on good fortune.

It is rare that a choreographer walks into a studio full of dancers and instantly recognizes *your* talent. You have to go through the audition process. Make the best of the situation. It is a challenge and challenges are good for you. At the very least, an audition is a free class. It's a special introduction to someone you may have wanted to meet. You get a taste of the choreographer's work. You can evaluate yourself and discover who else is out there. You learn from watching others' success and disappointments, as well as experiencing your own. You learn most by daring to try your hardest, and that is the most difficult thing of all. But in doing your best, you show yourself to your greatest advantage and you haven't let yourself down. This should come as a measure of satisfaction that will sustain you until the next opportunity to try again. Auditioning is performance. And until you get into a company, it may be the only chance you get to perform. •



DANCE • PAGES

A GUIDE TO METROPOLITAN AREA DANCE . . . AND EXERCISE STUDIOS

DANCING Involves More Than Just DANCE CLASSES, 1986

By Rebecca Kelly

Twyla Tharp is said to have worked out with a boxing coach to get in shape for a season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Molisssa Fenley, a young modern choreographer whose performances are feats of endurance, works out at a gym. Finis Jhung has his students perform push-ups daily. Dancers are all over the health clubs strengthening their limbs. Professional dancers are turning to sports training to prepare them for their special feats of endurance, getting to know their bodies more thoroughly. The old taboos against non-dance training are quickly disappearing. Gymnasts take ballet; ballet dancers take modern; modern dancers study weight training. Dancers ride bikes, run, swim laps. Dancers who always feared 'bulking up' if they worked as athletes do with weights, now understand the value of repetitions to delineate muscle, fine tune and hone them. So it comes as no surprise that some of what used to be considered traditional exercises for soccer teams and football teams, runners, ice skaters, and other athletes have found their way into the new contemporary dance classes.

The class starts and the sleepy looking dancers suddenly find themselves doing jumping jack push-ups on the 10-count. Three or four vigorous minutes later —they are awake! The blood is flowing, the heart is beating, the skin is flushed, the dancers are a little breathless. But they have crossed the threshold. The grouchy body syndrome is bypassed. They are awake. The dance continues. Somewhere between warming up the back, the batement exercises and leaping through space, the dancers find themselves on the floor stretching in organized simple muscle-lengthening exercises: side stretches to strengthen and tone the ribs and waist-- and hold it! Men watch the women do their daily minimum ten push-ups; women watch the men.

The watching puts pressure on the dancers to do a better job. Having a sense of one's own weight also helps make a better partner. If you can lift yourself, you can do a great deal to assist the man or woman who has been assigned to lift you. This is a new kind of contemporary dance class encompassing sports and endurance training with lyricism and ballet placement. Dance makes motion look easy for the body. Though everyone knows that look of ease comes from sheer dint of hard labor. There are no shortcuts, but there are efficient unconventional routes to the same place.

It's 1986 and dancers want to train fast. Some start their serious dance careers late and are eager to explore whatever will help develop special muscles quickly, strengthen the torso, arms and legs. Some dancers didn't have the opportunity to start training at an early age. These late starters have had to use their will power and make use of whatever physical background they had in their youth. Sports, gymnastics, social dancing all contribute a great deal to the finesse required at a dancer starting serious training after the age of 18. But some haven't even had the good fortune of an active and athletic youth. These would-be dancers do well to augment their regular dance and classes with aerobic activity such as bike riding and stair-climbing to increase endurance, and basic pushups and free weights to increase their torso strength. Obviously all this must be accompanied by constant stretching. It is amazing just how much the body can be trained. Even into the mid and late twenties, through diligent work. This is not to suggest that sports training can replace what is offered in a dance class. But it can enhance what is learned in that rarified atmosphere •

NOTES ON DANCING: *Performing*

by Rebecca Kelly



photo by Martha Swope

What makes the difference in a dancer with obvious technical ability and a dancer with performance flair? Why is technical ability not enough? Charles Weidman used to encourage his young dancers to perform more fully with phrases such as "put space in your face" and "feel the ecstasy of falling." He would admonish us if our "faces looked gray." He told us it was embarrassing to watch us if our faces weren't connected to our bodies.

I have had the opportunity to work with a new generation of dancers and I have had time to mull over these phrases in the years since my own quest began to develop dancers who reach out in performance to their fullest degree.

When a performer puts every particle of his or her soul into a performance it is a wondrous and often cathartic experience for an audience member. That willingness to stretch out to the fullest degree is the rare talent of the performing arts world. What is so compelling about a live performance—a good one? Is it that most people do not experience a demonstration of physical conviction in their everyday lives? Yet they recognize and even envy that full out expression they see on stage.

As a child I used to love to run as fast as I could, or swim seemingly impossible distances under water, or dive from the highest diving board, or read a whole novel at a sitting. As an adult, I never lost my desire to "act" fully.

Yet I went through a period as my technical training in dance advanced

when I couldn't get my total "conviction" out as a performer. I could imagine what it would be like to dance fully, but I couldn't make it happen for myself on stage. Perhaps there was too much of the need to be an accurate student. The freedom of childhood was gone, and there were many standards of excellence I wanted to fulfill. Perhaps I was afraid of being judged. I became aware of a dichotomy while dancing. My body, always very physical, would do all the right things, but my "self" would remain detached—censoring and withholding approval. I went through a period of being a ghost performer.

How many dancers do we all know like that - a good dancer- afraid to call attention to her/himself in performance? I attribute it to high standards in technical training while simply not having the confidence and the courage to make the very mistakes which are the little steps along the way to success. I think how terribly important it was to me that Charles Weidman recognized the need to train and develop the performing animal inside his dancers. Oh, he was merciless about it on some days, humiliating us if we didn't inspire him with the sense that dance was wonderful. And I can understand his frustration now as I see the reserve in young skilled dancers today. He wouldn't watch us when he couldn't bear the lack of magic in our inexperienced

bodies and faces. But his kind of encouragement was totally lacking in almost all the other technique classes I took during those formative years.

By that time the vogue was increasing for modern dancers to study ballet. Modern dancers were grimly picking up the essential vocabulary of ballet to make themselves more versatile and marketable in the competitive dance arena. In class everything was calm, controlled, predictable, and faces took on a mask-like intensity as the moderns fought to gain new ground. Nobody told the dancers that just because their legs wouldn't go up to their ears in *developee* today, didn't mean they couldn't have a beautifully expressive *port de bras* if they worked at it. Aren't faces, necks and chest just as essential a part of the performing artists equipment as beautiful feet and legs? What about phrasing, attitudes, endurance? Are these no longer taught in class? Emphasis these days seems to be on technique and the grind. And dancers look like grinds, even the good ones. I long to see the sheer love and exuberance of dancing. Why shouldn't that be encouraged in a class? And certainly it should be evident in an audition.

A performing talent is not born, it is created through the opportunity of practice, and under the guidance of the right teacher/teachers. It can be developed, and it must be for those seeking to become artists of the stage. Technique alone is not enough, though obviously essential. The performing talent comes more easily to some than others, but it can be nurtured in the right environment. Just because you are perhaps shy or reserved by nature, doesn't mean you can't learn to be outrageous, or sensual or thrilling on stage. But perhaps you have to find an environment where that is encouraged, to learn and explore this side of your nature. For some, it isn't just going to happen as a result of a certain number of years in a classroom. Are you training the performing artist in you, as well as training your body? And if not, just when do you expect to work on that aspect of your total craft?

There is a large dance-going audience out there. What do you suppose they like to see in a performer? Do you ever consider it?— fit bodies, youth and exuberance, sex, excitement, beauty, fantasy, an artist capable of pouring out heart and soul, contact? The most successful performing artists somehow reach out and touch their audience. Somehow after all the discipline they have learned to care about that.