

DANCE

MAGAZINE

DANCE MAGAZINE

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Women's Leadership ■ Training for Versatility ■ The Jobs Guide

THE WORLD AT YOUR FEET

MARCH 2011

WOMEN RULE

5 DIRECTORS'
VISIONS

VERSATILITY=
MORE GIGS

THE
JOBS
GUIDE
100s OF
LISTINGS

Left to right: Anne
Zivolich, Vanessa
Thiessen, and Yayoi
Kambara of ODC



DANCE
MEDIA



Three women of ODC:
Chin-chin Hsu, Anne
Zivolich, Yayoi Kambara.
Costumes designed by
Brenda Way.



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A FEMALE FORCE

Five company leaders on how gender shapes their vision and style

BY VICTORIA LOOSELEAF

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1966 the great soul singer James Brown crooned, “This is a man’s world...but it wouldn’t be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl.”

Now, more than four decades later, a lot, bad grammar aside, has changed. Or has it? Though women have made great strides on many fronts—politics, the boardroom and yes, even in music (from Madonna to Lady Gaga, estrogen rocks)—the question persists in the dance world: Where are all the women artistic directors?

And while a few women have risen to positions of power (including Monica Mason at The Royal Ballet, Brigitte Lefèvre at Paris Opéra Ballet, and Judith Jamison at Ailey), we look forward to seeing those numbers increase. There is hope, in today’s world, of women continuing their quest to attain and maintain leadership roles. To that end, *Dance Magazine* spoke to five women in charge of major dance companies today. Discussing their leadership styles, how they have evolved, and their status in the 21st century, these feisty females all have strong identities and ideas about their places at the top of the ladder.

Transitioning from prima ballerina to artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada, **Karen Kain** is unique in that her entire working career has been with this one esteemed company. Currently overseeing an organization of 200, Kain first joined the troupe in 1969 as a dancer, eventually becoming artistic director in 2005. Indeed, Kain has the distinction of

having served under all the troupe’s directors, allowing her to experience various leadership styles firsthand, beginning with the company’s founder, Celia Franca.

“After Celia there were five men, and I learned what I wanted to do and didn’t want to do as director,” recalls Kain. “But I worked with Celia the longest, and she had a way of being very tough and very nurturing at the same time.”

Like Franca, Kain says part of her job is to nurture the dancers, making them feel confident about their abilities while also challenging them. “I’m part of their support team,” says Kain, “not someone who’s ordering them around. From the smallest things—like addressing them by their names—to the bigger ones, I feel my dancers and I have a good relationship in terms of negotiating what works for the company and what works for the artist.”

Kain adds that she leads by being true to herself. “I can’t be another person, or a distant director. I am personally involved in all my dancers’ careers. I look forward to presenting them with new challenges and introducing them to new choreographers and seeing what that alchemy will be like.”

The result of such alchemy was on view this season in the triumphant company premiere of Wayne McGregor’s landmark work *Chroma*, as well as in full-length classics such as *Don Quixote* and Cranko’s *Onegin*.

Stoner Winslett, the founding artistic director of Richmond Ballet, is also a nurturer who champions new repertoire. Sidelined by injury, the ballerina became the organization’s first full-time employee in 1980, assuming the directorship that same year. In addition to performing

classics, Richmond Ballet’s 15 dancers and 8 apprentices perform works made for them, including nine by Winslett.

“A good director has to have a vision,” says Winslett, who has commissioned 54 pieces, “and has to be able to convince other people that that vision is their vision. When I came to Richmond it was a student company, so I’ve had the privilege of starting with students and hiring dancers and growing them. There’s a lot of nurturing in that. I also treat my dancers the way I like to be treated.”

Unlike leadership approaches with a top-down hierarchical style, Winslett says she follows the “servant leadership” model. “You serve the dancers, you serve the choreographers and try to pull them into the joys that dance onstage can be,” says Winslett.

Another eminent institution is ODC. Founded by **Brenda Way**, ODC is one of the oldest contemporary dance centers on the West Coast and is currently celebrating its 40th anniversary (see sidebar). Originally trained at School of American Ballet, Way then discovered modern dance, taught at Oberlin College, and relocated to San Francisco in 1976—a heady time, she says, for feminists.

“In the early days of the company,” recalls Way, who has also choreographed many works and raised four children, “when it was a collective, that and feminism were affecting my notions of leadership. In modern dance, since you are reinventing the language—or trying to do that—you invite the participation of your dancers in a deeper way, which means you probably have somewhat less of an authoritarian environment.

“The form itself opens it up to

different kinds of leadership. My view,” she adds, “has always been to enlist instead of insist.”

That attitude has served Way well, including helping her to develop her 10 dancers, whom she makes part of the creative process. “That’s typical of contemporary dance,” she notes. “But how you work with both their ideas and their delivery of those ideas on a daily

basis is how you develop an artist. I try to be straightforward and very particular in my feedback.”

Feedback—and flexibility—are also two keys to **Liz Lerman’s** success as the founding artistic director of the Maryland-based Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.



Above: Stoner Winslett. Right: Richmond Ballet dancers in John Butler’s *After Eden*.



Okada, Nelson, and Way

ODC TURNS 40

Still fostering community after all these years

On March 11, the opening night of “ODC/Dance Downtown” season, artistic directors Brenda Way and KT Nelson and associate choreographer Kimi Okada will take a bow together. They always do. The trio is what remains from the ragtag group of 16 “hippie artists” from Oberlin College in Ohio who in 1976 followed the siren call of the West. They came despite that for Way “quitting a tenured position at Oberlin, when I had three kids, was pretty scary.” Okada remembers being both excited and concerned about “putting all our eggs into one basket.” Nelson, a young dancer who had just started to choreograph, was anxious about whether “we would be able to survive so that we could keep making work.”

Not only did these adventurers survive, they thrived. Started in 1971 as Oberlin Dance Collective in an abandoned gym on campus, ODC has grown into a two-campus San Francisco institution that has become a mecca for dance. Its \$5 million budget supports three entities: the 10-member ODC/Dance company; the ODC School, with over 200 weekly classes; and ODC Theater, which presents local and touring ensembles and offers mentoring and residence opportunities. The company, school, and administrative offices are housed in the beautiful, airy ODC Dance Commons, which welcomes a rainbow of Bay Area dance activities.

While the collective’s freewheeling spirit has evolved into a more formalized collaborative partnership—with Way the first among equals—it still embraces the unknown as a birthright. At its heart, as Okada puts it, is “a deep belief in the power of art to shape and change our lives.”

In San Francisco ODC exploded into what was at the time a rather sleepy dance environment with an energy and enthusiasm that has yet to abate. The young troupe renovated a warehouse, started making work, presented lecture demonstrations, published a journal, and invited other visual and performing artists into their midst. Among the first guests to appear there were Douglas Dunn and avant-garde dance critic Jill Johnston. Over the years artists such as Karole Armitage, Eiko & Koma, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, Stephen Petronio, and Ronald K. Brown made their San Francisco debuts in ODC’s modest little theater.

In 1979, having bought a “home,” the artists, with the help of assorted community volunteers, laid the dance floor. The space was only half-finished when the Jazz Tap Ensemble opened, and the audience sat on a surface that was still dirt. It’s this kind of can-do attitude that shaped everything ODC has touched.

Yet the major reason, of course, to celebrate ODC’s 40th anniversary is its artistic achievements. Way has choreographed around 90 pieces, Nelson 60, and Okada, who runs the school, some 25. Over the years this body of work has become formally more sophisticated without losing its humanistic principles or questioning spirit.

The 10 dancers have a 40- to 42-week contract—a rarity in modern dance. The company tours annually 6 to 10 weeks; they’ve performed in 32 states and 11 countries. Last year in addition to national engagements, they traveled to Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand as part of the U.S. State Department’s global initiative, DanceMotion USA (see “Dance Matters,” Jan. 2010).

ODC is celebrating its 40th anniversary with a two-week series (March 11–27) entitled “A Force at 40,” in which each of the three co-leaders will show a premiere. Nelson’s work is a collaboration with an artist of a completely different sensibility—Shinichi Iovakoga, a 2008 “25 to Watch.” Way’s new piece invites other members of the dance community to participate. And Okada takes a gently humorous look at cross-cultural (mis)understandings. Some of these works, no doubt, will be on view when ODC comes to the Joyce in August.

Way, Nelson and Okada are inspired by the commitment of ODC’s 10 dancers. Says Nelson: “Our dancers are a group of imperfect souls who get up every day to work their hardest to be the best they can. Humble and generous, they are incredible ambassadors of our art form. They give themselves over to a vision; they are the epitome of what we are trying to do here.”

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