



The Dance Centre

Dance in Vancouver
Three Ways

Peter Dickinson

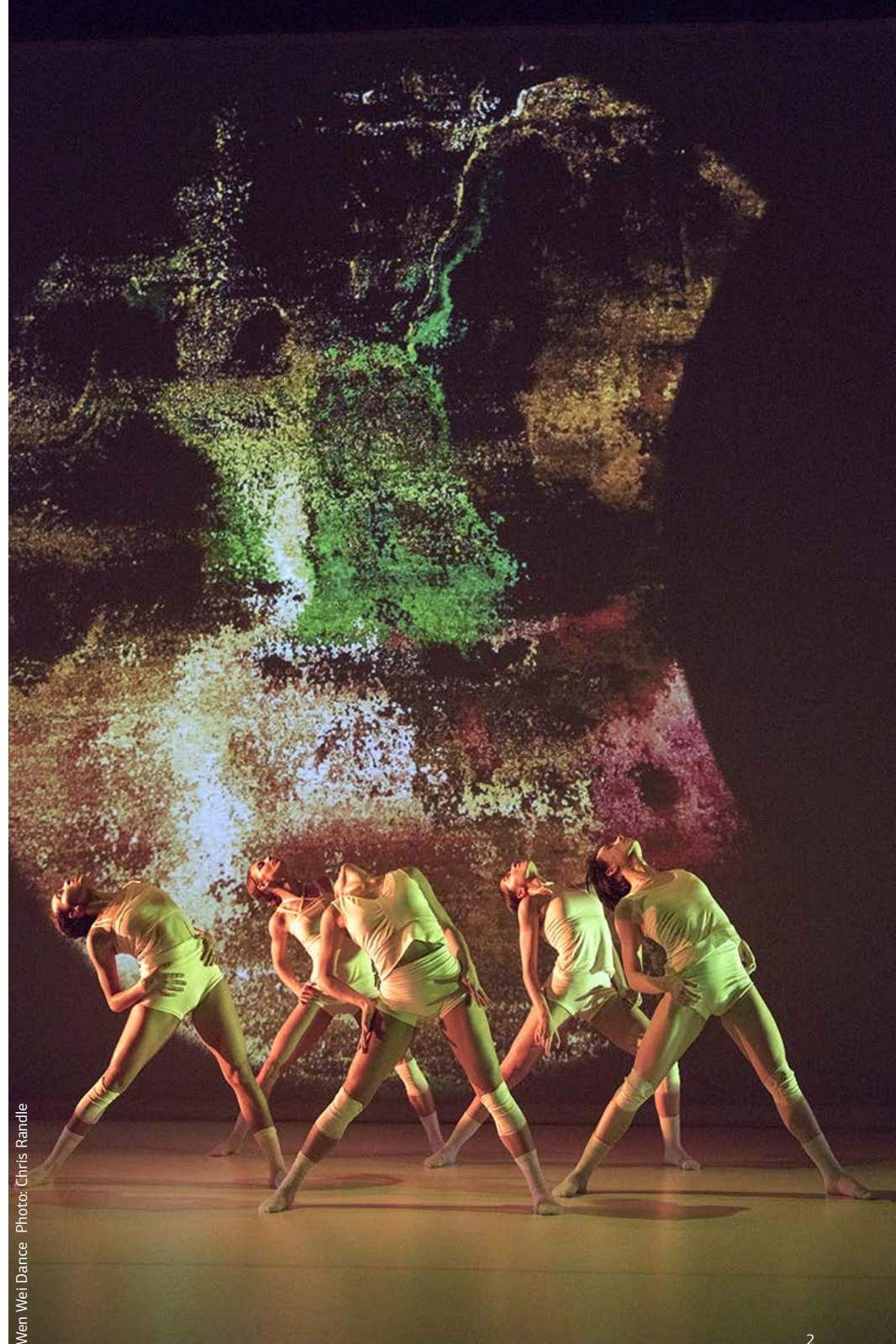


TANZMESSE 2022

1. In accounting for the ways in which dance in Vancouver and British Columbia is both distinct from and in conversation with contemporary movement practices as they have evolved in other parts of Canada and around the world, it helps to start with geography. Put simply, we're pretty far from every major national and international dance centre. On the one hand, this has meant that dance artists in the city have been free to develop their choreographic voices and formal approaches independent of aesthetic and conceptual trends dominant elsewhere. On the other hand, it has meant that these same artists have frequently felt compelled to travel widely in order to absorb these trends, collaborate with other artists they admire or bring their own work to a wider audience. Then, too, many settler dance artists in the city have themselves migrated from other parts of Canada and the world, resulting in a movement landscape that is stylistically varied and richly intercultural.

In this respect, it is worth noting that the orientations of contemporary Vancouver dance—and that of British Columbia, more generally—are as much trans-Pacific as they are intra-national or even trans-Atlantic. From Wen Wei Wang's early training in Chinese folk dancing and martial arts to the queer Filipinx performance aesthetics of Co.ERASGA's Alvin Tolentino and FakeKnot's Ralph Escamillan; from the decolonial feminist politics of battery opera's Lee Su-Feh and Hong Kong Exile's Natalie Tin Yin Gan to the post-Butoh experiments of Kokoro Dance's Jay Hirabayashi and Barbara Bourget; from the Bharata Natyam instruction and performances of Mandala Arts' Jai Govinda and Shakti Dance's Anusha Fernando to the Sri Lankan and Nepalese folk dances on display at the annual BC Buddhist Festival: Vancouver dance has necessarily been informed and transformed by the movement traditions of the Asian and South Asian diasporas.

Dumb Instrument Dance's Ziyian Kwan, who immigrated with her family to Vancouver from Hong Kong as a child in the 1970s, is a case in point. Having interpreted hundreds of works by almost every major choreographer in the city (she was a long-time Kokoro company member), she began creating her own solo works in 2013 as a way of exploring the intersections of her movement training and her cultural heritage. In works like *the neck to fall* (2013) and *The Odd Volume* (2019), for example, Kwan tackles the many ways in which she has been interpellated as a racialized woman of Asian heritage within the local dance community. At the same time, she has generously given back to this very



Wen Wei Dance Photo: Chris Randle

community, most materially through her storefront studio and shop, Morrow. This pop-up venue, established in the early days of the pandemic and now in a new and bigger location, has become a vital gathering space for younger queer and BIPOC dance artists in the city, several of whom Kwan worked with to make two vital works, *Made in Voyage* (2020) and *Spells for Chinatown* (2021), that speak directly to the dislocated genealogies and transposed geographies of much Vancouver dance.

Of course, most of this dislocation and transposition is a direct result of colonialism. When thinking about the time and space of Vancouver dance, it bears remembering that, notwithstanding the concerted efforts of the Canadian and British Columbia governments to eradicate it, the practice of Indigenous dancing on these unceded and occupied Coast Salish lands has never not been contemporary—and has also never stopped innovating. To this end, companies like Dancers of Damelahamid and Raven Spirit Dance and O.Dela Arts connect past

to present through story and protocol while simultaneously repurposing contemporary choreographic tools and modes of presentation as Indigenous ways of knowing through movement. That this knowing always happens in relationship with the lands and waterways of British Columbia is a through-line of this work, including by Indigenous dance artists who are themselves guests on these territories. Indeed, if the coastal setting, mountainous backdrop, and temperate climate of Vancouver have come to define a specific branch of sited dance created by settler artists based here—from pioneers like Karen Jamieson to a lauded aerial company like Aeriaosa—then it should also remind us that for Indigenous dancers and dancemakers place is always what orients—quite literally—any choreography. I think, in this respect, of the “CO-VIDS” created by Jeanette Kotowich (Cree/ Métis) during the lockdown, a series of site-specific experimental digital works that use technology to develop new ways of sensing ground—and its myriad supports. Kotowich, a dance artist who, like Kwan, has begun supplementing her solo practice with ensemble works, has most recently created *KWE*, a joyous ode to feminine energy and Indigenous futurism that unfolds across multiple locations, including the black box theatre.





FakeKnot Photo: Marchel B. Eang



Action at a Distance Photo: Ionut Rusu



Raven Spirit Dance Photo: Erik Zennstrom

2. A strong streak of theatricality runs throughout much of contemporary Vancouver dance. This is perhaps most obvious in the work of Kidd Pivot, the company formed by the city's most famous dance-world export, Crystal Pite. Marrying virtuosic movement to the use of text (especially in works created in collaboration with playwright Jonathon Young), and employing elaborate sound and stage designs, Pite's creations for Kidd Pivot freely indulge her love of narrative and theatrical *mise-en-scène*. Likewise, Out Innerspace's David Raymond and Tiffany Tregarthen, who have performed and toured extensively with Kidd Pivot, are known for setting their choreography within complex and visually beguiling on-stage worlds, though those worlds draw as much from cinema as from theatre. In works like *Major Motion Picture* (2016) and *Bygones* (2019), Raymond and Tregarthen play especially with light, using interactive motion-sensing infrared technology and intricate video projections to create architectural thresholds of darkness and luminescence that bodies constantly move in and out of, forcing the audience to adjust their eyes—and their minds—to a new kind of spectatorial surveillance.

Dance-theatre in the city extends to the work of Tara Cheyenne Friedenber, who mixes movement with character-based and, increasingly, autobiographical verbal humour and commentary. And in dance dramas like *Simygeek—Flicker* (2016) and *Mînowin* (2019), the Dancers of Damelahamid integrate narrative, movement, song, performance, and multimedia design to reinterpret traditional

Gitxsan origin stories through a contemporary lens. In much of her work, Kwan is also concerned with questions of intergenerational storytelling (*Made in Voyage* is a series of solos in which the dancers narrate personal tales of their grandmothers, and in *Kwan Yin*, the choreographer dances on stage with her own father). This storytelling frequently involves a plethora of props, which is just one of the ways in which Kwan embellishes her work with a theatrical flourish. At the end of her performances, the stage can seem to resemble something out of a work by Pina Bausch, strewn as it usually is with assorted objects and detritus: books and boxes, shoes and stray bits of clothing, furry stools and giant inflatable balls, spit and glitter, a piano, almost always one or more chairs.

Not that there isn't also a lot of abstract, conceptual, and improvisational dance created in Vancouver. After all, this is the home of the longstanding and justly celebrated contact company, EDAM, overseen by Peter Bingham. And it's where a choreographer like Justine A. Chambers creates subtle gestural works based on the accumulation of movements already within and around us. Indeed, Chambers' many collaborations with visual artists and gallery spaces are a reminder that a corollary to Vancouver's version of dance-theatre can be found in the turn toward installation-based work by many dance artists in the city. For example, in *Dance Machine* (2017–), Lee worked with Chambers and designer Jesse Garlick to create a "kinetic sculpture," in which invited dance artists and members of the public are asked to establish a set of principles by

which they negotiate their relationship to the work, its site, each other, and the multiple pathways that arise as a result. More recent dance installations conceived by Action at a Distance's Vanessa Goodman and Company 605's Josh Martin and Lisa Gelley explore the relationship between movement and sound. For Goodman, this relationship has always been intuitive, with the trademark twitches and surprising suspensions of her dancing perfectly matched to the sound design of long-time collaborator Locsil (Scott Morgan). In *Graveyards and Gardens* (2021), however, Goodman worked with the award-winning American composer Caroline Shaw to create an immersive performance environment in which a live album is produced by using the body as an echo chamber for both sound and movement. Exploring ideas around the motility of memory, Goodman and Shaw ask: If everything comes from and eventually returns to soil, how might we use this concept to think through—and “recalibrate”—ideas of decomposition and (re)generation in music and the body? The work is a fusion of the artists' respective disciplines, with Goodman singing in the work and, in its original conception, Shaw also meant to be dancing.

Company 605, which had previously created its own danced concept LP with *The Inheritor Album* (2012), premiered *Looping* in November 2019, a live installation derived from their earlier ensemble piece, *Loop Lull*, from January of the same year. A durational work in which a rotating cast of up to 15 dancers cycle in and out of the performance space, responding and improvising to each other and to the shifting sound score by Matt Tomkinson, *Looping* is perhaps the clearest articulation of Company 605's working method. Martin and Gelley have long been interested in how the individual moves with and in response to the group, the choices one makes or rejects as part of one's kinetic inheritance, including in real time. Nowhere is this more evident than in what I'll call the seriality of so much 605 movement, the way a phrase, begun in one body, is transferred mid-articulation to another body without interrupting the flow, but often changing its direction or velocity, much like a smooth stone skipping across the surface of a lake.



3. This ripple effect that Company 605 often experiments with in its movement vocabulary, the continuing and spreading results of an event or action, is also an apt metaphor for the ways in which the Vancouver dance community responds to, helps sustain, and is generally buoyed by the work and success of its members. The community is undeniably small, and while in the past, a scarcity model of funding and resourcing often pitted companies against each other, over the past 15 years, when the majority of artists referenced in this short text were establishing their practices, a culture of collaboration and mutual support has taken hold. Artists frequently appear in each other's work, serve as outside eyes, or help with different aspects of production and presentation. Co-tenanted and co-administered studios and performance spaces (including one that operates out of a converted 53-foot semi-truck trailer) offer an affordable and reasonably sustainable material infrastructure for the creation and presentation of new work in a city where the cost of living is among the most expensive in the world.

In addition, emerging artists now have significant and meaningful opportunities to pursue apprenticeships with or seek mentorship from more senior artists. Often these opportunities come from the major pre-professional training programs in Vancouver, including Modus Operandi, which is run by Out Innerspace and employs as guest teachers nearly every important dance artist in the city. And while there is definitely a hierarchy among dance companies in terms of audience and box office and funding, it helps that the company at the top of that hierarchy, Ballet BC, recognizes the existing talent within its own community, regularly commissioning new work from local choreographers, including by the respective life and professional partners helming Company 605 and Out Innerspace. Finally, there is the festival model that tends to govern the presentation of new work by independent artists and companies in Vancouver; the model has some limitations, but it also means that artists, programmed beside each other, tend to show up for each other.

As in most other locations around the world, this is not something the Vancouver dance community has been easily able to do over the past two years—at least not physically. The community I write about here will not emerge from the pandemic in the same way it went into it. In some cases,



Dancers of Damelahamid Photo: Anna Springgate-Floch

that provides an opportunity for much needed structural change, especially regarding presentation models and the continued under-representation of BIPOC artists on stage and the enactment of community agreements that emphasize meaningful practices of radical care. At the same time, the ongoing collective trauma of our current moment—in which the opposing impulses of enforced arrest and urgent assembly have so consistently shaped our movements, and in which a virus has shown us just how insistently, as embodied beings, we happen to each other—will necessarily influence the kind of work that gets made, how and by whom it gets made, and who gets to see it.

I have been struggling to think about what kind of critical gesture there might be that is adequate to such an acknowledgement, can show up to and for it, bear witness to it, transcode it—including through discourse—across time. I don't have an answer as yet, but perhaps the recording of the need to do so is a way to begin dancing the history of this community into the future.

Peter Dickinson is a professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University and the author of *My Vancouver Dance History: Story, Movement, Community* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

ABOUT THE DANCE CENTRE

Established in 1986 as a resource centre for dance professionals and the public in British Columbia, The Dance Centre is a multifaceted organization offering a range of activities unparalleled in Canadian dance.

Our goal is to support the development of a vibrant dance scene in BC and increase the profile of dance, by providing resources and services for the dance profession; presenting public performances and events; operating Scotiabank Dance Centre, one of Canada's flagship dance facilities; and promoting BC dance.

We are located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the $\chi\omega\mu\epsilon\theta\kappa\omega\gamma'\epsilon\mu$ (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. It is an honour and a privilege for us to be guests in their lands.







The Dance Centre

Scotiabank Dance Centre

Level 6, 677 Davie Street, Vancouver BC V6B 2G6, Canada

T 604.606.6400 | Toll-Free within North America 1.877.649.3010 | thedancecentre.ca

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