

Revelation through movement



Jennifer Knight Dills intertwines history and dance to create her masters concert "Entertaining Muses"

By Sara Jarrett
Oregon Daily Emerald

A dance is so often labeled a success or failure by what's seen on the stage, but artists like Jennifer Knight Dills argue a deeper look is necessary to find the true magic of Terpsichore the muse of choreography.

"What is important to me, is the work that led up to this [concert]," Knight Dills said of her masters thesis concert titled "Entertaining Muses: Dance Reflections and Revelations," which will be performed Nov. 12 and 13 in the Dougherty Dance Theatre.

The concert as a whole is about "contemporizing historical aesthetics, in an attempt at synthesizing ideas," Knight Dills said.

The evening-length performance includes two historical masterpiece solos performed by Knight Dills. She has also choreographed four original works based on ideologies of three historical modern dance masters.

The solos are "Two Ecstatic Themes" — originally choreographed by Doris Humphrey in 1931 — and Valerie Bettis' 1943 piece titled

"The Desperate Heart." University dance professor Janet Descutner, who is a certified dance reconstructor and Knight Dills' thesis advisor, reconstructed those two dances for this weekend's event.

"It wouldn't have happened without the relationship we forged," Knight Dills said of Descutner's role as an artistic director for the two solos.

While performing the reconstructed pieces, Descutner said Knight Dills has allowed her own voice to shine through by exploring contemporary themes and relationships, and by finding how the movement uniquely resonates within each performer.

Bettis choreographed "The Desperate Heart," for example, in response to the destruction of World War II, but Knight Dills has been able to connect those movements to contemporary issues. The choreographer likened some of the gestures used to those of a person rubbing needle tracks on his or her arm.

"Jennifer is examining the crises of today, like drugs and AIDS," Descutner said.

Dance, she added, is not "an antique or preserved historic monument the way sculpture is, but a living thing," and Knight Dills is exploring how "the human condition repeats itself over time."

Two of Knight Dills' original pieces, "Evenings... Yes!" and "In moto perpetuo," are based on Humphrey's theoretical and choreographic principles. Both draw from Knight Dills' studies with Leslie Main, director of the Humphrey Foundation in the United Kingdom. Knight Dills studied with Main at The Place dance studio in London for an intense two-week workshop in July of 1998.

"Evenings... Yes!" explores the fleeting nature of a quiet evening that offers a taste of ease before that sense is stripped away from you, Knight Dills explained. The dance is also demonstrative of the sibling relationship Knight Dills has with her two sisters.

Though it has become about this personal triad in her family, "it's ostensibly about the movement quality," she said. The piece utilizes the fall and recovery principle of

Humphrey's technique.

Knight Dills' attention to the choreographic process during her work on "Evenings... Yes!" gave at least one dance student a new perspective on her craft.

"Jennifer talked a lot about reflection in every sense of the word," said Laura Raucher, a third year graduate student in dance science. Raucher said that her previous experiences have been "product driven," rather than using the process to achieve originality.

"I wanted to approach dance making differently," Knight Dills said. Her own experience with choreographers interested in anything other than the actual performance is limited, she noted.

"I usually wonder, does this guy even think I have a brain," she mused, referring to some previous artists she's worked with. Knight Dills said she is adamant in making her dancers invested in the dance in such a way that it's as much theirs as it is hers.

"I give my dance to [the dancers], then we give it to the viewers," she said.

Two ways Knight Dills said



Dancer Sparrow Hall (front right) rehearses with other dancers for "Entertaining Muses: Dance Reflections and Revelations." The performance opens Friday night and a second performance is scheduled for Saturday. (Cover photo): Emilie Lavin.

All "Muses" photos by Cathrine Kendall Emerald



she achieved this goal was through journal writing and improvisation.

In both "Evenings... Yes!" and the Bettis-inspired "Elegiac," she asked her dancers to write down their thoughts as an emotional launching point to be used in personalizing the coaching process. Knight Dills then took aspects from each dancer during the improv sessions to build movement phrases, she explained.

"Elegiac," which literally means expressing sorrow, is just that. The piece deals with cancer and how the disease has an impact on everyone. When statistics say one in nine women

will get breast cancer, an artistic statement must be made, Knight Dills said.

"It's a haunting piece...with so much richness, emotionally and expressively," she said, describing "Elegiac."

The psychological framework that permeates Bettis' work provided a bridge for Knight Dills to harness the emotional intensity of "Elegiac" in actual movement.

"It's an unrelenting kind of race," Knight Dills said. The race is a physical one, in that there is a backwardness and forwardness theme to the movement, but there is also the race of life against death.

Inspired by modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan and drawing on her experiences with Duncan scholar Kay Bardsley, during Bardsley's residency at the University in 1997-1998, Knight Dills choreographed the dance titled "Signatures," which she said explores "water properties of wave rhythm and reflection as a movement motif."

"Entertaining Muses: Dance Reflections and Revelations" is performed this Friday and Saturday evening at 8. Tickets cost \$3 and will be available at the door. Dougherty Dance Theatre is located on the third floor of Gerlinger Annex, 1484 University St.

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