



Photo by Anndee Hochman

Robin Lane: daring young woman

I feel part of a community that is wonderful and big, but I feel like a bit of an outlaw on about 50 fronts

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

If you looked up Robin Lane in the dictionary, there would be a video, not words, by way of definition. First, an outfit — maybe a white shirt with a black grid design, a black vest with white threads scribbled through it, a scarf splash-printed in shades of black, white, gray. Mixed media.

Then there would be the voice — young-sounding, talking a staccato streak, stippled

Profile

with an infectious giggle. And the hand. Thin, wiry fingers, supple as Silly Putty, crazy as marionettes, making Robin Lane's ideas come alive in the air. She talks about a piece she choreographed, and the hands take over, fluttering to show where the spotlight falls, swooping across the table like trapeze lines, braiding the air like dancers' bodies.

Lane has been choreographing since junior high school. She broke rules — put dance and theater and tumbling together on the same stage — and didn't care when some people said it wasn't dance. She founded the Do Jump Movement Theater troupe in 1977, helped it find a home at the Echo Theatre in 1984 and got an Oregon Arts Commission fellowship for dance that same year.

Do Jump draws enthused audiences in Portland. Lane has a dozen full-length pieces to her credit. This fall, the company will take the show on the road.

Robin Lane grins — like a pixie, like a madcap inventor, like a person doing exactly what she wants.

"I started as a kid, taking modern and ballet. And doing gymnastics. I had really great teachers in the public schools in Los Angeles, and when I was in seventh grade, my gymnastics coach was really interested in dance. Every time anyone came to town, he would take us to master classes and stuff. So from there, I branched out.

"Why did I like it? There are really two aspects of it. One is the creative aspect and the other is purely physical. Gymnastics is so . . . athletic. And I was totally addicted to that feeling. Tumbling is such an incredible relationship to time and space; it's really exhilarating. I loved it, I loved tumbling. And I really liked working with people and combining ideas and imagery and music. That's the way I express myself.

"When I was doing dance as a kid, I'd always go to dance concerts and I always wanted them to go up into the air, to keep going . . .

"When I was 14, I made this huge piece. You know how you are at that age; you're real idealistic and you want to save the world. I had this piece called *Civilization*, about 30 minutes long. It had about 20 kids in it. I have photos of it, and it's really funny because I had people coming out all over the place, down in the audience and out of the sides of the building.

"I never had this image, like, 'Oh, I want to be a ballerina,' or 'I want to be in the Olympics.' I always had this image of 'I want to be making. . . .' This was a long time ago, before multimedia art. But even as a little kid, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to combine different art forms that I liked.

"Then I moved to Reed and I was majoring in art. I was going to be an artist, and I wasn't going to do other things. I had always done about 20 different things. I thought: 'I'm going to be serious, and I'm going to be a painter.' So that's what I did. I oil painted. I started getting jobs painting people's dead spouses' portraits in oil paint. I know, it sounds really bizarre. And I'm pretty scatterbrained, so the first time I lost



what was probably the last picture of this guy's wife. And later I lost this woman's picture of her husband that was probably her favorite picture. I stopped doing that. I was really bad at it, too.

"Then I left Reed and went to the Museum Art School. I really loved painting. It was certainly a lot less political and had a lot less crap than trying to be a performing artist. At least there is some private piece to it. I was taking a bunch of dance classes when I first moved here, and I quit them all because I was going to school. To be a painter. Then I saw this thing by people that were from the Lecoq School of Mime in France, and they were doing a one-year program of mime, acrobatics, character clowning. So I did that. I quit art school at some point in there. And I've pretty much been doing that kind of stuff ever since.

"I started teaching acrobatics for women. At the same time, I was also with an organization called the Portland Dance Collective. So I got connected up with a bunch of women who were doing a women's show at Storefront Theatre, and I started working with them, doing choreography and directing. After that, I did a show of my own stuff at Moving Space, which was what the Portland Dance Collective turned into. It was called *From the Inside Out*, and it was a piece that had a lot of theater in it, and a lot of trapeze. Somewhere in there, I'd gone down to California for a year and studied with a woman who taught me trapeze. She was combining gymnastics and dance, and she was the first person I'd ever really met who was mixing those two media.

"After that [show at Moving Space], we decided we wanted to keep working together. A core group of people. And I didn't want to call it something using my name, so we called it Do Jump. It was taken from a poster for a show — that was the name of that show. Janesa [Kruse, a martial arts teacher and performer whose school, Women with Heart Fighting Arts, shares space at the Echo] got a studio in North Portland, and we — Do Jump — would rehearse there in the morning. It was a tiny space. We just got really tired — we were doing all this aerial work, and it's incredibly hard to perform and hard to make up pieces when you don't have space to hook it in.

"Then one of Janesa's students was just walking down the street, and she saw the sign [for Echo Theatre]. Everyone in the company — our costumer, one of our musicians — went over there to look around. It was a complete hell-hole. But we looked at the shape of the room. It was so huge. We talked for about ten minutes and said, 'OK, we'll take it.'"

Reviewers sometimes stumble for words to describe Lane's work, which uses mime, theater, dance, gymnastics, trapeze, puppetry and costumes that have characters of their own. "Do Jump falls somewhere in the crack between the worlds of theater and dance," the

critics will write. Or, "Highly original movements of all kinds. . . ." The reviewers like it. The audiences like it. But some people have sniffed and wondered. "What IS it?"

"That's been a big issue for me, and until just recently, I think I've been letting other people define what I'm doing a lot. I think that a part of me wants everyone to like me and wants to be accepted by this group of people. In the dance community, I have a lot of friends and have met a lot of people. But worrying about those people who want to pass judgment on whether what I do is dance . . . You know, there have been times when I've said, 'Oh it's not dance.'

"In the early '70s, people that were doing dance, and saying they were dancers, were doing modern dance. And then there were people who were sort of out on the edge, people who were doing weird stuff. There were a lot of purist camps. In the beginning, some people consistently said it wasn't cool to put gymnastics with dance. Now, everyone is doing it.

"It's funny, because I feel like the cutting edge a lot. And my work is accessible. I mean, I feel pretty philosophic and poetic, but I really am interested in communicating. I feel like it's something I want to say to the world, but . . . kids can get it. Old people can get it. A lot of it is about basic stuff of human nature, or just a feeling, like a piece about being really . . . on fire! That makes it accessible. So some people who are looking for art are uncomfortable with it. "I guess if I had to say what art form I was, I'd say poet. That's definitely the way I organize things — much to the chagrin of the people I work with. A lot of times, the imagery will come to me, and then I'll forget about it. Or I'll write it down and work on it. And when I write the pieces, it's kind of like poetry. I'll be describing either the energy or the action or the underlying theme.

"So I write the show down. It could be a piece of poetry about each section, or sort of a review of it. And then I'll come to the company and say, 'This piece has these elements.' And we improv like crazy, each piece separately. And the performers give me ideas. And then I organize. And I generally have a middle, a beginning and an end. I know what the piece wants to mean. I have a total outline. Sometimes I have movements, phrases, sometimes I have music. I often work with the musicians that way. I'll say, 'This is the beginning, start out with a stillness . . . and then the light is coming up,' or whatever, so that they have sort of an emotional skeleton. Then they'll take it away and compose on top of that. Then we'll work in other instrumentation and make it into a piece of music.

"Originally, I was in everything. I did a lot of solos. And now, I'm mostly directing. So that's changed for me. I miss dancing. A lot. But the older I get, the more I think: how can I make this seven-person piece that I want to craft, and I want an audience to really . . . I mean, I don't want to throw it at them, I want to take them on a journey . . . how can I craft it while I'm doing it?"

"How do I know when it's good? Well, first of all, I'm always changing it. Everyone in the company can vouch for that. I could say, 'When I feel pleased with it.' How do you know when something's whole? It's funny. . . . I take the audience's negative reaction to know when it's not working.

"We're going to take the show to San Francisco, and we're going on another tour of California in the fall, and I've got this woman who's been trying to bring us to Japan for two years. I can't give her good enough promotional material. They're so high-tech over there. But if I can take it out of Portland, I'm definitely going to keep doing it.

"It's hard to imagine not [continuing this work] and it's hard to imagine living on this kind of emotional and financial edge. You know, I don't really feel part of a community, except for my own community. I feel part of a community of people that I work with and of people that support us. And it's really wonderful and big. But I feel like a little bit of an outlaw on about 50 fronts."

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