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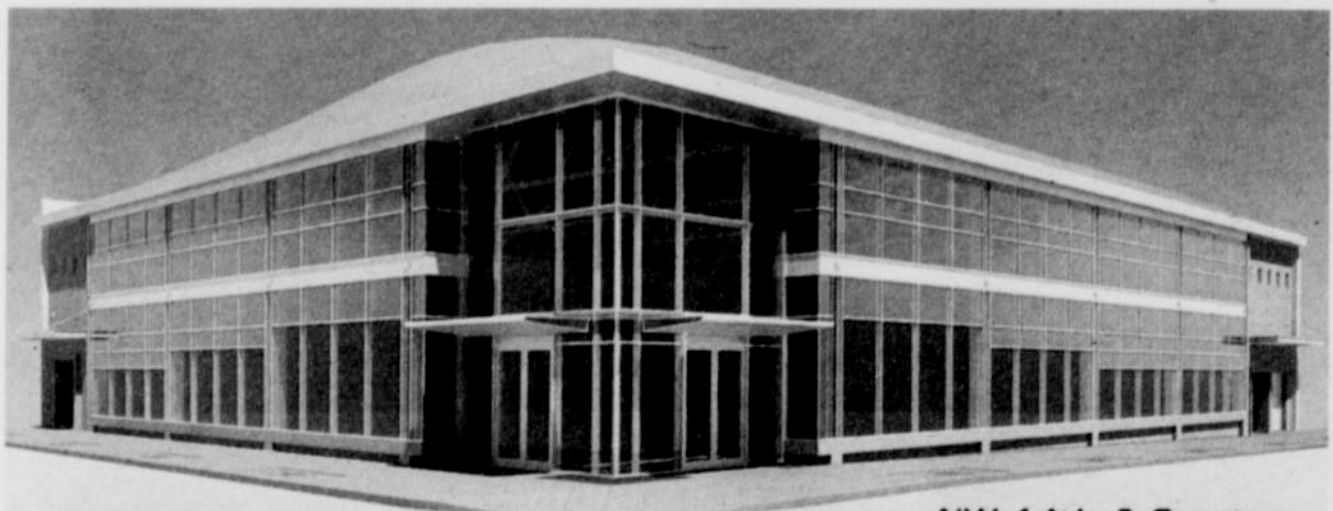
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Creating Change In The Community Since 1978

25 years of dance

Building a Community

Portland's vibrant contemporary dance scene developed over decades

by Rebecca Ragain

Young contemporary dance artists are moving to Portland from all over the country, drawn in part by our city's enthusiasm for the art form.

Noel Plemmons, who is co-director of POV Dance along with Mandy Christiansen, finds Portland's dance scene to be fresh and open to new ideas.

"Portland is so affirming, in regard to any art, I think," says Plemmons, who moved here from San Francisco in early 2007. "People come out and see dance, whether they're in the dance community or not."

Portland's diverse pool of choreographers and dancers did not appear overnight, nor did its appreciative audience of dancegoers.

Although it is impossible to cover within the confines of a newspaper article all the influential movement artists who have worked in Portland during the past 25 years, we'd like to provide a glimpse of the foundation upon which today's local dance scene is built.

Setting the Stage

Portland's first major modern dance company, Portland Dance Theater, was founded in 1970. A number of its members are still involved with Portland's dance scene today, including Catherine Evleshin, Patricia Wong, Gregg Bielemeier, Bonnie Merrill and Judy Patton.

Portland Dance Theater helped educate Portland about modern dance. "It was difficult at first," Bielemeier recalls. "Then, once more people got educated to the fact that PDT was here, it caught on and took off on a nice roll."

Although Portland Dance Theater was successful—it received city, state and national support for its activities, which included touring and bringing in guest choreographers—it dissolved around 1979 as its members moved on to other projects and locations.

"It was just evolution," says Bielemeier, who relocated to San Francisco around the same time.

Other landmarks of today's Portland performance scene also had their start in the '70s: Imago Theatre, Jefferson High School's dance department and Robin Lane's Do Jump physical theater company.

The Next Generation

During the 1980s, much artistic activity centered on Portland State University's dance department. In addition to hiring dance professionals as teachers for its training program, it presented work through its Contemporary Dance Series, bringing choreographers like Trisha Brown and Stephen Petronio to town. The series played a significant role in building local audiences' appreciation for modern and contemporary dance—and, by ex-

tension, building the city's reputation as a prime place to perform.

"The PSU presenting program was one of the leading dance presenters in the country," says George Thorn, a professional arts consultant and co-director of Arts Action Research. "If you had a company on tour, there were 12 to 15 [venues to hit]...you always wanted to make sure you had Portland on your tour."

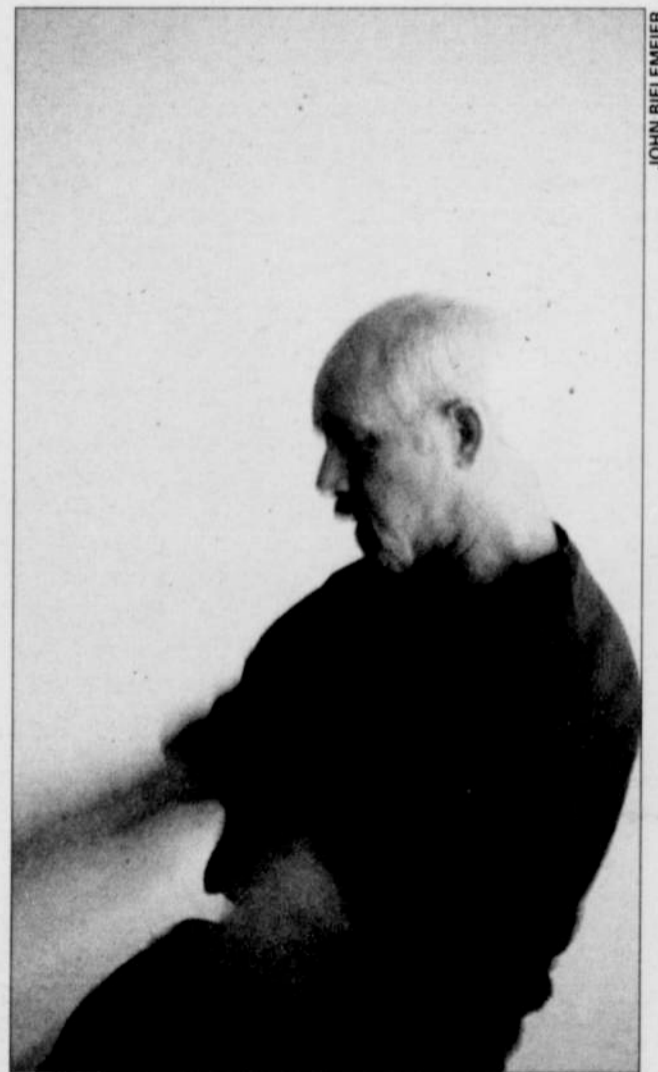
In addition, the department's resident dance company, The Company We Keep, fostered the growth of several of today's mainstay dancer/choreographers, such as Minh Tran and Tere Mathern.

Independent movement artists such as Merrill, Susan Banyas and Sue Brantley continued to make new work through the 1980s. Oslund + Company moved up from Eugene in 1984; Jann Dryer formed a company called Cirque.

Another major player was James Canfield, who came to Portland in 1986 to act as artistic director of Pacific Ballet Theatre; after Pacific Ballet Theatre merged with Ballet Oregon to form Oregon Ballet Theatre, he became its artistic director. "There was a great foundation set for ballet, and also contemporary dance, by a lot of people prior to myself...we got to pick up on the ground that they laid," he says.

When Canfield arrived, he aimed to embrace the existing dance scene, rather than stand apart from it. For instance, he invited contemporary dance choreographers such as Mary Oslund and Josie Moseley to create work for OBT.

By bringing the work of a diverse and eclectic range of choreographers to town, as well as mak-



JOHN BIELEMEIER

Gregg Bielemeier co-owns a home organization service in addition to his work as a choreographer.