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DANCE

An 'Arts Organism' That's Still Growing

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WASHINGTON, Conn.

DANCE companies by and large are urban phenomena. And modern dance companies by and large are creations of individual choreographers trusting in their personal charisma. But Pilobolus, the collective named for a barnyard fungus, has always played by its own rules.

"From the beginning," Robby Barnett said last month, speaking of the early 1970s, "we wanted not to live in a city. And we wanted to make things together."

Thus it was that an Aquarian Age "arts organism" (as it calls itself) settled in rural Connecticut, in a town time had already forgotten.

In late May, at the clubhouse in which Pilobolus has been rehearsing on and off for more than 30 years, six of the company's seven dancing athletes spent 15 vigorous minutes running through as much as they had of an untitled new piece. In the center three men scuttled about like a single creature blessed or cursed with three minds. At the edge two women enacted some private, toxic ritual. And an odd man out had imprisoned himself in a cage of eight chairs built for kindergartners, then risen to his feet to seek his way: a Tinkertoy Frankenstein's monster.

But now they all faced forward, frozen in a wedge formation, raising and lowering white squares of cloth to intercept flickering film images projected from across the room.

"It's a collaboration," Mr. Barnett said, speaking softly to Peter Sluszka, the animator. "I'd be thinking something scarier here: birds changing to bats changing to bugs or something. She doesn't want bugs. Maybe she wants butterflies."

"She" would be Inbal Pinto, from Tel Aviv. Ms. Pinto and her partner, Avshalom Pollak, are on board for the first major Pilobolus collaboration to involve outside choreographers. The new work, commissioned by the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C., opens there on Thursday. It travels to the Joyce Theater next month, but New Yorkers can catch a preview on Monday in the Works & Process series at the Guggenheim Museum.

Charles L. Reinhart, the director of the North Carolina festival, said he has no idea what to expect. "Once again," he wrote in an e-mail message, "the company is putting itself on the edge. Pilobolus continues to think outside of the modern-dance box, which is why we have them back every summer."

In its 36 years Pilobolus has undergone many mutations. In the old days, every new piece was a collaboration, cobbled together by those who would perform it.

"Knowing nothing about dance, we twisted ourselves like protein," Mr. Barnett said. "It was a utopian approach, learning to move together through space." And in the seasons that followed,



John Kane

After 36 years Pilobolus is still full of surprises. The latest one: a collaboration with outside choreographers.

though individual members experimented with solos and duets, the company's signature works continued to be created by committee.

Today Mr. Barnett, Michael Tracy and Jonathan Wolken, three of the company's founding fathers, share the title of artistic director. But they turned over the actual dancing to successive generations of younger talents long ago and have been going their separate ways as choreographers for several years. Mr. Barnett, for his part, had been out of the dance game since 2002 before making this comeback with new partners.

"Much as individual dances of ours have proved successful and durable," Mr. Barnett said, "Pilobolus the arts organization may be our most original creation: a think tank for smart, creative people to discover what you can create with clusters of human bodies. You don't need harmony. Conflict is not only inevitable, it's essential. You have to expect it, welcome it, find ways to move through it. Collaboration is a Dar-

winian process. The best idea will rise. Lots of brains working on the same idea; it's intoxicating."

Pilobolus conducts workshops on its methodology for anyone from children in third grade to budding captains of industry in elite business schools. But among themselves the Pilobolus directors have often wondered whether it would be possible to fold extra brains into their creative process.

In 1999 they tried, with the author and illustrator Maurice Sendak. Together the four devised "A Selection," a dance of death haunted by memories of the Holocaust. As documented in "Last Dance," a film by Mirra Bank, the going got very rocky at times. Mr. Wolken found Mr. Sendak's conceit trite and made no bones about saying so. As they say in progressive business circles, team members have a responsibility to dissent.

But there's a question of degree. "You can't necessarily employ your scorched-earth policy

with the same impunity with Maurice that you do with us," Mr. Barnett told Mr. Wolken on camera. "I'm used to it. I know you can't build your new city until you've razed ours."

Mr. Sendak made no attempt to meddle with movement. He did stick to his guns as a storyteller, but all in all the experience left him feeling bullied and bruised. "I don't think it had to be that hard," he told Ms. Bank glumly once the piece was finished. "Maybe I shouldn't complain."

When Pilobolus finally revisited the idea of collaborating beyond the tribe, Mr. Reinhart recommended Ms. Pinto and Mr. Pollak. "There is a creative umbilical cord in the way Pilobolus and Inbal Pinto use startlingly innovative gestures to express their witty and surreal sense of the world," Mr. Reinhart said.

So far Mr. Barnett was finding the collaboration as congenial as it is revolutionary. "For Pilobolus the basic choreographic unit is what we call a 'move,'" he said. "It has an image attached. It may be for six people and last for 15 seconds." Once devised, moves are shuffled like tarot cards until the sequences begin to acquire a kind of logic.

Ms. Pinto's working method is very different. "I start with a story," she said. "Then I break it up and put the pieces back together." Whatever the story of the new piece may be, it was never shared with the dancers, who had to make of the movement what they could.

Low key, watchful, Ms. Pinto and Mr. Pollak drifted off to separate zones of the hall with different subsets of dancers as the voluble Mr. Barnett continued. "Our moves are big things," he said. "Inbal understands her world through much finer-grained inspection, in one person moving alone. She'll have 20 things happening in 17 seconds. It's almost an inductive versus a deductive approach. She polishes each specific piece until it starts to glow, and then goes to the next one. I like to mess around until I see the whole arc. Then I start to refine."

As noted, the Pilobolus gospel holds that conflict is as much a part of collaboration as harmony. Just now harmony was apparent, while conflict was not. Rather than impose their will, Ms. Pinto and Mr. Pollak seemed to be coaxing the dancers along, allowing ample leeway for improvisation. And Mr. Barnett seemed to be functioning as a facilitator and technical problem solver, his eye on balancing the big picture.

"What's essential in a collaboration is to create a unified vision while keeping the spine of individual intent," he said. "There's a social contract. The group has a responsibility to elicit from each member the deepest things that member has to offer. And the other way too. The individual has to take responsibility for the whole thing."

"This is Phase 1," he added, "getting innocent people into our madhouse and seeing how it goes."

From left, Jun Kuribayashi, Manelich Minniefee and Edwin Olvera of Pilobolus rehearsing a new work created in collaboration with the choreographers Inbal Pinto and Avshalom Pollak.