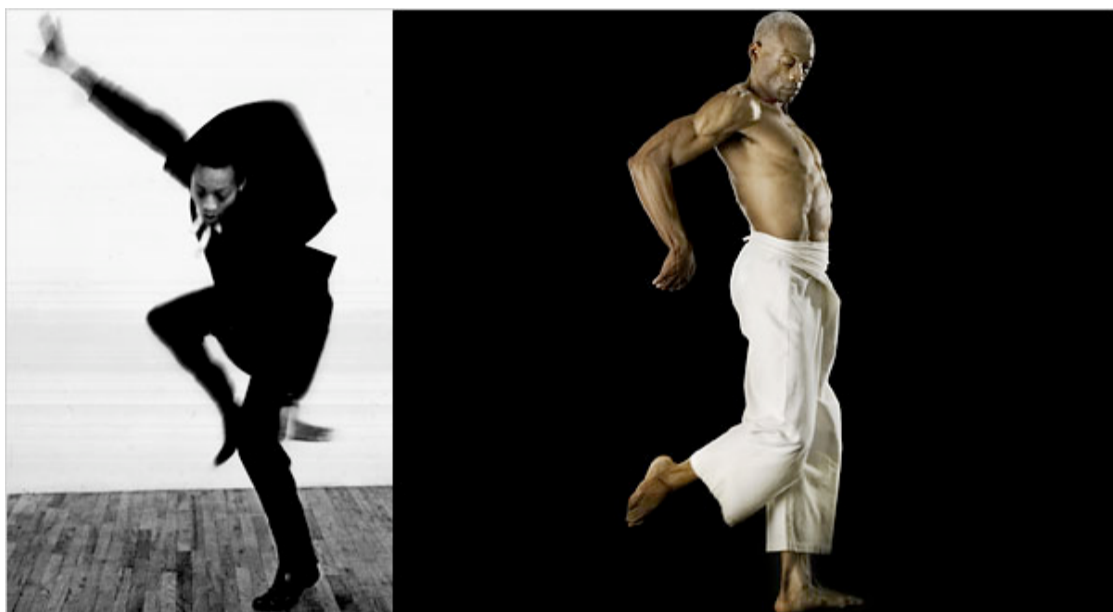


DANCE

Memories of a Venerable Showcase



Left, Paula Court; right, Matthew Wakeman

Bill T. Jones, who has provided strong memories for those who saw him performing in *Fast Tracks*, in 1985, left, and, right, in a recent performance as he has continued to choreograph and dance.

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO
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FROM dance enclaves in the Bronx to roving, artist-run collectives, showcases for “emerging choreographers” — that fuzzy, mutable category — are a dime a dozen these days. But this week one of the pioneers, the *Fresh Tracks* series at [Dance Theater Workshop](#) in Chelsea, reaches an important milestone: 500 artists presented, counting a few double appearances.

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Tom Brazil

Cyndi Lee, next to shadows, as she performed with Mary Ellen Strom at Dance Theater Workshop in the 1980s.

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Agatha Wasilewska

Ms. Lee, in the striped shirt, teaching yoga classes today.

Fresh Tracks, which will present work by seven choreographers on Friday and next Saturday, has run, in one guise or another, since Dance Theater Workshop was founded as an artists’ collective by Jeff Duncan, Art Bauman and Jack Moore in 1965. The list of participants, chosen through open auditions, is a Who’s Who of contemporary dance, including Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, [Wendy Perron](#), Doug Elkins, Reggie Wilson, [David Parsons](#), [Meredith Monk](#), Bebe Miller, Tere O’Connor and Maria Hassabi. Deborah Jowitt, the dance historian, teacher and longtime *Village Voice* critic who has reviewed so many *Fresh Tracks* evenings, performed in the very first program.

As usual with such long-running, grass-roots (at least at first) efforts, there are conflicting versions of history. Ms. Jowitt, for one dismisses the idea that the showcase, then called the Studio Series, had anything to do with *Fresh Tracks*. No matter; she is claimed by others. “Hogwash or not, I just love that history,” said David Dorfman, the choreographer and Connecticut College professor, describing a placard in the old theater’s lobby listing *Fresh Tracks* artists. “This is our history. It’s our little internal history. It’s important.”

This week Mr. Dorfman will be cheering on two former students, Maggie Bennett and Rebecca Serrell. “I was as excited for them as I was when I got it” in 1985, he said.

Their excitement brought back memories of his own performance. “Nervousness and utter enjoyment is what I remember feeling,” he said, “and still feel thinking about it.”

Here are a few of the *Fresh Tracks* alumni, and their memories.

Bill T. Jones

Of all the participants, Bill T. Jones has probably had the most storied career, including this year's [Tony Award](#) for best choreography, for "Spring Awakening"; a role in the culture wars of the 1990s, when the former New Yorker critic Arlene Croce condemned his landmark 1994 meditation on illness, "Still/Here"; and an electrifying interracial partnership with Arnie Zane, who died of AIDS in 1988.

Ms. Jowitt and others mentioned Mr. Jones's 1977 solo (in what was then called the Choreographers Showcase, becoming Fresh Tracks in 1984) as one of those charged moments when you realize you're seeing something important. Mr. Jones's feelings are more complicated.

"I believe everyone was white on the panel," he said of his audition. "It was cool central, and you knew it." At the time Mr. Jones was living in Binghamton, N.Y., with the American Dance Asylum, a collective of "hippie types and general malcontents" who "turned up our noses at Manhattan," he said. "We thought of it as a Babylon: true art couldn't happen in a commercial environment. Can you believe it? Of course all these highfalutin ideas collapsed as soon as I was offered something."

Mr. Jones was the first of the collective to break into "the grand ivory tower of the avant-garde in Lower Manhattan," he continued. "Our idols were the people in Grand Union, Judson Church, people who were certainly not on the cover of Dance Magazine. To make it meant to sell out. So it was a confusing time."

David R. White

"Going back to the original Studio Series, it was always a question of 'Open the door, see what's out there,'" said David R. White, Dance Theater Workshop's executive director from 1975 to 2003. "Some years it felt like everyone was economically bereft, and the only thing we were seeing was solos, and then another year everybody seemed to be working with 14 people. This was completely random, but it gave you a sense of the zeitgeist."

Mr. White remembered heated discussions and agonizingly deadlocked panels. Other choices were easier. "There were always one or two — certainly the De Keersmaeker falls into that, and also the first angry silent solo by Donald Byrd — where everyone knows that something important is happening here. I made it clear that we're not looking for masterpieces. You could find some, like the De Keersmaeker, which was as perfect you're going to get in a short-story format. But the job is to look for the pieces where the strengths are shouldering the weaknesses out of the way."

Having sat through an estimated 2,700 showcase auditions during his tenure, Mr. White added by e-mail that no single performance was make or break. "But every decision by every panel (panels themselves ever changing, never the same) are like glass-bottom boats in clear water," he wrote, "slipping over the random flux of who makes dance and why, and, at its best, carrying along the visceral reactions of those lucky enough to observe it."

Cyndi Lee

When Cyndi Lee was selected in 1982, "it was a really big deal," she said. Galvanized by her performance (which she remembers mostly for its costumes of short jumpsuits and running shoes, as well as some rhythmic, gestural movement) and the opportunities that followed, Ms. Lee said it "gave us all a new idea that maybe we really could have a livelihood" as dancers. But 14 years later she quit, worn down by the politics and hardships.

"I did this concert, and the director of the theater never even came to see it," she recalled. "I hired a P.R. company, and the P.R. person came on the last night and said to me: 'Oh my gosh, that's the best concert I've seen all year. If I'd known it was going to be that good, I would have worked harder for you.' And I said, 'That's it, I'm done.'"

Ms. Lee turned to yoga, founding Om Yoga, which celebrates its 10th anniversary next month. She credits choreography with her creative style of teaching. And, yes, she said, she employs "many, many, many dancers, or ex-dancers, or ex-choreographers, and I go to see them dance."

Deborah Jowitt

With Dance Theater Workshop itself still an emerging enterprise, the Studio Series in which Ms. Jowitt participated bears more resemblance to current artist-run series like the peripatetic Catch and Chez Bushwick in Brooklyn than to the Fresh Tracks of today.

"You couldn't flush the toilet during performances," she said, describing Jeff Duncan's loft on 20th Street, where the shows took place on Mondays and Saturdays. "It definitely had an identity that was more like that of a cooperative."

"I also remember, very vividly, this program in which I performed with Meredith Monk," she

continued. “It was as if we came from different countries. I had come from very traditional modern dance, and I remember her saying to me, ‘Did it take you a very long time to choreograph that solo?’ And I never knew if she meant it looked difficult, and that was a good thing, or if I had just cooked it up.”

By the early 1970s that cooperative feel was fading, and Ms. Jowitt had already been writing for *The Voice* for several years. She recalled being able to see certain trends over the years and the excitement of looking in on the new. But when asked about individual performances, only one is seared into her memory: Bill T. Jones’s in 1977.

“It was so full of controlled rage, and he was so beautiful,” she said. “It was politically explosive, and he was a charismatic performer of the sort that was unusual.” **Laurie Uprichard**

In June, Laurie Uprichard left her 15-year tenure as executive director of [Danspace Project](#) at St. Mark’s Church to direct the International Dance Festival Ireland in Dublin. Before Danspace she worked at Dance Theater Workshop (where she served on many Fresh Tracks panels). But she was in the showcase herself, in 1973, just 18 months after moving to New York.

“There’s a *Voice* review that I have in my drawer in N.Y.C. and I remember some sentence about an ‘existential dirge ... ,” she wrote in e-mail. “Deborah Jowitt wrote the review, I’m pretty sure, of that edition of the Choreographers Showcase. The piece started with me on a ladder in the dressing room — the wall of which stopped a couple of feet from the ceiling so my torso was visible. I recited the short Beckett bit from there, mumbled it really, then came careening out of the dressing room running full tilt through the space to the other end. After that, I did a lot of rolling on the floor as fast as possible and ended up on my back with my legs against the upstage wall doing something that I can’t remember as the lights faded.”

Ms. Uprichard added that “the experience of being treated as a serious young choreographer was very important” and something she took with her as a presenter.

How long did she pursue a career as a choreographer after the showcase? “Not a minute longer.”

Philip Sandstrom

From 1980 to 2003 Philip Sandstrom worked at [Dance Theater Workshop](#), eventually becoming director of operations. He served on many showcase panels and helped a number of artists create lighting designs (usually their first) for the shows. It was a much smaller world, at least at the beginning, and the space, also smaller and more homey than the current building, lent itself to intimate performances.

“D.T.W. and downtown lofts were pretty much it for contemporary dance” in 1980, he said. “As the panel’s composition changed, the people who actually got on the program changed. Being quite connected to the dance field at the time, you’d hear a lot of griping about who was chosen and why they were chosen.

“It was remarkable. I wish I had some sort of video of all the auditions. You could see a cross section of New York City dance history within that 20 years.”

Levi Gonzalez

As dance has evolved, so has Fresh Tracks. In 2005 Dance Theater Workshop began a residency program, vital in an era of expensive, inadequate studio rentals, and it has developed a dialogue involving all of the artists and moderated by Levi Gonzalez, who did a “very physical, dance-centered exploration” in a 2002 Fresh Tracks with Luciana Achugar.

“That was when the building was being built, so we did it at the Flea,” he said. “There was still this idea that I think has since disappeared, in New York, that there is an echelon of presenting, or of gigs to get, to get yourself established.”

Fresh Tracks “really introduces you to the world of how you manage yourself artistically in a way,” he said. “But it’s clearly not anymore one of the main venues to come and see up-and-coming artists, and in a way it’s less curated. I really shouldn’t say this, because I’m moderating the Fresh Tracks panel, but it doesn’t draw me to it unless there are certain people I already know, whereas with Catch there is a certain spirit already. But what they have done with Fresh Tracks is incredible. Now they have a residency, workshops and a dialogue session, and it just seems like a real full, supportive program for young artists.”

Karinne Keithley

Still a senior in college when she waltzed into Dance Theater Workshop in 1995 for her audition, Karinne Keithley laughs now when recalling how she assumed her career would smoothly unfold after the show.

“I just kept going back to my mailbox in college, when I got back, waiting for a note from David White saying, ‘good job’ ” and offering an immediate follow-up gig, she said. “I think I just thought it was this very clear avenue, and that if I showed up and did well, then I’d get another

show. And if I did well at that, I'd get another show. And then I'd be a professional choreographer, which of course didn't happen."

Instead Ms. Keithley is now working toward her doctorate in English, having left what she described as "the professional life of performance" in favor of various collaborative projects involving a diverse group of artists.

"I feel I've seen the end of that one institutional structure of dance, and the emergence of other forms which are still in trial," she said. "I think D.T.W. is flourishing and becoming a new institution. At that point it was the undisputed epicenter."

Asked what she most remembered about her performance, Ms. Keithley recalled meeting Ellen Robbins backstage, before going on. Ms. Robbins, the veteran teacher, "asked me if I was nervous, and I told her no," Ms. Keithley said with a chuckle. "And she said, 'Well, you should be.'"

Carolyn Hall

Fresh Tracks is a choreography showcase, but some excellent dancers have come through it as well, including Carolyn Hall, who auditioned in 2002 using a commissioned solo by Lionel Popkin. Ballet stars often commission work, Ms. Hall pointed out, "but people who work in the downtown scene don't generally, so I was a curiosity."

The project came at a time when Ms. Hall was feeling the need for more autonomy in her career, without being drawn to choreography. She described the solo as "a mysterious journey of a woman from an ambiguous and contemplative place to a place of resolution, not necessarily with a period, but with a dot, dot, dot."

The ellipses might have been a symbol for the sharp turn that Ms. Hall's life would soon take: a return to school this fall, to study marine biology.

"As a performer and not a choreographer and teacher of dance," she said, "the future economic sustainability is difficult unless you're going to follow through with administrative work, which I was doing to support myself. People who are choreographers or teachers, they don't feel as much of a need to find an alternative to the field. I had a yearning to go back to science, which had been one of my first interests. I felt like I needed to know whether biology still mattered to me."

Otto Ramstad

After 10 years of performing his work Otto Ramstad of Minneapolis is hardly a green choreographer. But like many other out-of-towners, he still faces an uphill battle in getting New York institutions to take note, especially since he has moved from site-specific and film work to theater-based work only in the last couple of years.

Mr. Ramstad, speaking by phone from Japan, called the audition surreal, adding that he performed in a "dream state" and, as a result, couldn't really gauge how he did.

"I came to New York for a day and a half to do it," he said of his Fresh Tracks audition. "I spent more time in the airport and on airplanes than I did auditioning, and being in the basement of D.T.W. was kind of like being in the airport. I went to D.T.W., then I went to the new [MoMA](#) to see the last day of the giant steel sculptures — the [Richard Serra](#) exhibit — and then I went back to the airport. I had rehearsed for two hours before getting on the plane, and then I went right back to the rehearsal room in Minneapolis."

Mr. Ramstad said it was not always easy for him, like many out-of-town choreographers, to have his work seen in New York.

"I don't necessarily see it as the first step" to the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#), he said, laughing. "I've been merging in different fields at different times. Now I'm trying to figure out how to emerge."

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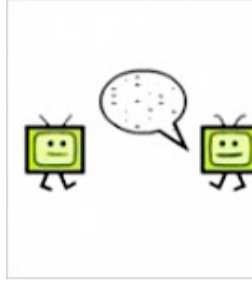
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