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PERFORMING ARTS

Bodies in Motion

Vermont's dance scene takes a big leap

BY MEGAN JAMES [12.01.10]

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Ellen Smith Ahern and Lida Winfield

On a recent Saturday morning, Montpelier's **Contemporary Dance and Fitness Studio** is packed with dancers practicing whale turns to thumping German hip-hop. They kick their legs straight up, then around, then behind them, their bodies following in a furious twirl. There's so much energy in the room — and so many flying limbs — that visitors are asked to sit in the hall and watch through the door, for fear an errant foot or elbow should crash into them.

"Come on, you guys are from Vermont, you should know how to use the floor!" shouts Kellie Lynch, a Connecticut dancer teaching the workshop as part of the studio's guest-artist series. It's an odd thing to say. This state is known for a lot of things, but dance is definitely not one of them. Then again, maybe it could be.

Dancing is sexy again, no doubt about it. Maybe it's the recent surge in dance competition

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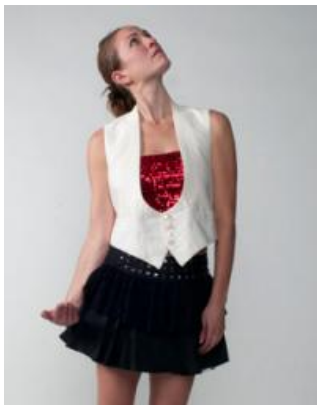
shows on TV. Who doesn't love "Dancing With the Stars"? But that doesn't explain why the dance scene in celebrity-free Vermont seems to be getting hotter by the month. No NBA athletes are spiking the action around here; no "Bristol the Pistol" is polarizing the masses.

Upcoming Performances

Everyone Can Dance, choreographed by Tiffany Rhynard and Big APE, at FlynnSpace in Burlington, December 3-4, 8 p.m.; Montpelier City Hall Auditorium, January 27-30, 8 p.m.; Town Hall Theater in Middlebury, March 18-19, 8 p.m. \$14-18. www.bigapedance.com

December Dance Show!, featuring works-in-progress: "The Taxidermist Speaks," by Selene Colburn and friends; "Mother," by Joy Madden; and "The Woods Are Deep," by Ellen Smith Ahern and Lida Winfield, Saturday, December 11, 7 p.m. at Contemporary Dance and Fitness Studio in Montpelier. \$5-10 donation. Info, 229-4676. www.cdandfs.com

Getting off the Ground, an hour-long performance, including "The Woods Are Deep," by Ellen Smith Ahern and Lida Winfield, followed by a reception and introduction to the duo's community-supported arts initiative. Thursday & Saturday, December 16 and 18, 7 p.m., at Firehouse Center for the Visual Arts in Burlington. \$10 donation. www.ellensmithahern.wordpress.com, www.lidawinfield.com



Hanna Satterlee

ALSO BY MEGAN JAMES

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Instead, over the past year or so, individual dancers have quietly emerged from the University of Vermont, Middlebury College and the Montpelier studio in simultaneous and overlapping bursts of creative choreography. In a state where local dance has long flown under the radar, this resurgence might be called a movement — literally.

"It feels like things are changing," says Selene Colburn, 41, who has danced on and off in Vermont since the mid-'80s and was just named inaugural artist-in-residence at the new **Burlington Dances** studio in the Chace Mill. "People are moving to Vermont to dance. It's a weird perfect storm."

Many factors have contributed to that storm, including the creation four years ago of a dance program at UVM. Associate professor of dance Paul Besaw, who heads the program, says simply having someone in the community who is paid a full-time salary to think about dance is a boon to those who practice the art form. It's been a boon, too, to the professional dancers his program brings to Vermont — environmental dance artist Jennifer Monson was just named a professor-at-large at the university.

But Besaw has also made a consistent effort to reach out to local dancers and choreographers in the region. Shortly after arriving at UVM, he connected with Colburn, who works at the Bailey/Howe Library, and before long he found Tiffany Rhynard, who had just taken an artist-in-residence position at Middlebury.

Rhynard, a choreographer and movement artist, was looking for community, too. "I thrive on having other people around to bounce ideas off of," she says. "[Dance] is communal. There's an exchange." So, in 2008, after directing the semiprofessional Dance Company of Middlebury, Rhynard started **Big Action Performance Ensemble (Big APE)** with a few recent graduates of the Middlebury program.

The company now includes dancers from around the state and beyond, especially ones at the beginning of their careers who have come back to Vermont — or come here for the first time — after working in the more established dance communities of New York or San Francisco.

"There's a mentality you come across a lot that anybody who is dancing here professionally trying to do high-

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...who is dancing here professionally, trying to do high quality work, somehow ended up here because they didn't make it in New York," says Big APE dancer Ellen Smith Ahern, who danced with companies in Mexico and New York before moving back to Vermont, where she went to college, a couple of years ago. "We all went away or came from somewhere else, and we *chose* to come back."

It's not easy to make a living dancing in Vermont. Then again, it's not easy anywhere, says UVM dance lecturer **Clare Byrne**. "The opportunities to be a dancer in a company in the contemporary dance world are fading everywhere. It's all pick-up work," she says. "You've got to be creating your own opportunities."

Byrne, who started teaching at UVM two years ago, began a semiregular series of salon showings called "Eat

My Art Out" in July 2009. Dancers have gathered for the series all over Burlington, from the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts to Evolution Physical Therapy & Yoga to the Firehouse Center for the Visual Arts to North End Studio, sharing their work and learning from one another.

"The idea is: You want to dance? *Make* a dance," says Byrne.

For Hanna Satterlee, interim artistic director at the Contemporary Dance and Fitness Studio, it was more like *You want a dance scene? Make a dance scene*. Satterlee, also a Big APE member who returned to Vermont after dancing professionally elsewhere, was frustrated with the local community when she first arrived. But, in just the last few months, she's already created a vibrant dance hub in the capital city.

With plans to transform the creaky old studio into a full-fledged performance space, Satterlee has been laying the groundwork, drawing dancers into the studio for works-in-progress showings and the guest-artist workshop series. In March, she's hosting choreographer **Pauline Jennings**, who moved to Vermont with her husband, Sean Clute, last August. Together the couple own an "intermedia" dance company, Double Vision, in San Francisco, where they lived for the last 10 years.


For now, Jennings is rehearsing with her California dancers via iChat, but she's aiming to establish a full-time company in Vermont by the spring of 2012.

Several years ago, this idea would have sounded farfetched. But now, it seems, anything is possible. Jennings simply needs to build on the energy of the dancers and choreographers spotlighted here. Though not a comprehensive list, these individuals are shaking things up. Call it a movement.

Tiffany Rhynard and Big APE

Tiffany Rhynard, 38, came to Vermont four years ago to be the artist-in-residence at Middlebury College. In 2008, she began Big APE — or Big Action Performance Ensemble — with a handful of recent Midd grads. The group has since expanded to include dancers from all over Vermont and beyond. Rhynard is interested in questioning the norms of dance performance — her last work with Big APE, *Disposable Goods*, included such oddities as dancers baking cookies in a toaster oven on stage.


On a recent afternoon, Rhynard is standing in the center of the Edmunds Middle School gym in Burlington, while more than 30 dancers orbit her. They are rehearsing their part of the community dance project Rhynard is directing, called *Everyone Can Dance*.



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



Blurt: The Seven Days Staff Blog: Derby Line Pharmacist Challenges Fine for Illegal Border Crossing

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As promised, Roland "Buzzy" Roy has hired a lawyer to fight the \$500 fine he got last February for illegally crossing the border from Derby Line into Canada to get a pizza. Roy, a pharmacist, recently hired the St. Johnsbury-based...

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There's a method to this seeming madness in the gym. Eight Big APE members are serving as satellites, each leading a small group of community dancers ages 7 to 63.

Some dancers are crouched over and snapping fingers as if in a scene from *West Side Story*. One pair is mock-swimming. Another group is square dancing. And, in the corner, Big APE dancers Ellen Smith Ahern and Marly Spieser-Schneider are gingerly rolling a 7-year-old girl over their backs.

The group has been rehearsing once a week since the beginning of October and will perform the evening-length piece at FlynnSpace this weekend. Then, Rhynard and her Big APE dancers will start again with a new group of local dancers in Montpelier and, finally, in Middlebury.

This community approach was inspired by the reality TV show "So You Think You Can Dance," which, Rhynard admits somewhat guiltily, she "love[s] watching." But the premise — eliminating dancers each episode to identify the elite class of people who *really can* dance — has always bothered her.

She wanted to create the antidote: a program that invites everyone to dance. In Burlington she has a cast of 34, including the eight dancers who auditioned for the core roles. "I cast those eight dancers based on their individuality," Rhynard says.

Like many contemporary choreographers working these days, she says, "I'm not interested in making everyone look like me, or interested in the same movement quality that comes out of my body. I want to see what they bring to this idea that I want to explore." Rhynard believes every person's movement quality is uniquely fascinating.

"But that's what I spend all day doing," she says. "Looking at bodies that are interesting to me. So the question is, will it be interesting to other people, too?"

The other question she's been asking is not "Can everyone dance?" but "Can I tap into the spark that makes everyone want to move and makes everyone want to dance? Can I capture that?"

For Rhynard herself, the spark has always been a simple mandate: "I have to," she says. A self-proclaimed "movement junkie," she discovered dancing at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She loved it for its physicality, but also its mystery.

"I'm not interested if it's all explained to me," she says of movement. "But if it's forcing me to meet it somewhere and be puzzled or confused or angry, elated, then it gives me something to work with."

Rhynard admits she often doesn't know what her choreography is "about" until years later. She circles themes and then circles back. *Disposable Goods* addressed consumption and waste — the dancers interacted with piles of trash onstage.

"I'm still mulling over these ideas," she says. "What is trash in our culture? What is considered not worthy? Someone who doesn't deem themselves a dancer, does that mean they're not worthy?"

Hannah Dennison

After more than 20 years of making dances in Burlington, **Hannah Dennison** dropped out in 2001. Funding had dried up, and interest in the art form was waning. She had made a living from her work for a couple of years — "I could even pay my dancers," she says proudly — but it was grueling.

"It was exhausting," she says. "I felt like I was approaching everything from that place of shortage."

So she moved to the tiny central Vermont town of Washington and built a house. Now, Dennison, 62, lives pretty much off the grid. “We’re talking on a tin can,” she jokes during a recent phone call, and it does sound a bit tinny.

Building a home exacerbated the wear and tear on Dennison’s arthritic hip, and, for a while, she didn’t think she’d ever dance again. But over the last three years she’s found a way: Every Sunday at 1 p.m., she improvises in her living room while friend and fellow choreographer Sara McMahon, who was part of the Burlington dance scene before relocating to Alaska, does the same in hers. Then they write to each other about their respective experiences.

“I am an improviser now,” Dennison says. “That’s what I treasure more than anything else, because what it’s about is right now. It’s teaching me how to deal — with life, with whether I have to have my fucking hip cut off.”

“It’s an investigation, it’s research,” she adds, saying that her living-room movement is not a means to an end. “It’s part of living.”

Dennison came late to dance. She was in her thirties in the late ’70s when she broke into the Burlington dance community. At the time, the active scene centered on the Main Street Dance Theater, where there were classes, contact-improvisation groups and frequent public performances. Dennison led an intergenerational, all-female company called Working Ground and did site-specific performances at such locales as Winooski’s Woolen Mill, the Lake Champlain waterfront and Vermont Transit’s old bus barns with her nonprofit Cradle to Grave Arts.

But, by the time Dennison performed for the last time at the Flynn in 2001, the landscape had changed. Not only had funding evaporated, but the excitement had, too.

That was then. Now, even from Dennison’s hideaway in Washington, she senses some dance rumblings once again. “There’s an energy afoot,” she says.

Last April, Dennison had what she calls a “coming out” at one of local dancer Clare Byrne’s “Eat My Art Out” events. It was Dennison’s first public solo performance since dropping out of the dance world, and she was terrified.

“Because I started late, I never felt like I really had the chops to do solo work,” she explains. “I have to be up there with everybody else.” But, during the years of her relative isolation, Dennison has grown more comfortable improvising on her own.

“There’s something about this passage of time that has allowed me to be vulnerable in front of people, and that’s not an easy thing to do,” she admits.

So, will audiences see more of her now?

“I’m working on something,” Dennison says cryptically, brimming with excitement. Whatever it is, the project is “of a fairly significant grand scale,” she allows. It will most likely debut in 2012. “I really want to have as many dancers from around the state involved as possible,” Dennison says. “Maybe we’ll have a tent city.”

Hanna Satterlee

When Hanna Satterlee couldn’t find the dance scene she was looking for in Vermont last year, she decided to create it herself. Luckily, she was in a pretty sweet spot for such an endeavor: Lorraine Neal, director of the Contemporary Dance and Fitness Studio in Montpelier, was about to go on sabbatical in New York City. She asked Satterlee to take her place for the year.

Satterlee’s plan was simple: Figure out where people are dancing in Vermont and give them

a place to gather, perform and learn from one another. Just a few months into her new gig, Satterlee, 26, is doing just that.

Since September, she's brought in seven dancers and choreographers from Vermont and beyond as guest artists to teach at the studio. Plus, she's hosted a well-attended evening of works-in-progress by local dancers. Satterlee will host another one on December 11, featuring work by Selene Colburn, **Ellen Smith Ahern**, Lida Winfield and Joy Madden.

"A couple of the workshops actually brought in community members I'd never seen before," Satterlee says. "My mom even took her first dance class — the storytelling workshop with Lida [Winfield]."

On a recent Saturday morning, the studio is packed. About 15 dancers are participating in a workshop by Kellie Lynch from New Haven, Conn., which is all swiveling hip sockets and moving across the floor in great leaps and handstands. Everyone is sweating and smiling.

Satterlee is here, too, occasionally retreating to the back of the group to go over movements by herself. She's taller than just about anyone here, graceful and intensely focused. She's also on a "dance high" from watching Montréal-based RUBBERBANDance, which fuses the popping and locking of hip-hop with classical technique, the previous night at the Flynn. Lynch's workshop, she explains later, recharged her high for the next 72 hours.

Satterlee learned to dance as a kid in this same Montpelier studio, and went on to study dance and psychology at Goucher College in Baltimore. She's danced in Ghana and Brazil, New York and San Francisco.

Satterlee dances, she says, "for the smarts I get out of it." Something about moving her body makes space for her to learn. "I leave a class, and I think my brain just expanded," she says. "I feel like I have a bigger understanding of the world around me."

Joy Madden

Joy Madden was seven months pregnant and didn't know a soul in Vermont when she moved with her husband and daughter to Hinesburg three years ago. But she knew she needed to dance.

Before leaving Boston — where she had been managing a dance company called the Moving Laboratory — Madden, 39, had Googled her way to the Flynn Center blog and read that local choreographer Selene Colburn was looking for dancers for a project supported by the Flynn's N.A.S.A. (New Art Space Assistance) grant.

She emailed Colburn right away, explaining she was moving to the area and would love to be part of the show. And that her baby was due right around the time of the performance.

Madden moved on a Monday and began working with Colburn the following Sunday. Dancing through the transition was a necessity. Without it, "I would have been completely rudderless. I was hormonal," she says, laughing. "I didn't know anybody."

Her baby was born just weeks after the performance.

Since then, Madden has been digging into the local scene while juggling her two kids and day job as a massage therapist. She's developing a piece about motherhood, which builds on a vignette called "The Arrival" that she created shortly after coming to Vermont.

Curious about how her 3-year-old, Ruby, was dealing with the move — not to mention the birth of a baby sister — Madden set up a video camera when they were together. Once, when the baby started crying as she and Ruby were working on a puzzle, "Ruby ... just went off on a riff, mocking me," Madden recalls. "She was saying, 'Just a sec, sweetie. Just a sec.'" Ruby's recorded voice became the soundtrack to her mother's dance.

Madden will perform her work-in-progress tentatively titled “Mother” at the Contemporary Dance and Fitness Studio in Montpelier on December 11. This one is about Madden’s own mom and, she says, “the constant negotiation, the constant loss of being a parent.”

Ellen Smith Ahern and Lida Winfield

At a recent rehearsal for their upcoming show at the Firehouse Center for the Visual Arts in Burlington, Ellen Smith Ahern and **Lida Winfield** look like sisters. Physically, they’re quite different — Smith Ahern, 27, is about half a head taller, with dirty-blonde hair and dewy eyes; Winfield, 32, is tiny, with the dark hair and fair complexion of a porcelain doll.

But the way they move — climbing over each other, slamming their chests and mimicking each other’s curious gestures — has the playful intimacy of children exploring the world together.

The Burlington dancers recently formed a creative collaborative in the style of a CSA — instead of community-supported agriculture, they’re talking community-supported arts. Members who invest in the duo’s dance making will receive tickets to shows and invitations to participate in dance workshops and attend open rehearsals.

The two performers came to dance from different perspectives. Smith Ahern grew up in Illinois, where she trained in ballet. When she discovered modern dance in high school, and later at Middlebury College, she knew she’d found her calling.

“I was getting the message from ballet that my body wasn’t right for it, for a number of reasons,” she says. “So it was liberating to find this other dance form.”

Winfield grew up in Vermont and took classes in jazz and modern as a kid. “I really wasn’t very good,” she says. “I was often sort of the kid in the back.” Unable to remember the steps the teacher taught, she’d often just make things up. It wasn’t until she started participating in the *creation* of movement that something clicked. At 14, she was one of the youngest members of Hannah Dennison’s company, Working Ground.

Winfield and Smith Ahern met while performing in UVM dance prof Paul Besaw’s dance collaboration with the Burlington Chamber Orchestra last year and sensed they would work well together. Both have a taste for the awkward and ugly, as well as for the beautiful. And they’re both driven by the sense that this is it: They want to make a living from dancing.

“Our drive is similar,” Winfield says. “That is, the joy and also the heartache that comes with being an artist.”

The piece they’re presenting as a work-in-progress at the Firehouse — and before that in Montpelier — was inspired by a dead hawk Smith Ahern found frozen in a tree, its eyes open, talons wrapped around a branch, at the Intervale last year.

Talking about the piece and its origins, Winfield muses, “I always believed our bodies hold more truth than our words ever can.”

Smith Ahern says she dances because of the sense of freedom it gives her.

“I really love the idea of how much time and effort and thinking and emotion — and sweat! — goes into creating something that is gone immediately,” she explains. “This fantastic practice of creating something that you really care about, that you’re also willing to just let go.”

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