

Women Choreographers Soar at Djerassi Resident Artists Program

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Posted by: Sal Mattos

By Kathryn Roszak

The dance scene is filled to the brim with women, some famous—such as Twyla Tharp, who is equally at home in ballet and on Broadway, and Misty Copeland, the first African American Principal at American Ballet Theatre. The American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), the dancers' union, now guarantees dancers' salaries—but women choreographers are left far behind, and are far less visible and much less funded than their male counterparts. Case in point: choreographer Mark Morris has an entire building in Brooklyn housing his company activities, while fellow choreographer Twyla Tharp has struggled to keep her company alive. Boards of high-budget dance companies frequently select men to run them and this directly affects company hiring decisions. Check the season brochures for San Francisco Ballet and New York City Ballet and decades go by without a female choreographer in sight.

As a response to this gender parity issue, Danse Lumière presented the Women Ballet Choreographers Residency launch on May 15, 2016, an event with open rehearsals, screenings and panels. The concept of the Choreographers Residency is to gather women choreographers and give them space to exchange ideas and show work—which was the purpose of this launch—and then to fill out the residency with public outreach activities and performances, resulting in greater visibility and more support and opportunity for women choreographers.



Kathryn Roszak rehearses with Brennan Wall and Mone Shinoda, Silicon Valley Ballet trainees now at

San Jose's New Ballet School. Photo: Bari Lee

The venue of the Women Ballet Choreographers Residency is the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, which is situated among rolling hills in Woodside, California; the landscape is filled with unique sculptures gifted by artists to Djerassi. Six women choreographers filled the venue Artists' Barn with new works and films: Julia Adam, Dalia Rawson, Lissa Resnick, Amy Seiwert, Priya Shah and myself.

Three choreographers presented their choreography live in the studio. Dalia Rawson (director of the New Ballet School in San Jose) experimented with a kinect camera filming the dancers' movements, which then affected sounds that were played live. "I am working with programmer Tim Thompson," said Rawson. "The camera follows dancers' height and depth and this affects the music. Dancers manipulate the sound—so the performance is different every time." Rawson's young dancers reveled in their new dance as Rawson surveyed their structured improvisations in Djerassi's studio. Lissa Resnick of No Strings Attached Dance Company, trained in ballet but drawn to contemporary dance, shared the beginnings of her new dance responding to the challenges of living with diabetes. And the young dancers from the New Ballet School brought freshness to my own choreography patterned on the reversal of the Amazon River's flow over time.

Live performance was complemented by media presentations. In the composer's studio, choreographer Julia Adam screened clips of her dances performed in an old boathouse and in the West Marin woods; her work delved into the California drought and, in another episode, created edgy moves to Radiohead. Photographer Deborah O'Grady described her process of creating photographs as a kind of choreography for live music performances. Choreographer Amy Seiwert showed a film of her work **Barn Dance**, shot entirely at Djerassi, which makes use of a fabulous old barn. Visual artist Naomie Kremer was unable to attend, but sent a special video for the launch event showcasing giant digital sets she created for dance.

There are not many women artistic directors of ballet companies, but the residency paid honor to two: Celia Fushille of Smuin Ballet and Lauren Jonas of Diablo Ballet. Both have steered small, high-quality chamber ballet ensembles through tough times. Fushille regularly commissions women choreographers such as Seiwert, while Jonas has featured work by locals Sonya Delwaide and Sally Streets.



Danse Lumière artistic director Kathryn Roszak with San Francisco Dance Film Festival director Greta Schoenberg and AileyCamp's Priya Shah on the Women Ballet Choreographers Panel. Photo: Bari Lee

Throughout the day, women mixed and mingled in the Artists' Barn discussing their latest projects while soaking in the atmospheric views. "We are all so busy working on our own projects that it is great to gather together like this and realize that we are a community," said Fushille.

AileyCamp teacher and choreographer Priya Shah and former Royal Swedish Ballet dancer Katja Björner were joined by filmmakers Kate Duhamel and Greta Schoenberg (also founder of San Francisco Dance Film Festival) on a panel to discuss challenges women artists encounter. Surprisingly, quite a few of the women reported that they do not feel held back due to gender; they preferred to celebrate their successes and not attribute career challenges to gender. Nonetheless, attendees agreed that pressures exist, especially when it comes to raising a family. During the panel, Björner filled us in on how dancers are supported in Sweden, with equal and lengthy parental leave for both men and women.

Another panel discussion, on present and future challenges for women ballet choreographers, offered a chance for attendees to reflect on how each artist can create change. Seiwert (recently hired by Rawson to teach choreography at the New Ballet School) said, "If we aren't hearing from 50% of the population, then we should ask ourselves what we are missing!" Women choreographers are diverse and their needs are diverse. While one woman needs space and dancers, another needs childcare, and Seiwert wishes to be commissioned for a full-length ballet, something most women can only dream about.

“How do we inspire young women to see themselves as choreographers?” Rawson asked. “As a child, I was always choreographing. I had notebooks full of choreography. There is no time in ballet school for girls to make dances due to the technical perfection required of females. Opportunities to learn choreographic skills like improvisation are very important.” San Francisco Ballet choreographer Myles Thatcher joined the conversation as an ally: “I am a feminist and we should all be feminists,” he said. Thatcher hopes that choreography classes can be included in ballet schools to encourage girls—and that directors stop calling adult male and female dancers “boys” and “girls.” When asked what steps he takes toward creating change he said, “I try to not create ‘victim’ roles for women in my choreography.” And as the director of Danse Lumière, I vowed to provide honoraria for the women in coming years, and to focus on documenting womens’ dances by involving talented young women filmmakers from Berkeley High School.

As the day ended, Djerassi director Margot Knight took the artists on a sculpture walk as the fog rolled in over the hills. The artists became quiet and still under the great trees and looked with curiosity at sculptures appearing mysteriously in the landscape. Djerassi is a magical place. For a moment, time suspended and it was possible to imagine that what is being created is a kind of dance utopia where at last women and girls can have an equal voice.

Kathryn Roszak directs Danse Lumière, producer of the Women Ballet Choreographers Residency at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program. Upcoming performances: West Wave in San Francisco & 92nd Street Y in New York City, plus a new dance film. Visit dlkdance.com.