

THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

All-female troupes continue a modern dance tradition.

BY ANN MURPHY



Photo: Lois Greenfield

Strength includes the capacity for vulnerability. Ellis Wood Dance in *Timeless Red*. (Wood is far left.)

In San Francisco choreographer Jo Kreiter's *Whose Seeds These Are*, a supple dancer crouches, arranging seeds with obsessive care, while a farmer reports in voiceover that his fields have been contaminated by bioengineered seed.

On a stage in New York, Ellis Wood's women hurtle, flail, and wrap together with a lyrical, fractured physicality that is both fragile and strong.

In a different part of the city, Gina Gibney and her six dancers ask residents of a women's shelter to counter years of abuse from male partners by moving their bodies in defiantly bold ways.

In Minneapolis, Ananya Chatterjea stages *Bandh: A Meditation on Dream*. In the piece, 25 women of color perform

movement that blends Odissi Indian dance and modern forms into a vision of hope in a world where violence is escalating and religious fundamentalism is on the rise.

Each of these choreographers direct all-female companies that, in a sense, function like women's colleges to give women opportunities in a field where men and women still get very different breaks. These women use different aesthetic choices to explore their relation to feminism and the female body. Chatterjea and Kreiter, for example, may work with sociopolitical themes, while Gibney and Wood challenge notions of physical strength and femininity. But to all of them, dance is a vibrant, sensuous, and potent way to express the common humanity of women's lives.



Dance as an act of community: Ananya Dance Theatre in *Bandh: A Meditation on Dream*. Artistic director Ananya Chatterjea, seated front.

Gina Gibney, who directs Gina Gibney Dance, wants people to see that women can represent all of humanity when they dance. Typically, she says, when people see an all-female company, they think they see only half the world—and a lesser half at that. “So my exclusion of men is not about the exclusion of men per se. I’m not asking dancers to put on a role; I’m asking them to strip down beyond gender.”

Chatterjea, associate professor of dance at the University of Minnesota and artistic director of Ananya Dance Theatre, grew up in the radical political climate of Calcutta, India. As a girl she trained in classical Odissi, and later in modern dance. For her, women dancing together is an act of community that links all of us, male and female, and allows women to rise to meet the call of the world. “Women dream of huge things, like social justice and world peace, not just lipstick and saris,” she says.

The belief in women’s capacity to dream beyond the narrow confines prescribed for them goes to the very root of modern dance. As Elizabeth Kendall writes in *Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art-Dance*, new fitness programs were launched at the turn of the 20th century to lure despondent

middle-class women from their fainting couches. The hope was to liberate women from the unhygienic conditions of corsets and prescribed inertia.

Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis transformed these regimens into a radically different kind of freedom. Working with the idea of the natural body, they gave birth to what we know today as modern dance. Martha Graham, in turn, created an elemental movement vocabulary that embodied the extreme passions: desire, fear, jealousy, rage. Graham, as well as later choreographers Twyla Tharp and Trisha Brown, started with all-women groups. These and other modern dance pioneers not only defied society’s limits for women, they insisted on the universal relevance of their vision.

Wood, Chatterjea, Kreiter, and Gibney carry on this legacy by connecting dance to an idea of being female that transcends traditional gender roles. Almost by definition this road has an activist slant. Not only does it lead to edgy movement explorations that question the physical limitations imposed on women by society, these artists challenge the restrictions women often accept for themselves.

“I find that women tend not to ask questions the way men do and will take a job without knowing what the pay is or what the job entails,” says Wood, director of Ellis Wood Dance. (Wood’s parents, Marni Thomas and David Wood, danced in



Photo: Josef Norris, Courtesy Flyaway Productions

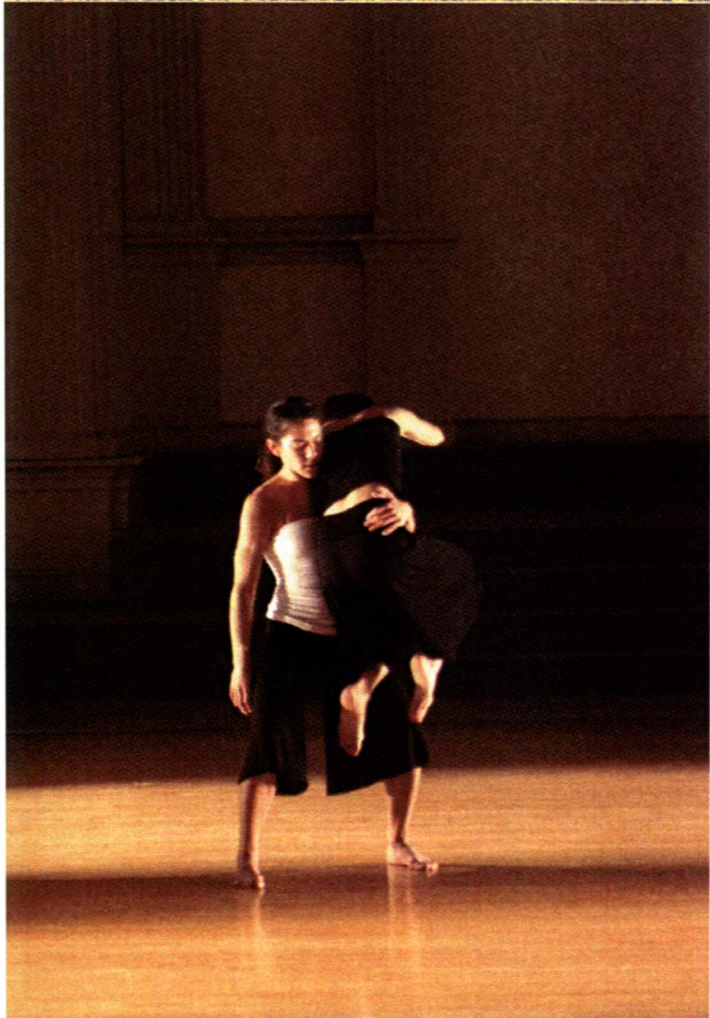


Photo: Andrezej J. Olejniczak, Courtesy Gina Gibney Dance

Top: Where physical risk and political advocacy meet: Flyaway Productions artistic director Jo Kreiter, in *Whose Seeds These Are*.

Bottom: Stripping down beyond gender. Kristy Kuhn, left, and Marinagela Lopez perform in Gina Gibney's *unbounded*.

the Martha Graham Company and together founded the dance department at the University of California Berkeley. For the first four years her mother taught but wasn't paid.) To counter any tendency toward blind obedience on the part of her dancers, Wood insists on laying out the facts and responsibilities of performing in her company at the outset. It squares with her mission, which is to confront reality and to ask her dancers to be willing to do the same.

"I'm interested in raw vulnerability, not just stereotypically strong women," says Wood, who has been told that her work is great but now all she needs are some men. "Women who work with me are really strong physically, dance with abandon, and have a capacity to be ecstatic."

Both Kreiter and Wood were competitive gymnasts as girls, and the air of risk they bring to dance seems to echo that of the gym meet. Wood imbues her movement with snapping limbs that pop back to center, while the women she portrays are complex, even contradictory beings who move against invisible obstacles. Kreiter overthrows some of the restrictions ascribed to the female body. In order to swing, turn, rise, and leap from custom-made apparatus in her aerial work, the dancers have to possess the kind of upper body strength usually found in men. But while Kreiter proves that women have such strength, she isn't interested in female machismo. What matters to her is the synthesis that results. That means split-second timing balanced with sensitivity to the needs of one another. "The physicality is a metaphor for personal power," Kreiter says. "Like keeping upper body strength, being perceived as equal is something that has to be worked at."

A great deal more work needs to be done to make such equality for women a reality. In findings published last year by the New York State Council on the Arts, the evidence indicates that men are on top—even in dance, where women are numerically stronger. The rosters of large presenting organizations are dominated by male performers, directors of large dance companies are predominantly male, and funders bequeath a larger portion of their dwindling pool of resources to men. Though this field was shaped by women, women are finding fewer mainstream opportunities today.

Chatterjea, Gibney, Kreiter, and Wood, along with other all-female companies, plow on, creating opportunities for women that otherwise would not exist. As they do, they are returning modern dance to its beginnings as a social, political, and spiritual quest to liberate the female body. They aren't mourning the state of things or allowing themselves to be immobilized by injustice. Through their dancing they re-examine gender and remind us that, from its beginning, modern dance challenged the status quo.

Ann Murphy is a writer on dance and design, living in Berkeley, California.