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Volcanoes in Borneo

Dancer Billbob Brown
pursues the “butterfly effect”



Structure and surprise: dance professor
Billbob Brown. (Ben Barnhart photo)

Seated in his professorial

office, intent on making a point, Billbob Brown is doing a sort of *pas de deux* with his desk chair. He spins himself on its swivel base, trundles himself forward on its casters, and finally – point made – presses his spine upright against the upholstered back.

Though he’s holding forth in a cubicle in the depths of the Totman basement – barely room for a visitor’s chair – Brown’s conversation is anything but underwordly. The choreographer and dance professor is talking about the stars – specifically, “The Pleiades,” the name of his newest dance.

Heavenly bodies have been an interest since boyhood for William Robert “Billbob” Brown. He had “a knack for stars,” read “book after book” of science fiction, and thought he might become an astronomer. Today, says Brown, his most prodigious muse is chess

Today, says Brown, his most prodigious muse is chaos theory: that branch of mathematics and physics that considers the behavior of complex, inherently unstable phenomena such as clouds, traffic, crowds of people. For Brown, dance too is a discourse of order and disorder: of movements both spontaneous and planned, structured yet full of surprise. In his work, while dancers may be rehearsed in particular movements, they still encounter – even court – the unexpected.

For Chaos Theory, the dance company he co-founded with a group of local colleagues in 1999, Brown serves not only as artistic director and choreographer but designer – the mind and eye behind the visual and technical effects that accompany dancers in performance. It's a task he relishes – the creation of sets and transient images through computer graphics and animation and video special effects.

In “Turbulence,” dancers move within gorgeous abstract swirls of color, the projected images of mathematical equations as visualized by a computer. In “Saturn’s Rings,” a giant image of a planet descends onstage, and dancers appear to land on it. In “Pleiades,” which Brown has been rehearsing for an April premier with the UMass Percussion Ensemble, a “motion-capture machine” projects spheres of light onto the dancers, illuminating their joints in such a way that they look like animated stars.

Brown’s penchant for astronomy extends to his press packet, which bears an image of himself superimposed on Saturn, its rings encircling him like a celestial hula hoop. But not all of his themes are astral. Many are political and psychological. “The C Word” is a comic piece about a couple who are unable to say the word “commitment,” much less make one. “It’s Only A Wallet,” with which the choreographer continues to tinker, addresses male violence through the murder of Amadou Diallo by New York City policemen last year.

Brown’s work as a teacher also reflects social concerns. As director of the University Dancers, he brings dance to schools where “60 percent of the students are on school lunches, use or sell drugs, carry guns, and get shot.” In the early ’90s he oversaw a collaboration between UMass’s Fine Arts Center and Springfield’s Kensington Elementary, teaching workshops, directing performances, and training teachers in the use of movement in the curriculum. To his delight, his presence seemed to be reflected in improved test scores and increased enthusiasm for the arts.

Brown feels that as a dancer he’s often able to reach

students others cannot – students who’ve been labeled as troublemakers or learning-disabled. Many such students, he says, are “kinesthetic learners,” who need to physically experience, create, or “embody” concepts and knowledge. He’s taught in science classes where students absorb the mechanics of the spheres by dancing his “Solar System Shuffle.” At one school visited by the University Dancers, teachers reported wonderful effects on children they’d long since despaired of helping. One autistic child, having discovered that he could dance, agreed to perform in front of the entire school. An eighth grader formerly on the verge of being expelled said, “I’m good at dancing but no one ever gave me the chance.”

Brown sounds like an elated astronaut as he reports this feedback: “We made contact!” he says. He’d like to exploit the pedagogical potential of dance at the college level, too, and to bring dance and physics faculty together for discussions, since “quantum physics and choreography speak the same language – space and time.”

Brown has covered a lot of professional ground since his graduation from the Arizona State dance program in 1980. He’s directed a company of dancers with disabilities in New Mexico and served as sacred dance coordinator at a Franciscan Renewal Center, where he choreographed a Mass for Pope John Paul II. He’s toured nationally with the Bill Evans Dance Company, choreographed for TV and film, and taught and performed in Europe, Japan, and throughout Mexico and the U.S. His Emmy-award winning video, *Opening Doors*, is currently being shown on PBS stations across the country.

In the future, Brown hopes to invent his own multi-layered movement technique, designed to “draw on every level of a human being – the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and communal.” With existing methods – including the akido-based “transformative integrative technique” which he’s studied – he remains unimpressed. (He demonstrates some movements resembling semaphore: “BOR-ING,” he pronounces, miming a person looking at his wristwatch. “I’ve got to go do my pliés now.”) He says he envisions something less rote: a program that is “physically demanding, that uses the voice and each center of the body, the chakras, such as heart consciousness and inner vision.”

One of Brown’s recent dances, “Butterfly Effect,” is based on a premise in chaos theory that “the beating of a butterfly’s wings can, through a series of unforeseen consequences, create a hurricane in the Caribbean.”

consequences, create a hurricane in the Caribbean.
Think of this as you imagine Billbob in his office
chair, arms akimbo, shoulders rolling. By that logic,
and given the weight of his human arms, he might be,
Yikes! setting off volcanoes in Borneo as we speak.

– *Deborah Gorlin*

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