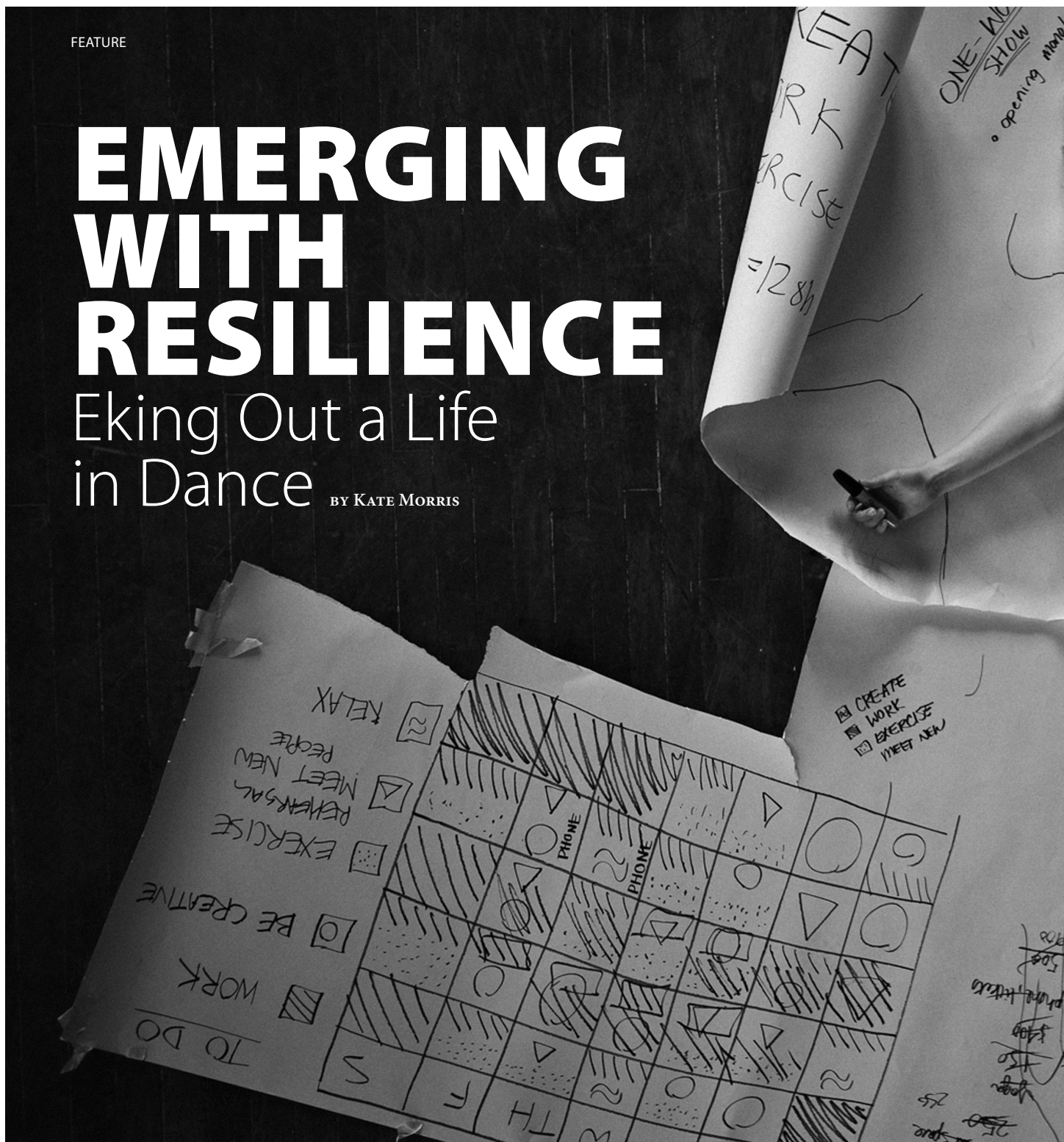


# EMERGING WITH RESILIENCE

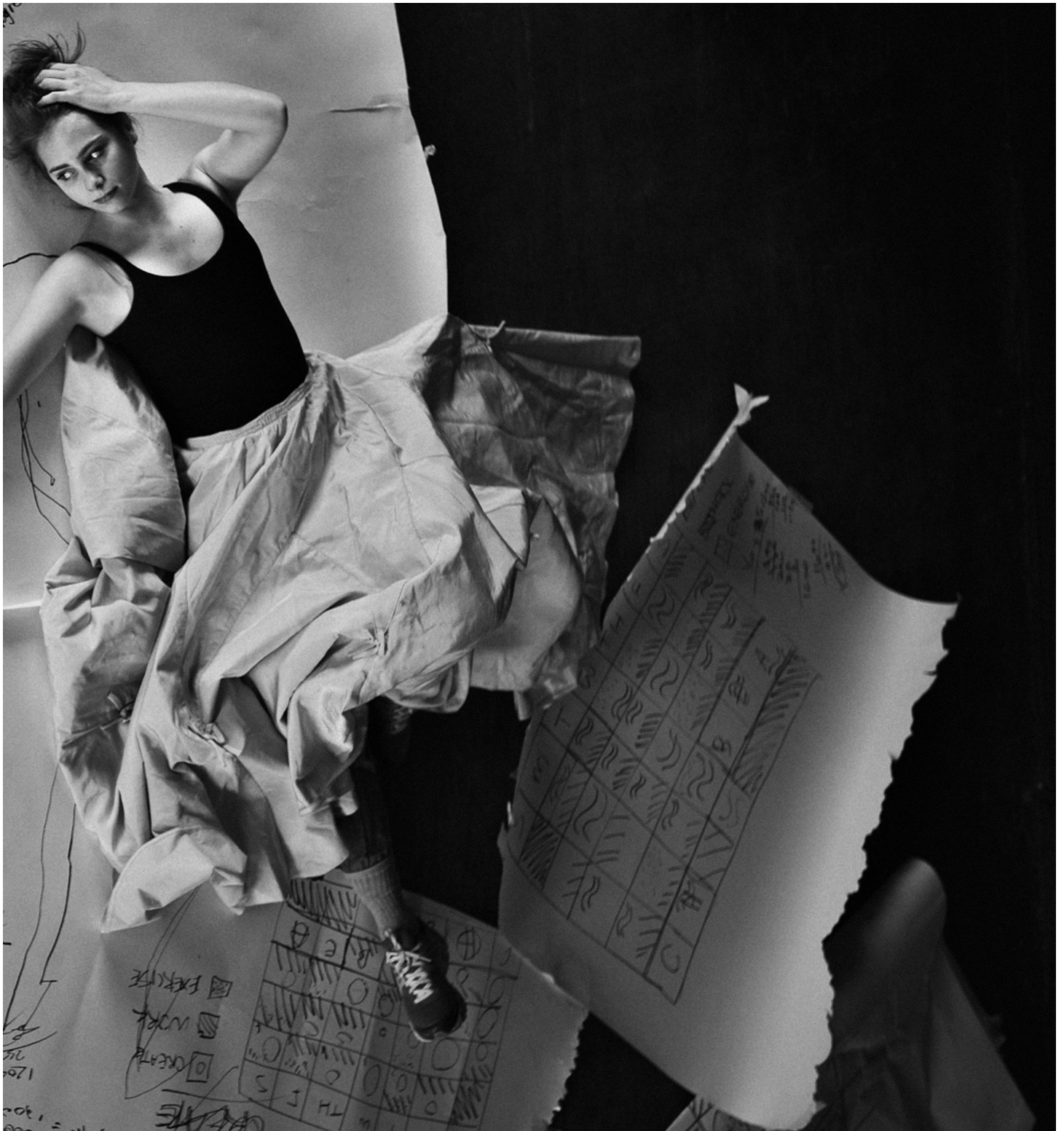
Eking Out a Life in Dance

BY KATE MORRIS



Shortly after graduating from Juilliard in 2009, Canadian dancer Charlotte Bydwell found herself in the very fortunate position of being hired as a company dancer in New York City with Monica Bill Barnes and Company (currently touring with Ira Glass of the acclaimed podcast and radio show *This American Life*). The company pushed Bydwell out of the contemporary and ballet worlds that she had become comfortable with at Juilliard and, over the three-year period that she was employed with them, into dance-theatre, clown and comedy, an experience she found liberating. Not only was she growing as a performer, she was getting paid to do so.





On the surface, everything seemed to be working out for this young, Montréal-born dancer. But with rehearsals four hours a day, plus obligations to attend daily technique class and a touring schedule that took her away from New York for anywhere between four days and two months, Bydwell's transition from undergraduate studies to the life of a bona fide artist wasn't so smooth. "There was no way to live off just my dance work," she admits. Instead, she cobbled together a living by holding side jobs where she would risk being fired for going on tour or for missing a shift because of rehearsal. Every day was an experience of mild panic as she tried to hold together the scheduling nightmare that had become her life.





To develop any career today requires determination, energy and time management, but a career in dance has its own difficulties that pose additional challenges for emerging dancers. The myth that companies readily hire graduates without having already built a relationship with them has largely been debunked, but the question of how best to foster these relationships remains. Emerging dancers now enter the field with the awareness that they need a portfolio of skills in addition to their dance training to get by. These skills are especially handy in the early years of their career when dancers are so full of potential and idealism,

but financial woes, parental pressure, self-doubt and even aging compete against the idea of a life in dance.

Managing the various dimensions of this transition is one of the central aims of “on the MOVE,” an educational program designed by Toronto’s Dancer Transition Resource Centre (DTRC) in partnership with dance service organizations across the country. On the MOVE was established in 2001 to address the pressing needs of emerging dance professionals, and has served roughly 5000 emerging dancers in the last decade alone. The mandate is to ease the transition from student to



professional by providing opportunities for skills development and networking. Part of the program's goal is to empower these young dancers to take charge of their careers, providing the tools and resources to make it happen.

While their university and training programs would certainly provide some of this know-how, they tend to focus on technique and choreography rather than professional skills development. On the MOVE delivers content from a peer group of established professional artists who participate in the workshops and recount their own experiences of entering the field. In this sense, it

begins the process of intergenerational networking that is crucial to young dancers. And there is additional value in convening members of the same cohort who may come from different schools or cities, or have training in other dance styles. For many, DTRC Executive Director Amanda Hancox contends, "It's just such a relief to meet other people who are feeling as nervous and excited as they are."

For the first time in their lives, recent dance graduates find themselves with so much possibility and yet they are also solely responsible for structuring that possibility. To better address





this situation the DTRC, along with their partners in Québec, is developing programming to help emerging dancers build psychological and emotional resilience. In many ways, dance training (which often begins at a very early age), primes dancers in a particular way that makes this transition more stressful. “Dancers tend to be perfectionists,” says Hancox. Without the assessment and feedback provided by teachers (and where getting hired may provide the only peace of mind about one’s achievements), emerging artists are also often plagued with uncertainty and self-doubt. In addition to all of the expected challenges of transitioning into a career, dance graduates find themselves in a situation where they have lost the barometer with which to measure their

achievements. And this can have serious consequences for their experience of the field. As a result, it is becoming obvious that preparing for a career in dance should also be centred on techniques of self-assessment, including measuring self-worth and developing self-confidence.

The transition from dance student to emerging artist is often framed as a renegotiation of the rules and imperatives that have been instilled throughout one’s dance training. (*Get yourself to class every day! Sleep nine hours per night! Eat this, but don’t eat that!*) Such regimens create continuity with a familiar and measurable sense of achievement, but they are often at odds with life experiences common to people in their mid- to late twenties who might want to travel the world, take up a new hobby or simply go on a dinner date.

While Bydwell stuck to her regimens and protocols, she constantly wondered, “How much of this is just a kind of obsession or way of telling myself that I am in control of what is happening?”

Bydwell later tapped into these anxieties in her one-woman dance-theatre piece, *Woman of Leisure and Panic*. About the show, Bydwell confesses, “I’m doing what I want to be doing, but I’m panicked about making any decisions of how to fill my time.” So she became even more regimented and disciplined. The show begins with a calendar on which she liberally schedules her “creative time,” but gradually, as the various necessities of life impose themselves on the week, that time is whittled down by the commitments of working as a hostess, exercising and training. Bydwell’s piece shows the precarious balance lived by emerging dance artists as they struggle to ground themselves in the community, while also struggling to say afloat financially and socially.

With youth and graduate employment rates at record lows across most professional sectors in this country, emerging artists face even greater challenges in establishing their careers than graduates in other fields. “It’s hard,” says Hancox. “You’ve just graduated school and the world is your oyster. You’re suddenly out on your own and you are responsible for your career.” Unlike their peers in other arts sectors, dancers are also faced with the necessity of continuing with daily classes that require them to pay out of pocket for constant professional development, as well as for workshops and other training opportunities. Additionally, in most cases entering the profession also means coming to terms with the fact that there is not likely to be much of a financial payoff down the road, and this refocuses attention on finding creative ways to make dance a viable career for the long haul. This certainly adds to the financial pressure of maintaining a career as a dance artist, but it leads to all sorts of other emotional consequences that are not immediately apparent to onlookers like parents and friends. For this reason, on the MOVE runs



seminars on budgeting and financing for independent and self-employed artists. Getting emerging dancers to think of themselves as businesses will have lasting positive consequences throughout their careers and allows them some tax relief for continuing with their training.

Like most young people, dancers often seek paid work in a field other than performance, while also pursuing dance work. Hancox admits their lives “become a big juggling act,” and the pressures from one source of income or creative outlet will have a direct impact on the others. A recent panel at on the MOVE addressed the question of “how to feel like a dancer when you’re not dancing.” Because, as Hancox acknowledges, “Not dancing, doing something else to pay the rent, is part of being a dancer now.”

As dancers mature and gain a better understanding of the time frame and commitment of their careers in dance, a parallel career tends to take shape. The question is how much that parallel career can be structured around a career in dance. The pressure of converting one’s passions into one’s career is a significant part of the *künstlerroman* – the coming-of-age story of an artist – and it typically involves reconciling an idealized version of what it looks like to be an artist with the social and economic realities that are actually shaping that artist. For Bydwell, at least a part of that maturing process was realizing that she needed to take a break: “Dance started as this very joyful thing and then the more intensely I committed to it, and the more it became my career, it started to lose some of that joy.” So she decided to head back to school, this time for an MFA in theatre studies in San Diego, where she says that having some distance from dance has let her connect to it in a stronger way. Her goal upon graduating is to continue to feel the joy of dance without letting the panic of the career take over.



Networking and establishing an identity within the dance community is another significant part of the transition. However, young people often need a lot

## ADVICE FOR EMERGING DANCERS FROM ESTABLISHED ARTISTS



“The best way to think about it, and for their parents to think about it, is to think about the next two or three years out of school as your master’s degree. In any other profession you would not be expected to go from your BFA directly into your profession. Why in dance do we think that immediately we should have a job, that immediately we’re just going to land on something? It’s going to take time, it’s going to take research and, in some cases, it’s going to take specialization.”

~ **Alexandra Wells**, faculty at *The Juilliard School* and co-founder of *Springboard*

“Cherish the stage of being emerging, get in the studio with the purest and simplest of intentions, trust in the work you are doing, follow your instincts, and enjoy and celebrate the talents and ideas that are percolating. Things change and evolve so fast; dancing with friends is a gift. Running a company is a challenge and it only gets more and more complicated as it evolves and as the organization’s activity increases. Enjoy the simple act of getting your dance on with people who inspire you. It sounds so obvious, but sometimes, in the thick of the madness, we forget.”

~ **Lisa Gelley Martin**, co-founder, *605 Collective*

“I would emphasize the importance of continually expanding one’s knowledge base beyond one’s daily training. Make an effort to keep your

creative well overflowing because today’s most compelling dancers are not merely interpreters, but they also play a special role as co-authors and a source of inspiration for choreographers and their colleagues.”

~ **Fernando Melo**, choreographer

“If I had to keep only one thing in my “dancer backpack” it would be a whole lot of curiosity, so that when the search for the place to dance becomes obsessively sticky, there is still joy and a sense of discovery. I’ve never met any dance artist, who started dancing specifically to work for a specific choreographer or company. It is the dance from within which always speaks first and which deserves to be served with tremendous curiosity. Some find their dream job at 20, others at 34, others maybe never, yet, one will always harvest countless fruits while being curious.”

~ **Eric Beauchesne**, dancer and rehearsal director, *Kidd Pivot*

“Allow ample time and space for creativity and reflection. It is important to have patience with the process of movement exploration and to take the focus off the final result. Utilize the process as an opportunity to explore the body and to observe and connect with the movement – truly feel the emotions and sensations that abound.”

~ **Peter Chu**, dancer and choreographer

Charlotte Bydwell / Photo courtesy of Bydwell





of guidance to navigate professional relationships appropriately. Hancox says that they need reminding to follow up on auditions (even when they haven't landed the part) and opportunities, and they need infrastructure for approaching potential employers.

Graduates often lack the soft skills that are important to developing healthy professional relationships, but they show a surprising amount of entrepreneurial spirit when it comes to building their own communities. A frequent tactic among emerging dancers in the transition from student to professional has been to form collectives of their peers. There are many different models for dance collectives in Canada, some of which form contingently with each graduating class, while others make a significant impact and create lasting legacies. The most obvious example of this kind is Dancemakers, founded in 1974 at the initiative of two of the earliest graduates from York University's department of dance, Andréa Ciel Smith and Marcy Radler, along with David Langer (another York graduate), Carol Anderson and William Holohan.

More recent collectives often form around perceived exclusions within the dance community felt by emerging dancers, and by dancers who have changed locations and find themselves in the middle of a new dance culture. Collectives focus on process, research and exploration – establishing spaces of creation that are safe and positive for young dancers to experiment. They also provide a space in which traditional dance hierarchies are levelled.

The 605 Collective in Vancouver, now a publicly funded dance company, started in Lisa Gelley Martin's apartment in 2006.

The motivation was simple: she and her colleagues were tired of paying for dance class and decided to take out the middleman and give class to each other. Similarly, Integrated Dance Artists Collective was founded in 2001 by a group of Ryerson University dance graduates. It focused on building careers and served as a training ground for how to produce and commission works, manage projects, develop audiences and market a show, allowing them to cut their teeth on their own terms, before disbanding in 2008, pursuing other projects as independent artists.

Hanna Kiel is among the seven founders of The Garage, a collective based in Toronto that started in 2013. Kiel is the most experienced and established of the members, the others are young recent graduates who may have had some contract work but not much. Kiel, who moved to the city in 2008, still feels that she doesn't know a lot of people in the community and relates to the plight of young dancers: "When I spend time with emerging artists, most of them feel like they're the only one. They feel very lonely and they're not quite sure what's going to happen to them."

The Garage was founded to create a community for those who may not otherwise have found their footing. "For me, it's been really great because I haven't been involved in a lot of projects," says Natasha Poon Woo, rehearsal director of the Canadian Contemporary Dance Theatre and a recent graduate of State University of New York Purchase. "I love going to take class, but class is just class. It's nice to have somewhere else to come and be with friends and feel like I'm involved with something else that has to do with dance." Some members might identify as dancers but want to try their hand at choreography, while others may



be developing teaching strategies for their own workshops. Kiel says that The Garage works through a fair system of exchange: each dancer gets something from The Garage, but they also have to give. For Kiel, The Garage is a place of research, a place to explore choreographic ideas and movement with dancers that can then be developed in her other projects. It is a necessary step in developing a piece, but it is one that comes before any research and development funding is in place. In exchange, the dancers receive mentorship and feedback from a more established artist. When members do have shows, Kiel and the rest of The Garage show up to support their endeavours.

While The Garage hopes to become a not-for-profit eventually, it already operates on the fringes of the dance economy. Members contribute a modest \$30 per season, which allows them to participate in as many of the weekly studio sessions as they wish. All of the collected money is used to rent studio time, and choreographers are not invited to participate unless they are willing to forgo remuneration and opt for The Garage's system of exchange. It follows that dancers are not paid, but The Garage model seems to fulfill other pressing needs within the community.

The model of mentorship among peers that The Garage is founded upon may be a sustainable one. Dancer, choreographer, arts advocate and policy writer Shannon Litzenberger argued in her master's thesis (also discussed in the February 2005 issue of *The Dance Current*) that for mentorship to work in the long run it must involve a reciprocal relationship in which "the mentor would need to acknowledge the benefit to their self." And yet this is the major hurdle for The Garage, as Kiel and her co-founders have not been able to recruit many senior artists with whom they might foster intergenerational exchange without compensation. The Canadian Senior Artists' Resource Network recently announced a pilot mentorship project that was launched in January 2014. It will match artists over sixty-five years of age with younger artists in their sector. The older artists will be compensated for their time, while the younger artists will be compensated for any expenses they incur as a result of participation.



Springboard Danse Montréal began thirteen years ago as a loosely structured apprenticeship program geared toward helping recent graduates get experience in a professional company structure. Today, the program is pitched to dancers to bridge the transition to a career by providing exposure and, implicitly, getting them work experience. Each June, dancers and choreographers converge in Montréal to train intensively for a three-week period, working with a specific choreographer and culminating in a performance.

Co-founder and Artistic Director Alexandra Wells describes how the program was envisioned to meet the needs of her students at Juilliard, who would often come to her for advice about what to do upon graduation. At the time, there was little infrastructure for graduates, and companies were not commonly

holding workshops where students might build a reputation for themselves within a professional setting. Springboard brings emerging dancers together with established companies that are open to and interested in hiring young dancers – though not often as a direct and immediate result of the program. It not only brings emerging choreographers into contact with established companies, but creates opportunities for them to work with dancers who are at a similar point in their careers. Because of the resounding interest on the part of emerging dancers as well as established dance companies, the program has grown from twenty-four dancers and four companies in its first year, to ninety-three dancers and seventeen companies this year.

At schools like the Codarts, in The Netherlands, and the London Contemporary Dance School, students are encouraged as early as their third year to audition for companies, because a requirement of the degree program is that students secure an apprenticeship. Rather than working toward an honours thesis or senior performance project, these schools foster professional behaviours in their upper-year students that may help with the transition from student to professional, better positioning these young people for a career in dance. By contrast, the reduced scope of audition culture in cities like Toronto, and the scarcity of funding for such educational initiatives (in contrast to the many companies and established apprenticeship tradition that exists within the European Union), may preclude the possibility of any such model being adopted by Canadian educational institutions.

Springboard targets dancers ranging in age from twenty-one to thirty-one, though Wells admits that, as the program developed, they have intentionally shifted their focus to





prioritize working dancers and those who are already looking for work in the business. While generally serving all emerging dancers, Wells identifies three main cohorts of attendees. The first cohort is the young dancer who attends the program while still enrolled in a university or other training program. For them, Springboard is a kind of research project into different companies and an initiation into the profession. Networking is all-important here too, as the students start developing a professional rapport that will continue over their career.

The second cohort comprises recent graduates. If a graduate has any inclination toward working with someone from abroad, spending time working with that choreographer or company can often be a good indicator of the potential for a relationship to develop. Recent graduates benefit from the connections forged with emerging choreographers, who are also just starting their careers and looking for similarly minded collaborators. Springboard provides these recent graduates with experience in a professional context, which Wells says “they desperately need at this stage in their careers.”

The third cohort comprises those dancers who have already been dancing on a freelance basis, or in a more formal company structure, but who want to explore other options. These are often the dancers who secure contracts as a direct result of the program.

One of the advantages for the choreographers at Springboard is that they have the same dancers for three hours every day in the studio. “You don’t have to worry that this one’s got to work and that one’s got another show,” says Wells. This situation is

common when working with freelance dancers: “You’re trying to build something and you can’t get everyone in the studio together.” Emerging choreographers get gorgeous studios and fabulous dancers to work with, and often use the time to research, working through the beginning movements that will eventually become a piece.

The audition process for Springboard is therefore more than rigorous; the dancers learn three different choreographic works in five hours and are scrutinized by a panel of six or seven judges. The choreographers chosen for the auditions are extremely different from one another and this is a part of the challenge. However, skill is not the only criterion because the selection process is also driven by the needs of the choreographers who will participate in the project. The auditions are therefore also castings for roles pre-established by the choreographers themselves.

While its mission is laudable in serving the community, Springboard is currently funded through tuition paid by the dancers. In effect, the dancers pay for the opportunity to be cast into the project. While the ethics of this fee structure might be called into question, Springboard does create significant opportunities for intergenerational exchange. Moreover, all proceeds either pay the invited choreographers or get funnelled into scholarships for dancers who could not otherwise afford to participate. Wells is aware of how precarious this business model is: “This age group is twenty-one to thirty-one. Their parents aren’t supporting them anymore. They’re in the job market and they don’t have



any money ... we have to give the scholarships we do." Springboard has no external funding and Wells admits, "If we come out to zero, we're happy."

However, the program is currently running on the drive and energy of its founders and, after thirteen years, they are looking to create a more sustainable not-for-profit model – one that will continue if the current administration is no longer willing or able to continue. Wells feels quite strongly that Springboard needs to exist because it serves the dance community in unique and important ways.

The participants I spoke with had various rationales for attending, just as their professional placement outcomes varied. Toronto's Natasha Poon Woo attended Springboard in June 2014 as well as in 2013. She found that after graduating from SUNY Purchase, she had limited time for taking class and getting involved in projects and performing. She saw Springboard as an opportunity to take three weeks for herself, "to go dance really intensively like I had when I was in school, network and reconnect with friends." For Poon Woo, "If something comes from it, great, if nothing, then that's fine too." David Norsworthy, a Canadian Juilliard graduate, has turned Springboard into a professional community itself. Having attended twice during his BFA, he is now on the advisory committee and has been invited to the audition process as choreographer. Norsworthy says that while "everyone knows what Springboard is for, people walk in with a keen eye for not only what is in front of them, but also for potential." Indeed Norsworthy's experiences at Springboard 2010 only recently materialized in the form of an offered contract. Similarly, Daniel McArthur gained a contract with Toronto's Coleman Lémiex three years after having worked on a piece of theirs at Springboard. This suggests that there are long-term benefits to Springboard, but it may also raise perennial questions about gender imbalance within the profession.

Being an emerging dancer is a complicated nexus of competing desires that involves a lot more than looking for employment. Fostering lasting relationships and networking in productive and creative ways – through collectives and professional development – has helped many emerging dance artists find their voice and determine their place in the dance world. With dance service organizations across the country partnering on programs like on the MOVE, which empower young dancers to take charge of their own careers and create their own opportunities, dancers entering the field today are at once deeply committed to their careers as dancers and aware that they may need to sustain themselves through other means. In the dancers I interviewed for this piece, I witnessed a profound sense of responsibility for nurturing their careers and an incredible humility about any opportunities they received along the way. In this sense they are already as hard-working and as generous as their more established peers. While all of the dancers I spoke to were tenacious and inspired, they had also

## Recent graduates desperately need experience in a professional context at this stage in their careers ...

~Alexandra Wells

internalized the lessons of process – valuing the work on its own terms. Emerging dancers (whether through collectives or programs like Springboard) seem to have found important allies in emerging choreographers, as

each embark on research and development before there is even a grant to apply for. There is lots of room to act in these interstitial spaces and transitional times. Groups like Toronto's Love-In and Vancouver's Modus Operandi are galvanizing dancers through alternative workshop and training platforms that help to fill in gaps where other infrastructures have failed to support emerging talent. Fostering even deeper connections between emerging artists across the performance and arts sectors would prove fruitful as well, though it is difficult to say where support for such an endeavour might come from. And, of course, we need to think about how we might value the work of emerging artists differently in order to advocate for opportunities that are better suited to their needs as beautiful, fledgling, inchoate promises. ~

Learn more >>

### The Juilliard School

[juilliard.edu](http://juilliard.edu)

### Dancer Transition Resource Centre

[dtrc.ca/english\\_services/content/on\\_the\\_move](http://dtrc.ca/english_services/content/on_the_move)

### Springboard Danse Montréal

[springboarddansemontreal.com](http://springboarddansemontreal.com)

### 605 Collective

[605collective.com](http://605collective.com)

### The Garage

[facebook.com/TheGarageToronto](https://facebook.com/TheGarageToronto)

### Canadian Senior Artists' Resource Network

[csarn-craac.ca/en/mentorship.php](http://csarn-craac.ca/en/mentorship.php)

## Sommaire

Le danseur qui amorce le passage de l'université ou d'un programme de formation professionnelle vers une carrière fait souvent face à des impératifs difficiles à réconcilier : maîtriser son art et gagner sa vie. Tout en travaillant pour établir une autonomie financière durable, le danseur émergent doit former sa communauté et bâtir des relations avec des artistes plus établis. Comment faire ? Différentes infrastructures ont été créées pour faciliter la transition, de programmes d'organismes de service en danse, à des collectifs et des modes alternatifs de mentorat et de formation. Nourri par l'esprit entreprenant de nombreux jeunes artistes tenaces, le milieu de la danse trouve des moyens novateurs d'accompagner le danseur émergent et prend pied pour combler les possibles lacunes dans la formation et le subventionnement traditionnels. ~