



Three women of ODC:
Chin-chin Hsu, Anne
Zivolich, Yayoi Kambara.
Costumes designed by
Brenda Way.

A FEMALE FORCE

Five company leaders on how gender shapes their vision and style

BY VICTORIA LOOSELEAF

In

1966 the great soul singer James Brown crooned, “This is a man’s world...but it wouldn’t be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl.”

Now, more than four decades later, a lot, bad grammar aside, has changed. Or has it? Though women have made great strides on many fronts—politics, the boardroom and yes, even in music (from Madonna to Lady Gaga, estrogen rocks)—the question persists in the dance world: Where are all the women artistic directors?

And while a few women have risen to positions of power (including Monica Mason at The Royal Ballet, Brigitte Lefèvre at Paris Opéra Ballet, and Judith Jamison at Ailey), we look forward to seeing those numbers increase. There is hope, in today’s world, of women continuing their quest to attain and maintain leadership roles. To that end, *Dance Magazine* spoke to five women in charge of major dance companies today. Discussing their leadership styles, how they have evolved, and their status in the 21st century, these feisty females all have strong identities and ideas about their places at the top of the ladder.

Transitioning from prima ballerina to artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada, **Karen Kain** is unique in that her entire working career has been with this one esteemed company. Currently overseeing an organization of 200, Kain first joined the troupe in 1969 as a dancer, eventually becoming artistic director in 2005. Indeed, Kain has the distinction of

having served under all the troupe’s directors, allowing her to experience various leadership styles firsthand, beginning with the company’s founder, Celia Franca.

“After Celia there were five men, and I learned what I wanted to do and didn’t want to do as director,” recalls Kain. “But I worked with Celia the longest, and she had a way of being very tough and very nurturing at the same time.”

Like Franca, Kain says part of her job is to nurture the dancers, making them feel confident about their abilities while also challenging them. “I’m part of their support team,” says Kain, “not someone who’s ordering them around. From the smallest things—like addressing them by their names—to the bigger ones, I feel my dancers and I have a good relationship in terms of negotiating what works for the company and what works for the artist.”

Kain adds that she leads by being true to herself. “I can’t be another person, or a distant director. I am personally involved in all my dancers’ careers. I look forward to presenting them with new challenges and introducing them to new choreographers and seeing what that alchemy will be like.”

The result of such alchemy was on view this season in the triumphant company premiere of Wayne McGregor’s landmark work *Chroma*, as well as in full-length classics such as *Don Quixote* and Cranko’s *Onegin*.

Stoner Winslett, the founding artistic director of Richmond Ballet, is also a nurturer who champions new repertoire. Sidelined by injury, the ballerina became the organization’s first full-time employee in 1980, assuming the directorship that same year. In addition to performing

classics, Richmond Ballet’s 15 dancers and 8 apprentices perform works made for them, including nine by Winslett.

“A good director has to have a vision,” says Winslett, who has commissioned 54 pieces, “and has to be able to convince other people that that vision is their vision. When I came to Richmond it was a student company, so I’ve had the privilege of starting with students and hiring dancers and growing them. There’s a lot of nurturing in that. I also treat my dancers the way I like to be treated.”

Unlike leadership approaches with a top-down hierarchical style, Winslett says she follows the “servant leadership” model. “You serve the dancers, you serve the choreographers and try to pull them into the joys that dance onstage can be,” says Winslett.

Another eminent institution is ODC. Founded by **Brenda Way**, ODC is one of the oldest contemporary dance centers on the West Coast and is currently celebrating its 40th anniversary (see sidebar). Originally trained at School of American Ballet, Way then discovered modern dance, taught at Oberlin College, and relocated to San Francisco in 1976—a heady time, she says, for feminists.

“In the early days of the company,” recalls Way, who has also choreographed many works and raised four children, “when it was a collective, that and feminism were affecting my notions of leadership. In modern dance, since you are reinventing the language—or trying to do that—you invite the participation of your dancers in a deeper way, which means you probably have somewhat less of an authoritarian environment.

“The form itself opens it up to

different kinds of leadership. My view,” she adds, “has always been to enlist instead of insist.”

That attitude has served Way well, including helping her to develop her 10 dancers, whom she makes part of the creative process. “That’s typical of contemporary dance,” she notes. “But how you work with both their ideas and their delivery of those ideas on a daily

basis is how you develop an artist. I try to be straightforward and very particular in my feedback.”

Feedback—and flexibility—are also two keys to **Liz Lerman’s** success as the founding artistic director of the Maryland-based Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.



Above: Stoner Winslett. Right: Richmond Ballet dancers in John Butler’s *After Eden*.



Okada, Nelson, and Way

ODC TURNS 40

Still fostering community after all these years

On March 11, the opening night of “ODC/Dance Downtown” season, artistic directors Brenda Way and KT Nelson and associate choreographer Kimi Okada will take a bow together. They always do. The trio is what remains from the ragtag group of 16 “hippie artists” from Oberlin College in Ohio who in 1976 followed the siren call of the West. They came despite that for Way “quitting a tenured position at Oberlin, when I had three kids, was pretty scary.” Okada remembers being both excited and concerned about “putting all our eggs into one basket.” Nelson, a young dancer who had just started to choreograph, was anxious about whether “we would be able to survive so that we could keep making work.”

Not only did these adventurers survive, they thrived. Started in 1971 as Oberlin Dance Collective in an abandoned gym on campus, ODC has grown into a two-campus San Francisco institution that has become a mecca for dance. Its \$5 million budget supports three entities: the 10-member ODC/Dance company; the ODC School, with over 200 weekly classes; and ODC Theater, which presents local and touring ensembles and offers mentoring and residence opportunities. The company, school, and administrative offices are housed in the beautiful, airy ODC Dance Commons, which welcomes a rainbow of Bay Area dance activities.

While the collective’s freewheeling spirit has evolved into a more formalized collaborative partnership—with Way the first among equals—it still embraces the unknown as a birthright. At its heart, as Okada puts it, is “a deep belief in the power of art to shape and change our lives.”

In San Francisco ODC exploded into what was at the time a rather sleepy dance environment with an energy and enthusiasm that has yet to abate. The young troupe renovated a warehouse, started making work, presented lecture demonstrations, published a journal, and invited other visual and performing artists into their midst. Among the first guests to appear there were Douglas Dunn and avant-garde dance critic Jill Johnston. Over the years artists such as Karole Armitage, Eiko & Koma, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, Stephen Petronio, and Ronald K. Brown made their San Francisco debuts in ODC’s modest little theater.

In 1979, having bought a “home,” the artists, with the help of assorted community volunteers, laid the dance floor. The space was only half-finished when the Jazz Tap Ensemble opened, and the audience sat on a surface that was still dirt. It’s this kind of can-do attitude that shaped everything ODC has touched.

Yet the major reason, of course, to celebrate ODC’s 40th anniversary is its artistic achievements. Way has choreographed around 90 pieces, Nelson 60, and Okada, who runs the school, some 25. Over the years this body of work has become formally more sophisticated without losing its humanistic principles or questioning spirit.

The 10 dancers have a 40- to 42-week contract—a rarity in modern dance. The company tours annually 6 to 10 weeks; they’ve performed in 32 states and 11 countries. Last year in addition to national engagements, they traveled to Indonesia, Burma, and Thailand as part of the U.S. State Department’s global initiative, DanceMotion USA (see “Dance Matters,” Jan. 2010).

ODC is celebrating its 40th anniversary with a two-week series (March 11–27) entitled “A Force at 40,” in which each of the three co-leaders will show a premiere. Nelson’s work is a collaboration with an artist of a completely different sensibility—Shinichi Iovakoga, a 2008 “25 to Watch.” Way’s new piece invites other members of the dance community to participate. And Okada takes a gently humorous look at cross-cultural (mis)understandings. Some of these works, no doubt, will be on view when ODC comes to the Joyce in August.

Way, Nelson and Okada are inspired by the commitment of ODC’s 10 dancers. Says Nelson: “Our dancers are a group of imperfect souls who get up every day to work their hardest to be the best they can. Humble and generous, they are incredible ambassadors of our art form. They give themselves over to a vision; they are the epitome of what we are trying to do here.”

—Rita Felciano

Clockwise from top left: Aaron Sutton, Sarah Ferguson, both Courtesy RB; Claudia Goetzlmann for Dance Teacher



Above: NBC's Xiao Nan Yu and Guillaume Côté in Balanchine's *Apollo*, to be performed this month. Inset: Karen Lerman.



Begun in 1976, LLDE is another collaboratively led institution—this one inter-generational.

"Whether it's female in the sense that we nurture or whether it's because maybe as women, we are not so willing to put only ourselves forward—so we don't have quite that much of an aggressive streak that says, 'It's all about me'—I don't know," admits Lerman. "But in my case, a lot of it's been about 'we.' The quality of nurturing is good for dance and it's been good for me."

Lerman, whose leadership style is inquiry-based, says that women tend to see the bigger picture as opposed to focusing on the individual. "You're not going to see me yell and say, 'Do this.' I'll ask questions, push, prod, and challenge my dancers to be able to do it. It's very much a partnership."

LLDE member Martha Wittman knows Lerman's style firsthand, as she does a number of directors. At 76, Wittman has danced under the direction of Doris Humphrey and in companies led by Joseph Gifford and Anna Sokolow. Recalls Wittman: "My memory

is of being told much more explicitly what to do under male directorship than working with women. With Liz," Wittman continues, "she has a sense of who people are and what their potential

is. She draws on that potential and helps people to develop further than where they are." (See sidebar for Lerman's plans to leave the Exchange.)

For **Jawole Willa Jo Zollar**, who founded Urban Bush Women in 1984, being a good director requires a combination of passion for the art, long hours, and a commitment and willingness to grow. That said, however, Zollar, whose works originally challenged assumptions about body types and styles of movement and have always been political, does not believe in sweeping generalizations. "It's all about the individual. There are certain socialization processes as women that either work for you or against you. I think it's all in terms of how the individual internalizes that that really comes to your own style."

Leadership, she adds, is also about values. "When I first began, for me the value was about just getting the work done by any means necessary. What I've learned is



Above: Urban Bush Women, in residence at Muhlenberg College this month. Inset: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

Clockwise from top left: Cylla von Tiedemann, Courtesy NBC; Aleksandar Antonijevic, Courtesy NBC; UBW photos: Ayano Hisa, Courtesy UBW

LIZ LERMAN'S BIG CHANGE

Deciding to break away from the house she built

Liz Lerman is all about asking questions. Back in 1975, when her mother was dying and she spent time in a seniors residence, she asked, Why can't old people dance too? A year later, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange was born. In her work, she asked, Why can't a dance performance combine art and information?

When she asked, How can we be more constructive when we criticize choreography?, her Critical Response Process was born. It is now used in venues across the country to stimulate dialogue.

More questions: Can a dance company be run as a collective? What, actually, is leadership? How can an institution be a fluid organism that adapts to change?

And then there was this: How can dance engage the big social and scientific questions? From that question flowed several multi-year projects. In the *Shipyard Project* the Dance Exchange engaged a whole community of working people in New England. In *Hallelujah*, the LLDE went in search of things they could praise, based on Lerman's work with congregations and communities.

For her pioneering approach, she received a MacArthur "genius" Fellowship in 2002. She then created *Ferocious Beauty: Genome*, a masterful mix of science and art, dance and video.

And now Lerman asks, How can I extricate from that which I have built? She plans to leave the Exchange in July. "I've been able to make it like an amoeba that keeps changing and stretching depending on my own interests." But now, she says, she needs to stretch even further.

Her new book, *Hiking the Horizontal*, to be released this spring, helped open the gates for her to forge new paths. "Writing



that book helped me see how I'd fulfilled my own thinking with a dance company. I'll still be involved in dance, but I've started to look for other platforms."

Lerman is in demand at universities as a thinker and catalyst who stimulates creativity. She's been involved in a project at Wesleyan with faculty members in astronomy, physics, and religion. "They provide content and I'm providing research methods." This fall, she'll be gathering people in different fields at Harvard in what she calls "creativity surges."

Lerman has the utmost faith in the other members of the Exchange to run it themselves, with Cassie Meador as artistic director (see "Why I Dance," June 2010). "It's an incredible group, and they are profoundly ready. They've absorbed the way I think about art, but they also can see things freshly and have new concerns. For instance, Cassie's not sure touring is a good model if you're interested in the environment."

Lerman, 63, may also be working with theater groups, and—who knows—maybe even the occasional project with the Dance Exchange. After all, it's been her artistic base for 35 years. "It's been a home for me. I had so much support here."

But she won't be leaving home just yet. Her latest work, *The Matter of Origins*, comes to Peak Performances @ Montclair in New Jersey this month. Collaborating with physicists and mining sources from the Book of Genesis to the Manhattan Project to the Hubble telescope (plus plenty of contributions from her dancers), she poses questions about how life began. With the second act spent as a teatime discussion, the piece engages audiences on several levels. *Washington Post* critic Sarah Kaufman called the piece "a work of expansive range, emotional depth and singular beauty," and dubbed it one of 2010's best dance events. —Wendy Perron



Liz Lerman, at right, with Cassie Meador, future artistic director of LLDE

that positive reinforcement goes much further than negative reinforcement."

Zollar, who has choreographed more than 30 works for her troupe, as well as works for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, is still performing at 60. She says she believes in exposing her dancers to all the arts. That, coupled with the work, is how she develops them as artists.

"It's through doing the work and trying to get to the highest level of the

work. By exposing them to writers they may not be familiar with," Zollar asserts, "by learning as much as they can about culture, it's all connected. You can't separate it from the movement."

Whatever their styles, in this generally male-dominated arena, these five women have each taken a unique road to directing and maintaining a company. And while nurturing is a common thread, they seem most fulfilled watching their

charges evolve into artists.

What better way to uphold the art form, then? As Winslett so beautifully said, "I was privileged enough to learn ballet and had some gifts that could help that flame be passed from one generation to the next."

Victoria Looseleaf contributes to the Los Angeles Times and teaches dance history at USC and Santa Monica College.