

### *Headwaters Dance: The Premiere Performance*

Missoula Children's Theatre, Missoula, MT, February 22, 2006.

Reviewed by Caroline Patterson

Previously known as Mo-Trans and housed at the University of Montana for twelve years, Headwaters Dance Company, under the direction of Amy Ragsdale, made its debut appearance on February 22 to 25, 2006, at the Missoula Children's Theatre. This performance was the company's first appearance as an independent company. The performance featured six pieces as well as the first installment of the *Montana Suites* project in which a guest conductor is selected to choreograph a piece about Montana.

This debut bears the stamp of Ragsdale's international vision—with pieces about or from around the world—and features Ragsdale's full flowering as a choreographer and as an artistic director. While her work has always had a striking combination of intensity and whimsicality, pieces such as "Oops" exhibit Ragsdale's understanding of the inherently comic nature of formality. To the music of "Palenque Rain Song," by Kan 'Nal, three prim female dancers in suits—Sarah Bortis, Anya Cloud, and Kaila June Gidley—are perched on stools crossing and uncrossing their legs as a male dancer, Kevin Wall, tries to join in. In between each piece, an Italian-speaking clown brings the performance down to the audience with imitations of audience members looking for seats or by staging a mock dance audition. In the curious love story, "Dance for a Girl," choreographed by Terry Dean Bartlett and Katie Workum, dancers Anya Cloud and Kevin Wall face each other, Cloud seated behind a cello, drawing out a slow note with her bow,

while Wall flops his body down on a mat, the violent slap of his body making the audience increasingly nervous until, at last, Anya reaches out to comfort him.

Ragsdale's overtly political piece, "Caged," makes a statement about the relationship between isolation and violence—which reflects her experience of watching the United States' action in Iraq from Mozambique, where she lived last year. One dancer (Anya Cloud) surrounds herself with wire boxes as the others (Sarah Bortis, Brian Gerke, Kaila June Gidley, and Kevin Wall) push and shove around her, growing increasingly violent.

Ragsdale says in her program notes that she is interested in working collaboratively with her dancers, using them to help "generate the movement for each piece," which in turn, she says, "stretches her movement ideas." Her "Upsurge 2006," set to the driving music of Steven Reich's "Electric Counterpoint," features just such a celebration of sheer movement. The spectacular piece, "Naranj 2004," choreographed by Felecdia Maria, is a celebration of movement virtuosity. Danced brilliantly by Brian Gerke, the piece is a combination of Thai dance, American street dance, and head-bobbing East Indian dance that dazzled the audience with its complexity of movement and intensity.

Finally, the featured *Montana Suite Part I: Boulder Batholith* 2005, was choreographed by New Yorker Jane Comfort, with an original score by Charles Nichols from the University of Montana Music School. The piece featured a trio, Maxine Ramey on clarinet, Margaret Baldrige on violin, and Christopher Hahn on piano, with vocals by Beryl Lee Heuermanof. Inspired by a trip Comfort took through the Boulder Batholith and around Butte, the piece contrasts the "overworld and the underworld" of a mining

community. As the piece opens, we hear the pounding, ear-piercing sounds of heavy machinery and the whistles from underground; then, by the headlamps on the dancers' foreheads, we begin to see their machine-like movements, from the rattling ore carts to the steady movement of the picks. Comfort contrasts the dark, claustrophobic world of the mine with the chaotic spinning of the world above ground as images of Butte landmarks, such as the M & M Café, flash in the background. The movement of the piece spins faster, as the dancers portray the increasingly frenetic dancing in the honky-tonks and the violence that produced the natural

landscape. Then, in the last scene, we see three women and a man in a grouping reminiscent of a turn-of-the-century photograph. With the flash of a gun, then a camera, the figures disappear, one by one, till we are plunged into the darkness and silence.

The debut performance of Headwaters Dance Company was huge, varied, and energetic. With pieces ranging from the comic to grave, and the Italian clown in between to eliminate any self-seriousness that might develop, the new company had a charged and exciting launch.