State of the ARTS

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Plexus Dance Theatre at 20

By Richard Newsham

How's this for a dance plot—three shoppers enter a grocery store pushing their carts like robots, but, suddenly in the Italian food section, their passion for living is released and pasta, Italian bread, Lysol, even Depends diapers fly into the carts. Or how about this—a group of men carry easels and place them on pedestals and begin painting to music, except the easels are actually dancers wrapped in blank canvas.

Welcome to the world of Plexus Dance Theatre, and two of its signature ballets and choreographers, *Grocery Store Ballet* by Denée Jordan and *A Piece of Painting* by Pamela Pilkenton. For twenty years Plexus (meaning "nerve net" and originally from the Latin verb "to braid") has interwoven a combination of different arts into the choreographic structure of most of their ballets.

"My work, and Pamela's too, comes from using themes—issues, situations, and experiences—that are related to everyday life," says Denée Jordan, who founded the company in 1984 and has choreographed half of the company's 250 original pieces of work."I had just moved to Ojai from Los Angeles and San Francisco and I realized there were no professional dance opportunities for choreography and performance in Ventura County.

"We started as a small ensemble of six dancers, but soon added lots of other artists—composers, musicians, painters and actors. For example, we've worked with the Master Chorale and Burns Taft (in *The Unicorn* and *The Magic Flute*), poets George Keenan and Phil Taggart, and composers and performing musicians Jeff Kaiser and Theo Saunders. We've been painted on—our costumes were featured as pieces of original art—and even our backdrops have been created on stage by painters as part of the performance."

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"Though the company has gone through changes over the years, we have a pretty eclectic blend of styles—everything from classical ballet to avant garde modern movement," says Pamela Pilkenton, who joined Plexus in 1986, bringing a real professional influence to the company, both as a performer and choreographer. Later, as director of The Performance Studio at the Livery from 1991 to 1997 she created a lab space for Plexus and other performance groups in Ventura. In fact, The Performance Studio served as the city's original arts incubator and arts center on a small scale—in addition to Plexus, it was home to Kids' Arts, Focus on the Masters, SPAWN and Theatre Sports.

The two choreographers have managed truly picaresque careers in the dance world both before and during Plexus. Denée trained in San Francisco and Los Angeles in a classical Russian-style ballet and danced with Los Angeles Ballet, Jeanda Hearst San Francisco Repertory Ballet, Rudy Perez and Gene Marinaccio. She also performed with Santa Barbara's State Street Ballet. She began modern dance 15 years into her career, with Valentina Oumansky, who was part of Bella Lewitsky's troupe.

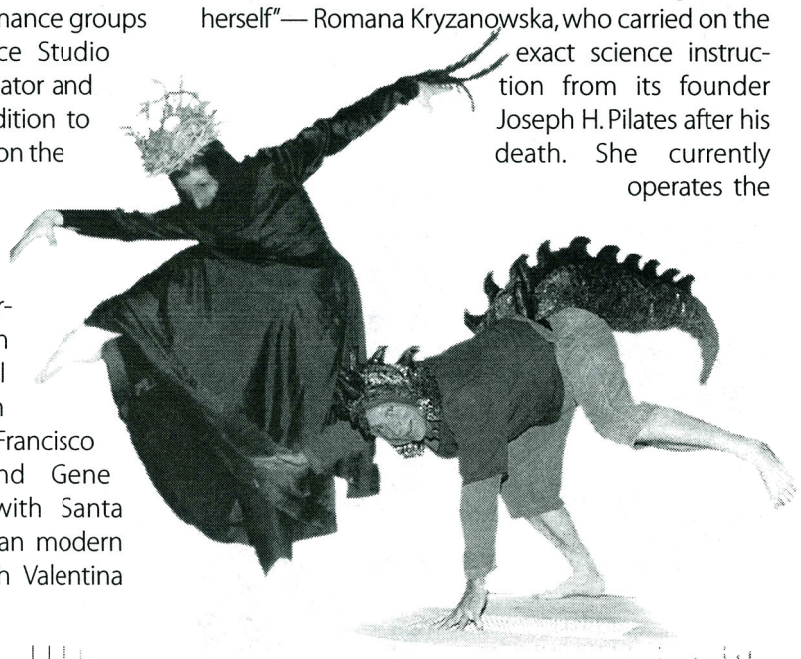
From 1994 to 1997 Denée took a break from Plexus and toured with ballet companies in Mexico and Central America, including La Compania de Bellas Artes in the Yucatan." It was my last opportunity to dance classically," says Denée. During her travels she was impressed with state funding that made dance performances affordable for everyone." The arts were not just for the well to do but also for the poor."

By contrast, Pamela came to dancing from "the other side of the tracks." Though she received topnotch instruction with Ballet Russe teachers beginning at the age of six, her best dance training came from semi or professional theater experience. "I graduated from the Performing Arts High School in New York City—yes, the school of *Fame* fame—with Ben Vareen, among others.

"The school trained you to be a ballet dancer, but we also received exposure to modern dance, and back then I was very rebellious against the ballet world. I did a flamenco dance gig at Café Gitano in downtown New York City and then managed for years off and on to be in the cast of the Broadway musical, *O Calcutta!*

Pamela, seen at right, performed in that controversial show about sex in both the New York City and San Francisco companies as one of the two dancers in the *pas de deux*—wearing not a stitch of clothing. For years her unclad image was featured on posters advertising the infamous musical on bus stop shelters and subway walls as far away as London and Berlin."I was a poster girl all over the world," she quips "and through the production got to met people like Sophia Lauren and Sammy Davis, Jr., who would come back stage."

Throughout her *Calcutta* years Pamela continued to train and dance at more august institutions. She received a scholarship to the Alvin Ailey Dance Company at the unheard of age of twenty-six. She went on to Duke University to do studies in locomotion and kinesiology. "Nureyev came there too—it was the age of body awareness." In the mid-nineties Pamela took a break from Plexus to study Pilates back in New York from "the big cheese herself"— Romana Kryzanowska, who carried on the exact science instruction from its founder Joseph H. Pilates after his death. She currently operates the Pilates Studio in Ventura. "These exercises keep me as an older dancer from being crippled with hip and knee problems."



Margo Sappington of the Joffrey Ballet—the first ballerina to cut her hair short—was an inspiration to Pamela, as was the inprov scene in New York, particularly at The Public Theater. "Keep in mind that *A Chorus Line* came out of improv workshops that later became productions mounted on Broadway and Off Broadway. As a performer you were hired from movement labs for your willingness to sing, dance, act and above all improvise. At The Public Theater I received great interdisciplinary and intercultural experience. One of the happiest moments of my life was when [Public Theater founder] Joseph Papp sang happy birthday to me."

"My experience at the Public—making everything come together when putting on a production—was the biggest influence I could bring to the Performance Studio and Plexus Dance Theatre," says Pamela. "As for choreography—I don't do it at the start, which drives people nuts. It's the last part of the process. Theatre comes first—we study the moves that depict the character—and the steps come last."

When asked about one of her favorite Plexus pieces, she mentions *Peep Diabolique* without a pause. "It's about having the audience and the dancers create and watch theater that it is out of the rut." The piece debuted in 1997 at the Ventura County Museum of History and Art." It started before the audience even arrived and there was no end to the piece—the audience just left as the dancers remained outside." The piece required video monitors, characters in costumes, peacock fans and an endless music loop of sound of an orchestra warming up." It was a trance performance with 20 dancers in 45 minutes that altered both the audience and dancers' perceptions."

One of Denée's Plexus favorites is "an evening of an entire underwater experience called *Waterside*, which I created with Pamela in 1986. We had a ton of sand brought in and created our own dunes at the Port Hueneme Cultural Center. Theo Sanders performed an original score live as we mounted ten ballets to the theme of an underwater wonderland. There was a reminiscence of a love affair, a satire on Jacque Cousteau, and a beautiful centerpiece of *Waves* involving an abstract series of movements. The evening began with the tide rolling in and ended with the tide rolling out."

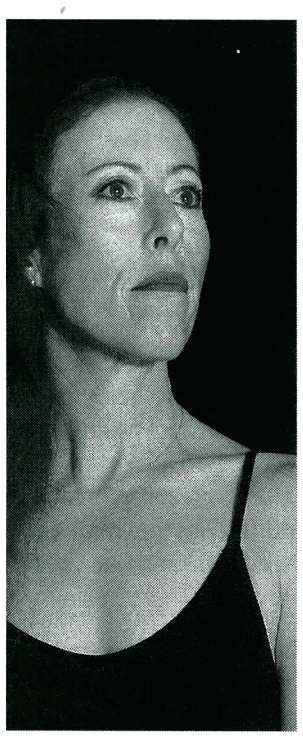
When asked how they could maintain Plexus for so long in a county with a struggling track record for keeping dance companies alive, Denée replies, "One thing that Pamela and I have—it sounds idealistic—is that we continue to believe in the magic of the arts and have refused to become pessimistic. Tired, maybe, and we certainly don't have any money from it, but we've never been in it for the money."

"And we have received at least eleven grants from the City of Ventura Cultural Affairs Division—both as Plexus Dance Company and as The Performance Studio—that have greatly helped keep our vision alive," adds Pamela." And I am very proud that the *A Piece of Paint* ballet served as the performance piece for the National Endowment of the Arts site visit back in 1993 when the City was setting up its Cultural Division."

The future of Plexus, homeless since 1997, looks bright. "We just opened a studio and performing space in Meiner's Oaks called Plexus Moving Arts Studio that will afford us a rehearsal home for our six dancers. We haven't had a home of our own for a long time," says Denée.

Besides a tongue-in-cheek rendition of the Nutcracker called *Clara Cries Nuts* that Plexus performed for the Harvest ArtWalk in November, the company is planning a huge 20th birthday celebration at Ventura City Hall April 23–25, 2004. The performance, made possible by a Facility Use Grant from the City of Ventura, will use many different areas of the building, and feature a retrospective of Plexus ballets as well as premiers of a few new works, incorporating multi-media artists, sculptors, painters and musicians.

The event will kick off with a black tie fundraising event on Friday, April 23. The evening will be a site-specific *tour de ballet* within a single building as the audience moves from room to room to create their own dance program. The company will be broken in to smaller groups that move to different spaces. There will be a free performance for families and children as part of the Spring ArtWalk on April 24, and a repeat of the repertory dance program on Sunday, April 25.



Adds Denée, pictured left, "The April performances will also celebrate the birthdays of two of the most important people in Ventura County's dance world. Both of them will turn 80. Dee Volz, who headed the journalism department at Ventura College, was a dancer and dance reviewer who brought my dance company to Ojai in 1980 through the invitation of Beatrice Wood [the legendary ceramist]. And Mara Lysova founded the Cabrillo Music Theatre as well as the Channel Islands Ballet."

Tickets for the April weekend will be available at the Plexus website **www.plexusdance.org** as well as several locations throughout Ventura.