

Margaret Jenkins: Collaborator

A retrospective of a profoundly influential career

By Ann Murphy



Dance in the Bay Area was almost as sleepy as Market Street. San Francisco Ballet rehearsed somewhere out in the Sunset in a converted garage, while the best Martha Graham instructors were sequestered at UC Berkeley, where you had to be enrolled to take a class. I went to one studio after another trying to find a facsimile of New York-level dance, only to be stunned by the popping tendons and bulging muscles of badly trained bodies in pink tights. Then the girlfriend of one of my roommates (the sax player as opposed to the bongo drummer) told me about a new studio in the Mission, out among the warehouses on Bryant Street, called, simply, the Bryant Street Studio. I rode the bus there the next day.

Although Margaret Jenkins has only recently begun to describe her approach to dance as laboratory-like, the studio she founded on Bryant Street was always an experimental place for serious performers to study together and make dance. It also became a spawning ground for new choreographers, composers, and visual artists. Jenkins' own company sprang from it in 1973.

The Saturday before last, as the rain plinked against the windows, I phoned Jenkins, now 60, a woman whose hair still cascades down her back in a dark, wavy pyramid and who looks and sounds remarkably like she did at 40. We talked about her early dancing and then discussed her stunningly successful three-decade career here. "The reason it was a success," the choreographer said modestly, "was that I was in the right place at the right time." "Well, yes," I said, "but not everyone can build a small empire." "Well," she said, "I was good at administration."

"Brilliant organizer, businesswoman, and visionary" is more like it. In the '70s and '80s Jenkins helped transform the Mission District into the city's grass-roots arts epicenter, put postmodern dance on the map in San Francisco, drew students from across the country to work with her, and produced new choreographic talent, like Joe Goode and Sarah Michelson.

Sixty-eight dances and 103 dancers later, Jenkins is launching a retrospective of her Bay Area career at the gargantuan 15,000-square-foot Herbst Pavilion at Fort Mason. It is, in a sense, a museum of her work -- much of it based on collaboration with other artists. Early collaborators, including Ginny Matthews, one of the first four dancers in the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company, plus some of the other early company members, will even reprise fragments of old pieces over the next two weekends amid 18 towering sets, concert video loops, and hanging costumes.

Back in 1970, Jenkins was avidly looking forward. She left New York and returned to the Bay Area -- where she'd grown up, a fifth-generation San Franciscan and daughter of the leftist head of the California Labor School -- with, she says, no great plan in mind. After spending some of her teens and most of her 20s in New York, dancing with the original Twyla Tharp company, working as Merce Cunningham's assistant for 12 years, and staging her own work in her own loft, she came back to her home city with a man in tow and an uncertain dance future.

"I knew in my heart of hearts that I was done dancing for other people," she says. "We moved to Mill Valley, and I thought I was going to teach class and do pottery, but I found I was really bad at pottery." That left teaching, and when she learned that there was almost no Cunningham dance around but a great appetite for it, she began running from one end of the bay to the other to instruct. Consolidation was just a leap away: By 1973 she had a school and a fledgling company. By 1981 she had teamed up with Brenda Way of ODC/SF, joining the New Performance Gallery.

Over the years, Jenkins has been charged with overintellectualization by some critics and insufficient intellectualization by others. Both accusations could be true, given that Jenkins' style reflects an aesthetic that turned away from certainty to embrace uncertainty. In her latest work, *Fractured Fictions*, which premieres this weekend on a stage she had built at the northern end of the pavilion, Jenkins intentionally avoids clean endings. "I don't want there to be resolution," she says. "I want to figure out how to dramatize a negative." It's an approach deeply influenced by Merce Cunningham.

But Jenkins doesn't go Cunningham's exalted route; her take on abstract form has always been quintessentially human, ironic, and jagged. Early modern dance influences sneak in, along with shards of narrative and raw symbol, because Jenkins is a postmodernist, while Cunningham is a modernist and an idealist. But it was through Cunningham that Jenkins -- who, at nearly 6 feet tall, was too big by conventional dance standards -- says she "finally found something that fit my body and fit my mind."

It is a big body and a big mind, with a big persona to match, and it would be hard to imagine a demure tribute to her career, but that's how the event began. Plans for the retrospective got under way two years ago as a modest affair to be installed at Theatre Artaud. But then the

theater shut, and the plans entered free fall. Suddenly Jenkins had to scramble for a venue; everything in town was booked except the vast Herbst Pavilion. While the former warehouse would have defeated most, Jenkins saw it as a challenge. Ginny Matthews wasn't surprised. "Margy has always had a gift for transforming hardship into something creative," she says. Jenkins and lighting designer Alex Nichols tackled the problem by roaming through "Mount Margy" -- 30 years' worth of stored sets -- and choosing what to show.

Such a retrospective isn't something one takes on alone. But then Jenkins has never worked alone. What really captivates her is problem-solving with her friends, like performance artist Rinde Eckert, guitarist Paul Dresher, and poet Michael Palmer. "What's interesting about making work is the people who are making it in combination with me," she says, and so their work, along with contributions by artists such as Yoko Ono and Bruce Nauman, will be on display and accessible an hour before each performance.

Jenkins disbanded her troupe 10 years ago and left the partnership at New Performance Gallery, but she has continued to create new pieces and is about to launch a mentoring program for young dance-makers, called CHIME (Choreographers in Mentorship Exchange). The idea is to help emerging artists know when their work is developed enough to take public. Collaboration, now between generations, goes on. "What a gift she has given us," says Matthews. "She created this container to hold our creativity, to shape it and give it a place." That's what makes her the mother of a whole lot of dancers.

-- April 23, 2003

Ann Murphy is a dance critic in Berkeley, California. Her new blog writingdance can be found here: <http://www.writingdance.blogspot.com/>