

# One Year in Retrospect

by Jenn Edwards and Philippa Myler, on behalf of Triadic Dance Works

*On an average, grey Vancouver day, about twelve feet from the studio we are locked out of, we're dancing where a parking lot meets a patch of grass. We have arrived early to go over a particularly finicky section that involves complex subdividing of musical counts, and some unison that morphs into a tighter and tighter canon. I look up and see a decomposing crow skewered on a tree branch. "Okay. I'm going to turn up my stereo. Try not to roll over anything smelly." My car is nearby, all of its doors wide open, our music blaring from its modest sound system. Some passersby are intrigued, others annoyed. Laughing, we tell ourselves that their reactions to this desperate, public rehearsal are part of our art.*

## Meet Triadic Dance Works

The three of us met in 2006 at Simon Fraser University's (SFU) contemporary dance program. After three years of sharing technique, improvisation, repertory and composition classes, we gravitated together as collaborators, as we all consistently pounced on the extracurricular performance opportunities available to us. We repeatedly performed in each other's pieces, and by our fourth year we had accumulated a substantial body of work. But we unearthed a special connection when we co-choreographed a darkly funny piece called *The Fine and Fateful Line* for our Grad show. By the time we left SFU in 2010, it was clear that our work as a collective had already begun.

We function communally, without one artistic director, which can be challenging. Rather than imposing pre-formed aesthetic ideas on each other, our process involves the "choreographer" setting aside her ego in order to coax out a sum that is greater than its parts. Our close friendship adds another challenge to working together, as our role as a collective demands honesty and pragmatism. There is no easy way to tell your best friend that she's consistently behind the counts in your piece, or the real reason why you had to change a particularly difficult section.

The values we have always agreed on as dance artists formed our mandate from the beginning; we are interested in broadening the audience for contemporary dance beyond the formal dance community. This has meant performing at non-traditional venues, often outside Vancouver's urban core. We also utilize the physicality that we develop in daily technique classes without overly scrutinizing its profundity, aiming to reduce some of the "preciousness" that often surrounds our art form. Recently, this has resulted in more humorous pieces, transparent social commentary, and ventures into theatrical performance artworks.

## Looking Back

After leaving SFU we had wide open schedules, a small collection of choreographed works, and a company name. As far as what to do next, we hadn't a clue. Even though our educa-



Dancers Jenn Edwards and Jennifer Aoki. Photo by Philippa Myler.

tion had afforded us fantastic mentorship, we were stuck on the practical matter of where to begin. Scouring the internet for performance opportunities, and taking full advantage of any possible connections, we managed to secure a spot in an arts festival at a small theatre. There was no overhead, which suited our non-existent budget, and we were the first-ever dance troupe to perform at Second Storey Theatre. It was as if our outsider status in the dance world was forcing us to fulfill our mandate of being accessible. We found ourselves performing in a non-traditional venue, in front of an audience foreign to dance. It was all we could find at the time, and it conveniently suited our founding mission statement.

We continued to jump on any and all performance opportunities, which started to inform the work we were creating. A private function at the Planetarium necessitated a cosmic-themed piece, so we lit ourselves with flashlights. There was an open slot in a Halloween-themed show, so we transformed a serious piece about violence and miscommunication to include three zombies. We were recently featured in Port Moody's Wearable Art Awards showcase, which necessitated stretching a solo into a duet so it would fill a long, V-shaped runway.

As the year progressed, we kept creating in the studio, enlisting the mentorship of more established dance artists, dramaturges, and our peers. Without any funding, we could only afford a limited number of hours in real dance studios. Our biggest concern became finding a way to supplement those precious hours so we started taking over spare rooms in community centers, using hallways if the centers were fully booked. This was quite a departure from the free, unlimited and secure studio space we had been privileged to work in while studying at SFU. As time went on we became more and

more resourceful and adept at being creative and professional in distracting, makeshift settings.

By our eighth month together we decided to create, produce and perform our own full-length show. Dusting off our handy On-The-Move binders from years ago, we set about inviting a guest choreographer, collaborating with composers and live musicians, shooting an original dance film, writing a press release, designing publicity materials, and assembling enough costumes and props for the six different pieces we had developed. It was a far more ambitious project than we had first imagined.

Looking back, it's hard not to laugh at some of the strange lengths we went to in preparation for this show, which we named *Stories From The Second Floor*. In order to see the pieces holistically we often used a digital camera and found the most ingenious ways of setting it up, such as balancing the device on a shirt and a book, atop a ballet barre. Community centers didn't always fit our rehearsal needs, and we felt guilty reminding six-year-olds that their birthday parties had run over their booking times by fifteen minutes. So we took advantage of rare mutual days off to drive way out to the suburbs, wherever we could find some free, uninterrupted studio time. Our performance stage was to be unusually small for dance, so we meticulously paced out and marked similar dimensions using socks, scarves, and flattened pairs of pants while rehearsing in the studio.

We were surprised to find that *Stories From The Second Floor* was generating some buzz and tickets were selling out quickly. Tensions rose as we had limited hours to rehearse with our live musicians, and lots of spoken text to memorize for the transitions. Also, the "messy sections" of movement required more "cleaning up" than we had time for. On top of it all, the composer for one particularly theatrical piece made a last minute decision to splice our vocal parts into the music; the only available place with the right acoustics to record our voices was one of our cars. As the show was scheduled for a Tuesday night, we could only begin our technical and dress rehearsals after the theatre manager arrived from his day job to let us in the building. We scrambled to polish the technical transitions between the six pieces in our eclectic show in a mere two and a half hours. There was no time to be nervous; suddenly it was eight o'clock. From the very top of the show, it was clear that our raw, honest performances were drawing the audience in - they engaged completely, laughing and wincing at all the right times, and gleaning insight into the arduous yet hilarious process behind the mere hour of dance they beheld. In our intimate setting, we fed off of the energy in the crowd, as they fed off of us. Some audience members admitted to being apprehensive about attending a contemporary dance show for fear of "not getting it." During a short talk-back session after the show, many of these same people expressed relief at feeling a connection to us through our humor, clear the-

matic intentions, facial expressivity, musical interpretation, and the kinetic flow of our movement. These encouraging reactions have provided some momentum for the work ahead of us.

We are also fuelled by reflections of our first year as Triadic Dance Works. The dead crow in the tree, the zombies, the car that became a recording studio, and the socks that marked out our stage dimensions are just a few of the memories that have shaped a collective identity, one that we plan on using to make dance for a long time to come.

*Triadic Dance Works* is a dance collective comprised of Philippa Myler, Jenn Edwards, and Jennifer Aoki. For more information, visit: [www.triadicdanceworks.ca](http://www.triadicdanceworks.ca)



Members of Triadic Dance Works. Photo by Dan Cento