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Pulse: Human Landscape makes environmental connection

Pulse | Ellyn Wexler

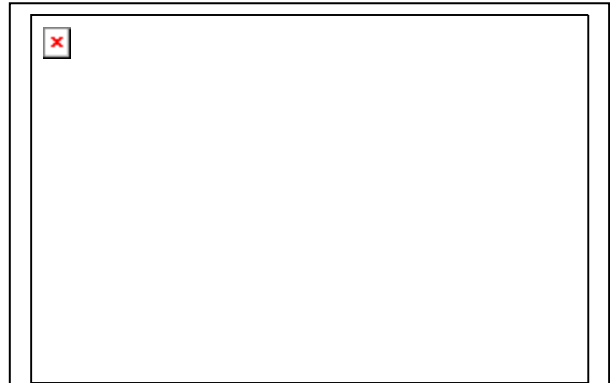
A suburban Connecticut high school's career day proved pivotal to Malcolm Shute's future as a contemporary dance artist.

Student participants were to attend four different presentations by community members who volunteered to discuss their vocations. The first three decisions were quick and easy for the teenager, but the fourth required more thought. Having "acted in plays and played trombone in the band," Shute says he "finally picked 'dancer' because it sounded close to 'actor.'"

The modern dancer who led that session eventually became Shute's teacher, and he experienced a defining moment in her studio.

"We were improvising, which I enjoyed because it let me forget about dance technique for a while and just move," he recalls. "I ended my dance curled into a corner somehow, sweaty and breathing hard, looking out on the Marley-covered floor of the basement studio thinking, 'Oh, so that's it.'"

Shute's father, "a musician and sometimes painter," encouraged his son's interest in the arts, and both parents agreed to support him "on the condition that I study an academic subject as well as dance at college." Shute complied, graduating from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with two



Jennifer Mueller
Malcolm Shute, artistic director of Human Landscape Dance, performs "Looking Over My Shoulder."

bachelor of arts degrees — one in dance, the other in English.

When Shute's wife Jennifer was offered a "good job at an environmental nonprofit" in D.C. in 1999, the couple opted to relocate.

"I liked the local dance scene, so we settled here," he says.

Dancing with local companies led by Nancy Havlik and Jane Franklin for about five years changed the young dancer's ideas about performing.

"I had the idea that to perform well, I had to make my movements as big, high and extreme as possible. I would come off stage with sweat streaming into my eyes and muscles vibrating with exhaustion.

"It took me a few years to realize that performing with delicacy and sustainment could be just as visually

interesting onstage, and that moments of low energy helped emphasize moments of high energy. "

After completing a master of fine arts in dance with a concentration in choreography at the University of Maryland in 2006, Shute auditioned for post-modern choreographer Trisha Brown in New York.

"As we performed the audition combinations, I realized that I was expected to just do the movement without putting much thought into it. I was surprised to discover that I was more interested in exploring the movement, attempting it with different initiation points or changing the pace at times, than I was in doing the movement."

"As a result, I had a great time, but I was not asked to come back. It was a turning point in my career: I knew I would perform less and choreograph more thereafter."

Shute felt ready for a company of his own.

"I started up my own dance company because I felt I had to. It was the clear road for me," he says.

To showcase his artistic vision — in short, "an examination of the relationships between people and the environments we inhabit" — he founded Human Landscape Dance (HLD).

"Dance does not take place in a vacuum. The context within which we perform says as much as the movements," Shute explains. "By plying the counter-tension between person and space, this group

reveals humanity's interdependence with our world."

He credits his 20 years of contact improvisation, "a movement practice in which dancers, sharing weight, move in response to the shifting point of contact between them," Shute says, as a major influence on his approach to choreography. The practice, he adds, "has translated in my work into a strong emphasis on touch and close partnering."

This intimacy is a trademark of Shute's choreography.

"Bodies mold together in unexpected ways: a leg stretched across a shoulder, a thumb pressing under a chin, or two bodies so entwined that one covers the other completely. The human dance of love, hate, parting and supporting are played out in different degrees of touch. Each partner writes herself into the fabric of the other."

As a Certified Movement Analyst, Shute's training in the "qualities and patterns of movement applicable to physical therapy, movement practices and social analysis," has been useful as well, especially in the choreography classes he teaches at Towson University "to help my students understand where they may add dynamic variation to their dances or draw the audience's eye onstage."

On Saturday evening at Takoma Park's Contradiction Dance, Shute's company will perform two pieces. The first "Closet Dances," a series of four dances that explore tense relationships, is set in a walk-in closet. Confined in that intimate space, the dancers experience intensified "closet relationships," Shute

says, "the kind that we hide while pretending everything is just fine."

It's a recurring theme in his work.

"I make dances about relationships between people, especially relationships at a crisis point," he says. "I use different degrees of touch to depict a variety of emotional states, such as conflict, care, love and parting.

"My dancers explore many degrees of touch: the aggressive grab of a partner's ankle, sensual tuck of chin against neck, irritated push of hand on hand, reckless winding of elbow around neck. In my dances, touch is a means of communication."

The second piece, "Leaving Home," which HLD performed on the National Mall in 2007 and a Metro Dance Award winner for excellence in sound design and original composition, stages a metaphoric birth in a city park.

"The dance asks 'Which natural processes do we yet allow ourselves — or are we forced — to experience? Is there anything beyond sex, giving birth and death from which we are blocking ourselves?'"

"It also questions the meaning of home. Set on grass, it recalls the sense of familiarity and kinship we experience in

the woods. If we feel at home in nature, why do we erect walls around ourselves?

"The dancers, ringed by a cloth barrier, experience varying degrees of difficulty in crossing this low wall. They express our sometimes paradoxical attitude toward nature."

Since two of his "great loves in life" are dance and travel, Shute plans to take his group "to as many new countries as possible."

"Dance breaks language barriers," he asserts. "I hope to show my work to as many eyes and ears as I can wrest away from their TVs."

Human Landscape Dance, as well as area bands The Able Birds and Scott and Friends, will perform from 8 to 11 p.m. on Saturday at Contradiction Dance, 7014 Westmoreland Ave., Suite A, Takoma Park. Admission is \$10 at the door. Visit www.hldance.org.

This column is intended as a place to tap the pulse of some of the multitude of creative people and organizations that constitute Montgomery County's professional arts community and celebrate their achievements. Your comments and suggestions are welcome; e-mail ewexler@gazette.net.

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