

DANCE

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Body language

"Contemporary dance" is multilingual. Capisce?

By Asimina Chremos



SHE'S LYING Rachel Thorne Germond gets down in her new solo.

Photo: Brad Taylor

It's pretty easy to tell a B-girl from a ballerina. A quick glance at the footwear alone is enough to clue in even the most culturally illiterate among us. Each dancer represents a form—hip-hop and ballet—that has easily recognizable movements. But when it comes to the varying shades of what's broadly called "contemporary dance," it can be much harder to parse the differences.

When we interviewed Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's artistic director, Jim Vincent, a few years ago and queried him on the stylistic evolution of the troupe since Lou Conte's departure, he said, "I would call what we do 'contemporary dance.'□" Rachel Thorne Germond—an indie choreographer whose show, "Fours," runs at Links Hall this weekend—uses the same "contemporary dance" wording in her press release and website. Yet, the two ensembles are worlds apart in both style and substance. One of the most radical differences between the groups is the way the dancers train their bodies. Although they don't perform classical ballets, HSDC dancers begin their rehearsal day with a ballet class. This means they work on a skill set originally developed in the royal courts of Europe during the 1700s. Think pointed toes, turned-out legs, graceful, rounded arm shapes, spins on one vertical leg, soaring jumps.

Germond, on the other hand, trains her pickup-troupe members in Klein-Mahler technique, originally developed in 1972 in New York as *Klein Technique™* by Susan Klein, a dancer who was looking for a way to heal from an injury and further developed by Barbara Mahler. The technique is meditative, consisting mainly of standing with the feet aligned under the hip joints, toes pointed ahead, and slowly moving into a forward fold starting with the top of the head falling forward in a move called a "rolldown." The focus is to sense how the bones act as conductors for gravity while releasing unnecessary muscular tension, thereby facilitating ease of motion.

Google yet another Chicago dance artist, Molly Shanahan, and you'll see her work described as "contemporary modern dance." Shanahan prepares her body neither with *grands pliés* nor rolldowns. At the recent OTHER Dance Festival, Shanahan and her Mad Shak troupe were lying on their backs with their legs up, calves resting on chair seats, while coach Kathleen Aharoni gave the dancers a lesson in a subtle system of "awareness through movement" developed in the 1940s by Moshé Feldenkrais. Verbally talking the dancers through exercises, Aharoni invites them to be mindful of the changes that occur throughout their bodies, even with a small motion of the head or an arm.

The various training approaches employed by different dance companies directly affect what you see on the stage. Choreographers and dancers collude in creating movement languages that reference how they view their fundamental material: the human body. So, while much dance goes under the name of *contemporary*, in the sense of being current and modern, there's a wide range of approaches and values represented. Your like or dislike for a dance performance may have a lot to do with what "language" you recognize and understand.

-Asimina Chremos

