

Break Open Play

THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE – CGI YOUTH COMMISSION FOR DANCE,
A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

CHOREOGRAPHED BY MATJASH MROZEWSKI

Study Guide

National Arts Centre, Dance
2003-2004 Season

Cathy Levy
Producer, Dance Programming



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This Study Guide was written and researched by **Katherine Cornell**
for the National Arts Centre Dance Department, August 2003.
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About this Study Guide

This guide is formatted in easy-to-photocopy individual sections. They may be used separately or in whatever combination works best for your class. Here is an outline of the contents of each section.

Introduction to the National Arts Centre's Youth Commission for Dance: a brief overview of the Youth Commission for Dance, a new initiative of the Dance Department in partnership with the Canada Council for the Arts.

The Making of *Break Open Play*: includes the production timeline and artistic motivation behind the creation of this new 60 minute dance work.

Meet Matt: a biography of Matjash Mrozewski, choreographer of *Break Open Play*.

In Conversation with the artistic team: a list of the cast and crew with brief interviews with the 5 dancers ("interpreters"), the composer and the costume designer of *Break Open Play*.

Matt's Choreography in Context - a brief history of contemporary dance since the twentieth century.

Classroom Activities/Lesson Plans: pre- and post- performance ideas.

Writing responses to *Break Open Play*: the importance of writing about art.

Bibliography/Resources: a select list of websites, references and links to arts education, performance venues and dance companies & artists.

Introduction to the National Arts Centre Youth Commission for Dance

This year marks the beginning of the National Arts Centre Youth Commission for Dance, a partnership with the Canada Council for the Arts, an exciting new initiative aimed at Canadian youth. During each of the next three seasons, a Canadian choreographer is being commissioned to create a new dance work aimed specifically at teenagers. The goals of this project are to widen the existing Canadian dance repertoire for young audiences; to emphasize our commitment to community and national partnerships; and to reinforce dance for young audiences as part of an ongoing aesthetic education. The Youth Commission for Dance underscores the NAC's commitment to youth and educational activities. The first piece for five dancers will be choreographed by the young Toronto dancer-choreographer Matjash Mrozewski, who has created works for several dance companies in Canada, the US and Europe. Break Open Play is an inquisitive and playful piece which explores creativity and design. It will offer meaning on different levels for audiences of all ages, while embracing the NAC Youth Commission's spirit of freshness and experimentation.

Break Open Play is co-produced by the Candance Network Creation Fund, the Brian Webb Dance Company (Edmonton), Harbourfront Centre (Toronto), and the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. The work will tour in the fall of 2004 to each of these cities. Break Open Play has also received financial assistance from the Laidlaw Foundation and from Terry Guilbault. This project would not have come this far, this fast, without the enthusiasm and dedication of Anne Valois, Head of the Dance Section of the Canada Council for the Arts, who has made a 3-year commitment to this partnership.

**Cathy Levy, Producer Dance Programming
National Arts Centre**

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The Making of *Break Open Play*

Choreographer

Matjash Mrozewski

Composer

Owen Belton

Lighting Designer

Roelof Peter Snippe

Costume Designer

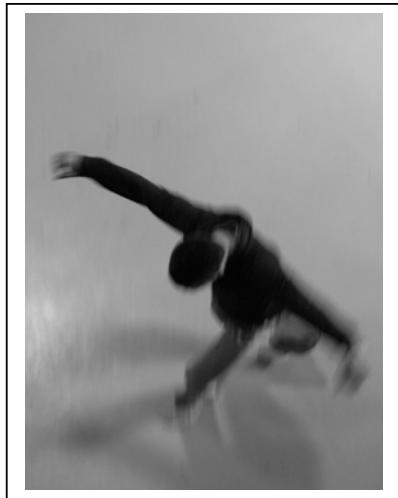
Samara McAdam

Dancers

**Kate Franklin
Sebastian Mena
Shawn Newman
Keiko Ninomiya
Anisa Tejpar**

Photographer

Neil Hodge



Timeline

- ⇒ March 2002 Initial conversations between Mrozewski and the National Arts Centre begin.
- ⇒ Nov. 2002 First meeting of the NAC Youth Focus Group.
- ⇒ Dec. 2002 Mrozewski begins to write and think about *Break Open Play*. Administration begins.

"I don't think I've ever done so much work on a new piece without actually being in the studio ... I got so many great books by directors. For some reason, reading more about theatre than dance was interesting to me, I got more of a global perspective ... It was heartening to read because there are so many different perspectives on the way people work. It was refreshing to read about so many people with a sense of vision. You can just see how experience leads you to that place."

Matjash Mrozewski

- ⇒ Jan. 2003 Mrozewski begins collaboration with McAdam and Snippe in Toronto; Mrozewski flies to Vancouver to work with Belton.

"I went there with very little idea of what I was going to do. So on the flight there, I made this list of all these different words/thoughts I wanted to discuss [with Owen] – 90% of which aren't necessarily in the piece. I just thought I've got to have some ideas swimming in my brain. But on my flight back, I spent almost the whole flight writing sentences and paragraphs. Because when we started talking, that back and forth helped so much, some of those ideas just exploded into something tangible. It was a really important trip because I came away with the seeds of the piece."

Matjash Mrozewski

- ⇒ Feb. 2003 Audition call for dancers.
- ⇒ April 2003 First creation period (all studio sessions are videotaped); video conference call with the NAC Youth Focus Group at the end of the two-week creation period.
- ⇒ May/June 2003 Mrozewski approves costume sketches, watches videos and listens to the music while working on other projects.
- ⇒ July/Aug. 2003 Mrozewski continues to refine and write about the ending of *Break Open Play*; Belton sends more of the music and McAdam begins creating the costumes
- ⇒ Sept. 2003 Costume fittings.
- ⇒ Oct./Nov. 2003 Second creation/rehearsal period; dancers wear costumes, use props, and work with lighting; Mrozewski finishes creating *Break Open Play* and rehearsals of finalized material continues.
- ⇒ Nov. 28, 2003 **World Premiere *Break Open Play*.**

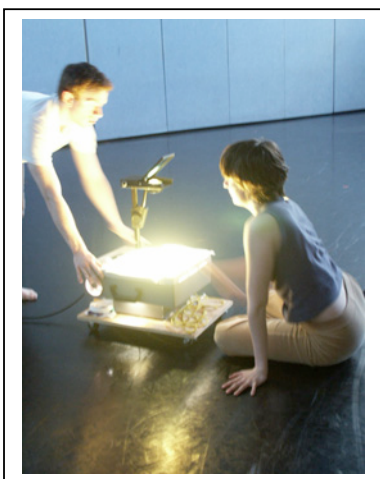
Motivation Behind *Break Open Play*

Break Open Play, a full-length work in four parts, depicts the creative act of artistic problem-solving through the body. This abstract ballet by choreographer Matjash (Matt) Mrozewski will premiere on November 28th, 2003 at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa (for more about the term, “abstract ballet”, please see the chapter “Matt’s Choreography in Context”). *Break Open Play* explores the act of creation from the development of simple ideas into complex arrangements. This contemporary dance piece is playful, evocative and introspective.

Section One: The Meeting

The piece begins unconventionally, with the curtains up. As the audience enters the theatre, it sees a backdrop of white paper and a white floor. This blank white canvas haunts all artists at the beginning of the creative process. Activity behind the canvas suggests a workshop in progress. The colourful dancers enter individually for the first section. Matt explains, “The bright and multi-coloured costumes will just explode against the white floor and backdrop – it’s like the dancers are painting with their bodies in bright colours against the paper. The dance is high-energy and aggressive, filled with references to hip-hop, break-dancing, karate, capoeira, ballet, modern dance, and jazz ... After a few minutes, the group fragments to reveal some of the personalities and relationships between the cast.” The characters express their emotions through intense movement sequences. They are curious, playful, sensual, angry, adversarial, tender and aggressive all at once. The dancers end the first section on the floor; their exhaustion and sense of community is apparent.

Section Two: Exploration



Matt describes the second movement of *Break Open Play* as follows, “This section is about discovery, play, improvisation; reflected physically with props and the growth of the dancers’ characters.” The props may be found in a visual arts classroom and include: paper, scissors, markers, string, chairs, tables and an overhead projector. The dancers transform the projector, a familiar tool, into a toy in the creative process. The projector’s light catches and exposes the dancers. Matt imagines that “the projector and the idea of ‘projections’ says many things. There is a whole voyeuristic angle to it: the public eye, the opinions of peers and the way they colour their view of others.” As this section evolves, the dancers reveal parts of the backstage area.

Section Three: Synthesis

In the third section, the dancers integrate all the elements explored in the previous section. They try to construct something on stage, as if trying to create a 'work of art' with all of the results of their previous experiments. This section uses different levels on stage; the inclusion of varied heights makes the action even more chaotic. Matt explains, "Originally, when I was thinking of how I would synthesize all of our gathered material, I was trapped with this idea of story or narrative with all the materials– but that kind of thinking is far too simplistic and would eliminate all of the multiple meanings and impressions gathered from the objects played within the second section."



Section Four: Epilogue

This final section does not define creativity but demonstrates the possible results of artistic investigation. The audience sees the dancers growing as people, as they explore their craft. The depth of complex investigation in the first three sections leads the characters to a simpler place in the final section.

Break Open Play challenges audiences young and old to contemplate their own creativity. The piece entertains, provokes, and inspires students to create art. Matt reflects, "As the piece progresses, the dancers make more discoveries about themselves and each other – exploring physically as well as emotionally." The audience leaves with a sense of the creative journey. Matt boldly illustrates improvisation and the arc of creation in *Break Open Play*.

Meet Matt

Matjash Mrozewski is one of the busiest artists I've ever met. Most established choreographers would be jealous of all the work he is getting. "I know my position is quite enviable right now... I can see my future mapped out for the next years."

My first impression of Matt: he is a frenetic, intense, charismatic, impulsive, passionate, manic obsessed with the human condition; in other words he is an artist. Matt is constantly creating movement, as a result people have been clamoring about his artistic potential since he was a young adult. Like many dancers he talks not just with his hands but with his entire body. Choreography hovers above him like a cloud just waiting to explode in a storm of movement.

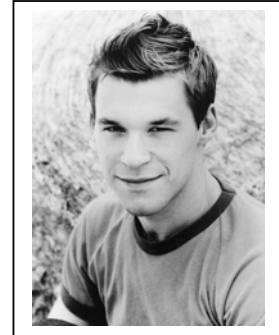


Photo: Cylla von Tiedemann

Like many of his peers, Matt studied at the National Ballet School. His dynamic temperament and interest in choreography was evident from an early age. "The School hadn't had any workshops for a while, and I had seen old yearbooks that had mentioned choreographic workshops. So I approached Mavis Staines [principal of the National Ballet School] when I was fourteen, and I asked her if we could have one. The first year [1989/90]... I choreographed three works totaling twenty odd minutes, so there was just a brief showing for the school. Then it snowballed from there. The next year there were three choreographers, and... now it's called the Stephen Godfrey Workshop. I'd like to think I had a hand in getting [the workshops] going again." His productive output at these workshops has been compared to that of another unique male student, James Kudelka. And as if his work in the school's workshops wasn't enough, in his graduating year Matt presented a piece at the company's choreographic workshop as well. This proactive teen appeared ready for the next step.

In 1994, he joined the corps of the National Ballet of Canada at age eighteen. He danced in the company for three years. The lack of challenging roles offered to members of the corps frustrated Matt. A friend encouraged him to audition for a ballet company in Europe, Le Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève. He began a new journey.

In 1997, at the age of twenty-one Matt left his friends and family for Geneva. "I felt the change was healthy," he insisted. He spent a year in Geneva and then moved on to Monte Carlo to dance with the famous Les Ballets de Monte Carlo. Matt put his own creations on hold while in Europe and honed his craft as a dancer. Performing in a diverse range of choreography revealed to him "totally different ways of working, totally different ways of seeing the body." He expanded his outlook on dance and gained valuable experience. Matt returned to Toronto in August 1999 to dance with the National Ballet again. Ironically, the community welcomed him back as an experienced choreographer even though choreography had not been his focus abroad. Matt feels that "I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now if I hadn't gone to Europe."

When asked about coming back to Canada, Matt replied, "I just came back to re-focus." Europe renewed and revitalized Matt. Choreography quickly became a driving force in his life.

Commissions poured in and Matt focused on the task at hand, developing his choreographic voice.

The commissions from Toronto Dance Theatre and the National Ballet stand out as stepping-stones in his choreographic career. When asked about straddling the ballet and modern dance communities, Matt was indifferent. “I don’t want to limit myself. I’m not a big fan of speaking in absolutes ‘cause you never know when you might change your mind. Obviously in the ballet world there is a certain energy in the room, a certain neuroticism, which I know there is in the modern world, but it just manifests itself differently ... One of my first FFIDA pieces was for Carolyn Woods [of Dancemakers], who I wanted to dance with two ballet dancers. But somehow we all just end up being dancers in a room.” His dancers rave about being in a room with Matt. He is just fun.

Since leaving the National Ballet in 2001, Matt participated in the New York City Ballet choreographic Institute and created works for the Milwaukee Ballet, Rex Harrington, the National Ballet School, the Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, the Copenhagen International Ballet, the York University Dance Ensemble, Toronto Dance Theatre and the National Ballet of Canada. His provocative hour-long dance film, *Year of the Lion*, premiered on CBC’s Opening Night in January 2003. Matt has also shown works at Dancers for Life, the Canada Dance Festival, the Fringe Festival of Independent Dance Artists, Dusk Dances, Fashion Cares and A Celebration of the Works of Canadian Artists for HRH Prince of Wales.



Alejandra Perez-Gomez, Tanya Howard, Richard Landry and Je-an Salas in Mrozewski’s “A Delicate Battle”.
Photographer: Cylla von Tiedemann

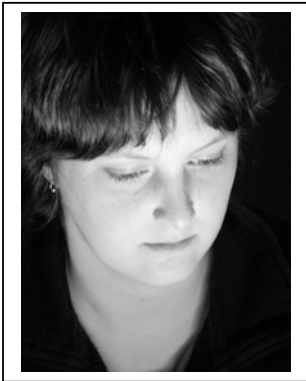
Matt is a whirlwind of energy; he doesn’t stand still – not for a moment. He communicates with speed and intensity; creativity swirls about him like a flurry. Many opportunities have come his way, but he also has been very diligent and determined about his work. He constantly pushes himself with new risks and challenges. Matt continues to follow the road less traveled.

Based on interviews with Katherine Cornell from 2001 to 2003. Excerpts published by *The Dance Current* magazine.

In Conversation with the artistic team

These five eclectic young dancers come from diverse backgrounds. They each bring a unique and multi-disciplinary approach to the creative process. Matt explains why he chose these dancers, “The Youth Focus Group asked if I would have teenagers in the piece. I worked with teenagers before at the National Ballet School and the Dancers for Life gala. Teens have school all day, lots of homework and then many extra-curricular activities; logistically, I couldn’t go there. This piece is the first time I’ve wanted to work with improvisation. I needed dancers who had a high level of experience for their age. The dancers are all independents too, which made scheduling easier. All of them have, at some point, choreographed something or taught.” These talented artists are not other-worldly contortionists, they are human. Matt continues, “With all my pieces there is a very human element. Audiences will hopefully empathize with the person on stage.” In others words, the students see themselves on stage.

These short interviews provide a brief insight into the dancers’ backgrounds. We hope that with this information, students will ask in-depth questions about the creative process during the talk-back sessions with Matt and the dancers.



Kate Franklin

Age: 23

Hometown: North Bay, Ontario

Favourite Authors: Anything by Irvine Welsh (author of *Trainspotting*) and John Steinbeck

Question: **When did you start dancing?**

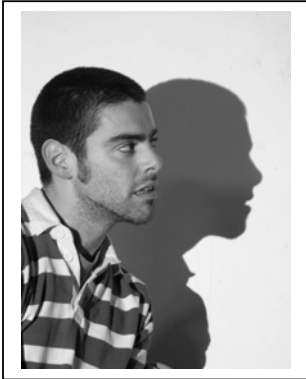
Kate: *“I started to dance when I was four at a recreational dance school in North Bay. I left North Bay at thirteen to go to the Quinte School of Ballet in Belleville [a residential training institution]. Quinte Ballet School was kind of neat because we all went to a regular high school. In the morning we went to academic classes and in the afternoon we left and got credit for our dance classes.”*

Question: **What did you do after graduation?**

Kate: *“I went out to Vancouver to do the Mentor Program at Ballet B.C. for a year. Then I stayed in Vancouver to be an independent dancer and choreographer. After that year in Vancouver, I went to Toronto to do Toronto Dance Theatre’s (TDT) three-week Spring Workshop. I auditioned for TDT and became an intern for a year. Now I’m an independent again.”*

Question: **Why did you want to be a dancer in this piece?**

Kate: *"I like Matt's work and his style. I like that he is classically trained like myself. I thought that I would like him as a young choreographer. I'm very impressed by what he has done. He is just on fire! At the audition, my feelings were confirmed ... I was excited when I heard that the piece was being created with a particular age group in mind because I feel dance needs to renew its audience. Making a work that speaks to a younger generation will hopefully ensure that people keep coming to see dance."*



Sebastian Mena

Age: 25

Hometown: Victoria, British Columbia

Favourite movies: *"I love martial arts movies, just for the choreography of it. I'm big of foreign flicks too. I don't think I could pick just one."*

Question: **Why did you decide to be a performance artist?**

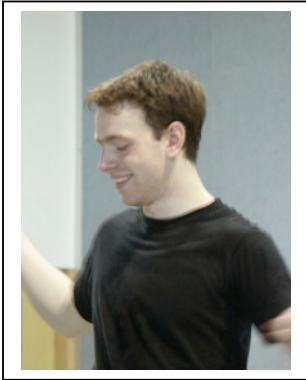
Sebastian: *"My family always told me that I needed to do theatre. I was really lucky I got a professional theatre gig when I was fourteen. Those theatre jobs were my summers; I would work with them intensively, we would do a show, and a tour and then I would go back to regular school. I worked with this theatre company and through them I started doing movement workshops. One workshop leader said, 'You've got to go to a dance class', I did and that was it. I started dancing when I was nineteen. I've been training independently in modern dance."*

Question: **I understand you moved to Toronto last year. What were you doing before that?**

Sebastian: *"I was Nelly Furtado's back-up dancer on her 2002 'Burning the Spotlight' world tour. I'm very proud of that. It taught me so much and it gave me a lot of performing experience. The tour taught me a lot about what I have to offer. It gave me a real boost of confidence. It was after the tour that I decided contemporary dance is where I want to be."*

Question: **Are there similarities between creating a theatre show and a dance piece?**

Sebastian: *"Oh yeah, for sure. For me its one in the same you are just using different elements. I don't separate dance and theatre at all. In dancing there is a more specific physicality, that's all."*



Shawn Newman

Age: 22

Hometown: Belleville, Ontario

Favourite books: Murder mysteries, fantasy

Favourite musicians: Billie Holiday, Dave Brubeck

Question: **What styles of dance have you studied?**

Shawn: *"I was four when I started dancing. As I kid, I studied a kind of ballet jazz hybrid, then I did tap, and then line-dancing was a big trend so I did that. At one point, I was doing seven to nine classes a week. I did my first professional show when I was sixteen. But my professional training didn't start until I went to Ryerson University's Theatre School."*

Question: **Which subjects did you like in high school?**

Shawn: *"I really enjoyed sciences; I loved biology. I think there are lots of similarities between scientists and dancers because you have to have an exactness about what you do. It requires a very analytical mind."*

Question: **How does Matt move?**

Shawn: *"I've noticed that Matt has the ability to be very gentle, soft, delicate, intricate and very precise which in the ballet world is stereotypically a woman thing. But he also has the ability to be big, dynamic, strong and really very fluid which tends to be more of a man thing."*

Question: **What is it like working with this young cast in the studio?**

Shawn: *"We are all very very different, but that is part of what makes it work. It has been fun to create relationships with these people. In the past, most of the people I've worked with have been in musical theatre and some of them have been twice my age. This is the first time I've actually done a contract with young dancers who have common interests and we know the same community."*



Keiko Ninomiya

Age: 28

Hometown: Near Nagasaki, Japan (English is Keiko's second language)

Favourite Instrument: Piano

Favourite Kind of Music: Francophone

Question: **How old were you when you started to dance?**

Keiko: *"I started dance when I was seven and I studied ballet. I trained at a private school in Japan. When I was in high school I started modern dance, but I wasn't serious. I went to England and studied musical theatre at the London Studio Centre and then modern dance at the London Contemporary Dance School. Somebody told me Canada is really great and there are great teachers at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. I came to Toronto to attend this school."*

Question: **What is your favourite movie?**

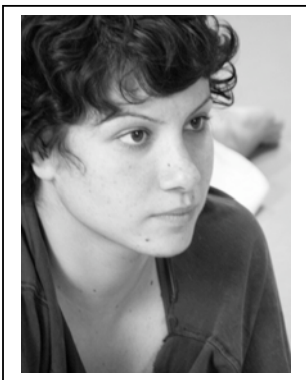
Keiko: *"I came from a small village in Japan and they still don't have a movie theatre. I grew up without it. Now, I'm getting more interested."*

Question: **What did you think of the Owen Belton's music in the audition?**

Keiko: (Keiko's eyes widened with this question.) *"I thought, oh I really want to do this. The music made me think of many images."*

Question: **What is it like in the studio?**

Keiko: *"I'm really enjoying working with this group. It's really a challenge. Everybody is so different."*



Anisa Tejpar

Age: 22

Hometown: Toronto, Ontario

Favourite Movies: *"I love film noir and anything with Joan Crawford in it."*

Question: **When did you start dancing?**

Anisa: *"I was four when I started. I really liked it. My teacher said I should audition for the National Ballet School [a residential training institution]. I was there from Grade 5 'til Grade 12. Then I interned with Toronto Dance Theatre for a year and then I danced with the company. I left TDT after two years when I was 19. Then, I went all over Europe - hung out, took classes and workshops like crazy. I went to New York for a year - hung out, took classes and worked. I went to Europe and New York because I felt like I didn't know enough about dance to really dance. I got back last summer and I haven't stopped working since."*

Question: **You danced for Matt at Toronto Dance Theatre in 2001 and at Dusk Dances this year. Do you see any similarities in his works?**

Anisa: *"I think there is a certain amount of physicality you definitely need to have to do his movement. He has this stylized way of moving. For me, what I find similar is his attention to arms, he is really specific. Its even hands, being unaffected but being articulate. Your hands should be like your feet."*

Question: **What is Matt like in the studio?**

Anisa: *"It is great as a dancer because he is inspired by you. You do something and he'll say 'Oh my God, that was so fierce.' He'll get excited and then he'll add on and there is this buzz. He is just really chilled in the studio. He doesn't get all 'Betty Ballerina' or weird."*

Owen Belton, Composer

Hometown: Burnaby, B.C.

Favourite bands: Radiohead, Coldplay, Massive Attack, generally British music

Owen has written music for dance for the last ten years. He uses both electronic and acoustic instruments, along with computer techniques such as granular synthesis to create his scores. Matt describes how he found Owen, "Owen has worked a lot with [Canadian choreographer] Crystal Pite. [Her choreography and his music] struck me. I knew that there was a connection there. He had mailed CDs out to choreographers and I wrote back right away and said lets keep in touch. My instincts were right there. It's been a good collaboration. I felt there was a real contemporary energy and funkiness to his music. There is a depth to it."

Question: **How did your collaboration with Matt begin?**

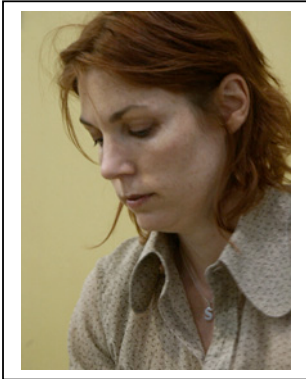
Owen: *"I met Matt back in late January. We talked about possible structures for the piece and a bit about content. The next day, Matt played a few samples of some music he felt quite strongly about ... I started working on a percussive rhythmic section that was one of the first things Matt knew that he wanted. He gave me an approximate tempo and said it needed to be groovy."*

Question: **Tell me about the instruments you've used in *Break Open Play*?**

Owen: *"The acoustic instruments I've been using include accordion, guitar and strings. For one section, I sampled a steel drum. It has been inspiring to write for the guitar again. It was my first instrument, but I haven't used it much before in writing for dance."*

Question: **How do you create music for a choreographer?**

Owen: *“Creating music for a choreographer can be challenging. Sometimes they have pretty specific guidelines, and can ask for a lot of corrections and adjustments - working with Matt has been great though. I’ve had quite a lot of creative freedom. (Matt has usually been quite happy with the things I’ve sent him, which is always nice.)”*



Samara McAdam, Costume Designer

Hometown: Pickering, ON

Favourite designers: *“I’m influenced by the history of fashion. I like designers such as Chanel, Chloë, and Yves St. Laurent.”*

Question: **I understand you studied both fashion and costume design. Could you describe how creating costumes for dance differs from creating clothes for the street?**

Samara: *“Yes, the fabrics have to be different. For dance, I pick lighter fabrics that breathe. It has to have a good stretch to it, not rigid at all. You also have to clean costumes more often in dance. Everything must be washable.”*

Question: **How did you develop your design with Matt for *Break Open Play*?**

Samara: *“I met Matt at Toronto Dance Theatre in November 2002. I managed the costumes for that fall season. We talked backstage. Then he called me this year about Break Open Play. It is a very exciting project ... I worked with the dancers at the workshop in April. Matt really wants different mediums in the costumes like paper, duct tape, and twine so we played with different ideas. I brought swatches [of fabric] to the studio: red, green, yellow, purple, and orange. I want the costumes to be Crayola coloured. The dancers helped choose the colours. Then I went looking for cotton and stretch fabric; the drawings came after. Matt wanted the design to be classic. The dancers look like kids in school. The colours will make it exciting.”*

Matt's Choreography in Context

A brief history of contemporary dance since the twentieth century

Contemporary dance isn't ballet or modern dance. It is a mélange of influences and styles. Contemporary choreographers are free spirit authors able to form their own language not restricted by the limitations of narrative. Matt's eclectic choreographic style is most definitely contemporary dance.

Les Ballets Russes

Contemporary dance began with Diaghilev's Les Ballets Russes at the beginning of the twentieth century. This troupe of ballet dancers and choreographers revolutionized dance by collaborating with provocative composers, visual artists and designers. The dance, music, costumes and sets were created through collaboration instead of under the direction of an institution. No one art form or artist took precedence. Several significant artists collaborated with Les Ballets Russes, including composer Igor Stravinsky, designer Leon Bakst, artist Pablo Picasso, choreographer Michel Fokine and choreographer George Balanchine. Les Ballets Russes performed mixed programs of short ballets instead of full-length narratives; they drove Parisian audiences wild, and influenced the fashions, art and design of the day. This may not seem remarkable, but ideas such as abstract ballet and mixed programmes pioneered by Les Ballet Russes remain influential in North America and Europe to this day.

William Forsythe's Influence



Sandrine Cassini and Matjash Mrozewski in
William Forsythe's "Approximate Sonata"
Les Ballets de Monte Carlo
Photo by: Hans Gerritsen

One of the most significant contemporary choreographers in Europe today is William Forsythe. Forsythe's style builds on George Balanchine's famous neo-classicism. Forsythe mixes pounding electronic music with athletic ballet technique. He also developed an elaborate system of improvisations. His dancers require an incredible amount of flexibility, control and speed to perform his ecstatic choreography. Forsythe has taken ballet to a new level and therefore his influence is internationally pervasive. Matt learned some of Forsythe's pieces and improvisational techniques while working in Canada and Europe. Matt's experiences with European dance influence his choreography.

Matt also studied with choreographer Amanda Miller. Miller worked with William Forsythe and helped him develop some of his choreographic techniques. Matt is passionate about Miller's work. He states, "the other person who I love, and worked with briefly is Amanda Miller. There's something about the roundness to her movement. I really have an affinity with her."

Both Forsythe and Miller use Rudolf Laban's movement analysis as a springboard for their choreography. Matt explains, "Using the nine point system, you give your body external orientations that act as take off and arrival points. This system takes the movement outside of the body and gives the body a relaxed and incredibly lengthened look." Matt left Europe in 1999 to work in North America. His emerging choreography is also comparable to North American dance artists.



Twyla Tharp's New Ballet

The United States is the birthplace of modern dance where, unlike most other countries, it developed concurrently with ballet. Numerous choreographers working in America, such as George Balanchine of the New York City Ballet, pushed the boundaries of dance. Matt's work most resembles that of American choreographer Twyla Tharp. Twyla Tharp creates work for stage and screen, moving between Broadway and ballet companies with ease. She has used popular music, such as works by Jelly Roll Morton, Billy Joel and the Beach Boys, so her style is uniquely American. The *New York Times* describes Tharp's style as manifestly confident in her use of ballet idiom with the mind-set of a modern dancer. Of course, Tharp isn't the only choreographer expanding the ballet idiom. Several Canadian choreographers, both established and emerging, use ballet technique as the springboard for creation.

Canadian Content

Canadian dance, like Canadian culture, is multifaceted and vibrant. Canadian choreographers use ballet, modern, and cultural dance styles in their creations. Other Canadian choreographers utilizing ballet include Édouard Lock of La La La Human Steps, dancer/choreographer Crystal Pite, and John Alleyne of Ballet British Columbia. Canadian choreographers are diverse, eclectic and self-effacing. Matt's choreographic lineage began at the National Ballet of Canada.

The National Ballet employed a resident Canadian choreographer from the beginning in 1951. As a result, the National Ballet has supported Canadian choreography through commissions and workshops. The careers of several choreographers began at the National Ballet including: Grant Strate, Ann Ditchburn, James Kudelka, John Alleyne and Dominique Dumais. These artists started their careers by creating work for the National Ballet and then for companies all around the world. Several other Canadian ballet and modern companies employ resident Canadian choreographers and offer choreographic workshops for their dance artists.

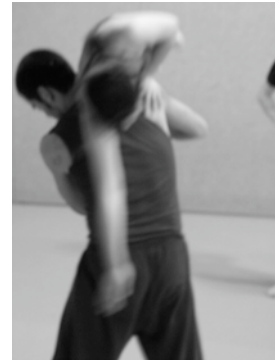
James Kudelka, Artistic Director of The National Ballet of Canada

Canadian James Kudelka is currently Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Canada. Since 1996, Kudelka has nurtured the development of several young choreographers, including Matt. Kudelka's personal choreographic style explores the themes of love, sex and death. His choreography for full-length ballet classics, such as *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*, are intricately woven tapestries of movement. Although Kudelka utilizes the *pointe* shoe and ballet vocabulary in the majority of his works, modern dance idioms unquestionably influenced his

creations. Kudelka's inclusive sensibility has worn off on Matt, who has danced in many of his works.

Choreographic Style

Matt's choreographic aesthetic is still evolving. His movement style represents a hybrid of his training, research and creative impulses. Matt elaborates that his "style of dancing retains the articulation and finesse of classical ballet with a weightedness and relaxed quality of movement from modern." This physical combination produces a sensual quality in his movement. His dancers also recognize a particular attention to the upper body. Anisa Tejpar notes, "He is very detailed in how he wants arms to move." For example, Matt pays attention to the shape of the dancers' fingers while moving. His choreography also incorporates a significant amount of floor work. The depth of his work continues to develop; each piece informing the next.



His choreographic content demonstrates a broad range of themes such as the tension between tradition and innovation. Matt's characters are compelling and very human. Even in his abstract ballets, his movement contains an inherent drama. Audiences empathize with Matt's characters and their journeys. His movement reaches the psyche, it is both physical and emotional. Ultimately, Matt is the product of a rich dance history and his contemporary choreography is unmistakably Canadian.

Using Improvisation

Improvisation can be defined as construction or composition. Improv became a significant creative tool in dance during the 1960s and 1970s. American choreographers such as Merce Cunningham and Steve Paxton used improv as the basis of their creative process. In that era, choreographers experimented with the idea of chance and creating choreography in front of an audience.



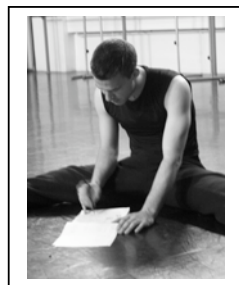
Today, many ballet and modern choreographers use improv in the studio to generate movement material.

Matt confesses that “Working with improv for the first time in this project really took away all my bearings. But it worked out. Improv is a very tricky thing. I was pretty nervous about starting this way, so for the first few days I didn’t go there ... As a choreographer, I don’t want to feel like I’m sitting back and letting the dancers do the work for me. At the same time, I’m opening up the experience to let them bring their creativity forward. But I never take advantage of that situation. I knew that if I didn’t try something, I’d be missing the boat.”

In the studio, Matt put on all kinds of music, from Missy Elliott to Haydn symphonies and asked the dancers to come up with individual moves. These short phrases demonstrated their experience in many movement techniques such as capoeira, karate, jazz, and hip-hop. Matt encouraged the dancers to offer movement phrases even if they thought it was stupid or tacky because he sensed the inherent potential for variation within their movements. The dancers then taught their moves to the group and each artist naturally modified the phrase to suit their body.

Matt describes the process, “Each dancer had to isolate elements from all of these various bits that they liked. For example, the arms patterns of one phrase added to another physical movement from the legs, say, but then they perform it with just an arm. Or maybe something danced slow and standing up could be done very quickly on the floor facing an opposite direction. Everyone starts from the same roots, but the results are so eclectic.” Matt continued the improv by creating longer movement sentences out of these short phrases. Kate Franklin described the result, “you got this combination of crazy funky technical stuff that was like nothing I had ever seen before. Then Matt would shape the phrase that we had built ourselves so that everything had his touch on it, then he would shape it into a larger dance.” Improv is an excellent spring board for creativity.

The dancers particularly enjoyed the improv process. Anisa Tejpar exclaims that “Improv is my favourite thing in the whole world! I can’t imagine anything I’d rather do. ... Matt doesn’t usually use improvisation. It scares him too. He comes from the ballet world and you are told what to do. The choreographer comes in and is very prepared and the music is on and here are the steps. It’s a major transition for him, a take-off point. ” Sebastian Mena was nervous at first, but the use of improv made him feel comfortable. “I knew Matt came from the ballet world. So it was a huge relief when he said we were using improv.” Matt is a choreographic risk-taker. Experimentation and creative exploration represent the foundation of *Break Open Play*.



Classroom Activities/Lesson Plans

These lesson plans approach the curriculum from a multi-disciplinary point of view. These activities are appropriate for any secondary level class, either as preparation or as a follow-up to the performance. Matt often generated movements for *Break Open Play* using improvisation; therefore these activities all employ improv (or stream-of-consciousness writing). Matt feels that “we could all afford to be a little more imaginative and playful” and these activities build on that idea. The students leave the theatre empowered and inspired to bring creative ideas -- in any field -- to realization.

Activity #1 Movement

“Movement Sentences”

Materials required: CD players, a selection of CDs, large space to move
Themes: Link between language and dance, creating movement, phrasing, focus, teamwork
Estimated time: One hour

Examples of Ontario Curriculum Expectations met by this activity

Grade 11 Dance:

- Use technique effectively to extend artistic scope; use improvisation appropriately as a compositional tool for individual and group presentations; use sounds visuals, textures, themes, and historical events as stimuli for improvisation;

Grade 9 English:

- recognize, describe, and use correctly, in oral and written language, the language structures of standard Canadian English and its conventions of grammar and usage, including: parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, prepositions, interjections.

Introduction:

- Discuss the parts of language (ie: phrase, sentence, paragraph) that build stories. Then discuss the idea of building dance, or any other art, with similar building blocks. Introduce the terms “movement phrase” and “movement sentences”.

Activity:

- Ask each student individually to generate a movement phrase to their music. A movement phrase can be a short move (ie: a wave) or a more complex move (ie: sway hips, snap fingers, and stamp right foot). There are no wrong answers.
- Each student finds a partner and teaches him/her their phrase. Then each student will know their own phrase plus one other. With their partners, the students practice the two phrases to music.

- The students then demonstrate and teach all of the phrases to their group (about six students). The group then decides the order and length of the movement phrases to create a movement sentence. Phrases may be repeated within the sentence.
- Once the group has learned the movement, the students choose a piece of music based on tempo, mood, and length.
- The groups will then perform for each other.

Conclusion:

- Immediately following the showing, the students should either discuss or write about the results. They can answer questions like: why did they choose that piece of music; why did they choose their particular order of movement phrases; how did their movement phrase change as other people learned it; how did the music influence the movement; once the whole group pasted the phrases together into a sentence did it become something different; were any of the phrases or sentences influenced by *Break Open Play*? This activity is very similar to the part of the process Matt and the dancers used to create *Break Open Play*. This activity will inform the students' understanding of dance both before and/or after they attend the performance.

Activity #2 Theatre

“The Party” (based on an improv game from *Whose Line is it Anyway?*)

Materials required: Bell, hat, stage space

Themes: Character development, written description, observation and listening skills

Estimated time: 30 minutes

Example of an Ontario Curriculum Expectation met by this activity

Grade 10 Dramatic Arts:

- Identify and explain methods of creating and developing roles within a drama that accurately reflect the intentions of the performers and the circumstances of the drama.

Introduction:

- Ask the students to describe different characters or objects with specific movement traits (i.e.: a Ninja who fights in slow motion or basketball being tossed around the gym). The characters may speak but should have a specific way of moving as well. The characters could be famous people or members of the community performing specific tasks. The students will write a few humorous descriptions on pieces of paper and put them in the hat.

Activity:

- The teacher then chooses four students for the party. Choose one student to host the party. This student is responsible for guessing the characters of the other players once the game is complete. (The class could be separated into groups of 8 – 4 actors, 4 observers – to ensure all students actively participate.)

- The host leaves the room while the three guests choose their characters out of the hat and share them with the audience.
- Host enters. The three students enter the scene when prompted by the doorbell (the teacher rings the bell randomly). These students may only leave the party once the host has correctly identified their character. This game is particularly enjoyable for the audience.
- Repeat the party with a new host and three new guests.

Conclusion:

- Discuss the role of the host. How did the other actors help the host decipher their characters? How did body language play a role in this activity? Is it possible to separate the students' personality from the character they play on stage?

Activity #3 Visual Arts

“Shadow”

Materials required: Overhead projectors, large rolls of paper, writing and drawing supplies
 Themes: Use of the body in visual arts and dance, shadow, using technology in the creative process
 Estimated time: 45 minutes

Examples of Ontario Curriculum Expectations met by this activity

Grade 12 Exploring the Arts:

- Use a variety of techniques (e.g., slow motion in dance) and technical effects (e.g., lighting, music, sound effects, special effects) appropriately within a group framework (e.g., use ensemble techniques in music, design the lighting for a dance production)

Grade 9 Visual Arts:

- produce artworks using traditional and new technologies (e.g., video, computer, scanner, photocopier, digital camera).

Introduction:

- In *Break Open Play*, the dancers play with an overhead projector and shadow. This activity is somewhat inspired by that section of the work. Ask the students to pair up. Then ask the students to brainstorm positive words that describe their partner. Each partner gives the other partner their list. The list will be used later in the activity.

Activity:

- Suspend the paper on a blank wall (if there is not enough paper for the class this activity can be done against a wall with washable paints or against a chalkboard with chalk)
- Turn down the lights and use the overhead projector to illuminate a student in front of the wall, while their partner traces the outline of their shadow on the blank paper. Challenge the students to create contorted body positions that will cast a unique shadow. (If the whole class is participating, try setting up three stations to keep the students moving)

- Once every student has their paper shadow, ask them to take the brainstorm list and write a poem about their shadow.
- Then the students add colour and design to the shadow of themselves.

Conclusion:

- Discuss with the students their choice of colour for their shadow. Ask the partners if they were surprised by the choice of words offered. Brainstorm other possible uses of an overhead projector.

Activity #4 Theatre

“Props”

Materials required: Performance space, props such as a chair, table, and lamp
 Themes: Suspension of disbelief in a theatrical setting, brainstorming, exploring creative boundaries, trust and teamwork
 Estimated time: One hour

Examples of Ontario Curriculum Expectations met by this activity

Grade 9 Integrated Technologies:

- Identify solutions to given design problems that involve existing situations or new ideas;

Grade 9 Dramatic Arts:

- demonstrate an understanding of “willing suspension of disbelief”.

Introduction:

- Matt is fascinated by the use of props. You will see chairs and tables used in unconventional ways in *Break Open Play*. This lesson is directly related to the piece. Discuss the intended use of an everyday item like a pencil (i.e.: writing utensil). Then brainstorm other uses of the item on the board. (i.e.: pointer, arrow, etc.)

Activity:

- Place a chair, a table, and a lamp in front of the class.
- Ask the students to work in small groups of at least three.
- Give the students 10-15 minutes to brainstorm different ways these three props could be used (either literally or abstractly) in an improvised scene
- Once the students have an idea about the scene ask them to attempt a timed improv (i.e.: 2 minutes) in front of the class.
- A logical plot is not the goal of this lesson, the students should try to find as many uses for the three props as possible (ie: the chair becomes a phone, a canoe, and a rock).

Conclusion:

- Discuss how each group manipulated the props to create new materials. How did the actors flip, slide or rotate the item to influence the audience? Did the actors need dialogue to clearly communicate the new use of the prop? Does the classroom look or feel different after this activity?

Writing Responses to *Break Open Play*

It is important for students to write about art. Abstract art opens the realm of possibilities and provides an excellent teaching tool for creative expression. There are no wrong answers when discussing abstract art. The students' imaginations represent the only limitation. Regardless of experience or age, students react profoundly to dance. Ultimately, art is a very personal journey for both the artists and the audience. Although writing about dance could act as an excellent pre-performance lesson, the activities listed below will provoke an in-depth classroom discussion days after the student matinee.

Curriculum Connections

- ◆ use a variety of print and electronic sources to gather information and explore ideas for their written work;
- ◆ identify the literary and informational forms suited to various purposes and audiences and use the forms appropriately in their own writing, with an emphasis on supporting opinions or interpretations with specific information; and,
- ◆ use a variety of organizational techniques to present ideas and supporting details logically and coherently in written work.

Matt hopes that the students feel strongly about *Break Open Play*. He empathizes with the audience and considers their reaction during the creation process. Matt observes, "This is what I like to see when I go to theatre. You'll have a bare stage and a chair; that chair becomes a car, a phone, a shoe and all these things. As an audience, you suspend your disbelief."

Forms of Dance Writing

Writing about dance requires practice. The most common formats of dance writing are previews, reviews, profiles, and journal entries. Beginning with profiles and journal entries provides a non-threatening way for students to start. Profiles are simply short biographies of artists. (Please see the bibliography/resource list for sample articles.) Journal entries begin with the writer's emotional response to the dance. This is an excellent way to build the students' movement vocabulary. (i.e. As a preparation activity, play any short dance video for the class and ask them to write down any words or sentences that describe the dance in their journal. After the video is finished, brainstorm a list of words that describe dance on the board.) Once students feel comfortable, ask them to read previews and reviews. Previews appear in newspapers and magazines in advance of the performance; reviews are printed after opening night.

Writing Reviews

Most effective reviews cross the boundaries between the three major elements of criticism; description, analysis, and evaluation. Description provides the basic data of the event. It deals clearly with the who, what, where, and when questions, leaving how and why for the analysis and evaluation sections. Objective description avoids leading adjectives that colour the writing with personal bias. In analysis, the writer deals with images, ideas, intent, and context of the

work. Ideally in this section, the writer supplies the reasoning behind the description. The aim of evaluation is to address the questions: what was the choreographer's intent? Was the work effective or ineffective, and why? A strong and responsible review includes description and analysis preceding the evaluation.

Activities

When the students attend *Break Open Play*, suggest that they bring paper and a pen to record their initial response. Back in the classroom, their response plus other written material about *Break Open Play* and the choreographer are the building blocks of dance reviews. (Please see the bibliography/resource list for sample articles.)

The primary goal of dance education is to illicit a response from student audiences. Northrop Frye astutely wrote, "Anyone who has much to do with young people soon becomes aware of their obstinate silences: it often happens that the more obviously troubled they are the more silent they become. But behind the insecurity, which is normal enough, there is also a kind of shame about speaking out. If, like the hippies of a generation ago, you confine yourself to formulas of the 'like wow, man' type, you know that you can be invisible in a crowd. As soon as you are actually speaking language you become naked and exposed. That is what I mean by the courage of articulateness."

This Study Guide attempts to empower teachers and students with the courage of articulateness.

About the author:

Katherine Cornell (B.A. History, University of Guelph; M.A. Dance, York University) is a writer, teacher, and historian. She co-wrote the dance history book, *Toronto Dance Theatre, 1968-1998, Stages in a Journey* and has contributed to several magazines, newspapers and anthologies. She teaches at Ryerson University and in the Royal Conservatory of Music's Learning Through the Arts program.

Bibliography/Resources:

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- Huxley, Michael, Witts, Noel (eds.). *20th Century Performance Reader, 2nd Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Neufeld, James. *Power to Rise: The National Ballet of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.
- Pontbriand, Chantal. "Choreographic Masterworks," *Dance Collection Danse magazine*. Number 55 (2003), pp. 11-33.
- Webb, Brian (ed.). *The Responsive Body: A Language of Contemporary Dance*. Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2002.
- Wyman, Max. *Revealing Dance: Selected Writings 1970's-2001*. Toronto: Dance collection Danse, 2001.

Websites of Dance companies that have produced Mrozewski's choreography:

The National Arts Centre - www.nac-cna.ca

The National Ballet of Canada - www.national.ballet.ca

Toronto Dance Theatre - www.tdt.org

Pittsburgh Ballet Theater - www.pbt.org

The Milwaukee Ballet - www.milwaukeeballet.org

Online Articles about Matjash Mrozewski:

http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_11.21.02/arts/mrozewski.html

http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2002-11-21/stage_dancefeature.php

http://thedancecurrent.com/reviews.cfm?review_id=18

<http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/20020505pbt0505fnp2.asp>

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