

# *Diary / Journal intime*

THE NAC – CGI YOUTH COMMISSION FOR DANCE  
A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

CHOREOGRAPHED BY HÉLÈNE BLACKBURN

## STUDY GUIDE

National Arts Centre, Dance  
2005-2006 Season

Cathy Levy  
Producer, Dance Programming



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This Study Guide was written and researched by Véronique Ménard and  
Nicole Turcotte for the National Arts Centre Dance Department, January 2006

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# *Diary / Journal intime*

## STUDY GUIDE

How to Use This Study Guide

Inspired by the title and subject of Hélène Blackburn's dance piece, I wrote this study guide in the form of a diary ("journal intime"), and so the tone of the text is quite personal and intimate. The guide is designed to provide high school teachers and students with some background about contemporary dance, and to prepare them to attend a performance of Hélène Blackburn's *Diary / Journal intime*.

The guide is formatted in easy-to-photocopy individual sections. They may be used separately or in whatever combination works best for your class in order to encourage discussion about contemporary dance in general and this work in particular.

Véronique Ménard

### **Credits**

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Translation: Diana Tyndale

# A Message from Cathy Levy



Dear Teachers,

Welcome to the third commission in our three-year NAC-CGI 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 2003–04, 2004–05 and 2005–06 seasons, we are commissioning a Canadian choreographer 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.

Photo : James Cochrane

The first commission, *Break Open Play*, was choreographed by the young Toronto dancer-choreographer Matjash Mrozewski and was a resounding success. *Break Open Play* was an engaging and dynamic work for five dancers that was beautifully produced and performed. It spoke eloquently to a youth audience about the risk and excitement of creativity itself in a dance vocabulary that was both sophisticated and accessible.

The second commission, *monumental*, was choreographed by co-Artistic Directors Noam Gagnon and Dana Gingras of Vancouver's acclaimed The Holy Body Tattoo. *monumental* was an urban, edgy, and very contemporary investigation into issues of alienation and fitting in. With the company's signature raw energy, *monumental* explored the physical anxiety of urban culture and the overwhelming human need for intimacy.

This season's commission, *Diary / Journal intime*, is choreographed by H  l  ne Blackburn of Montreal's celebrated Cas Public. Composed of a series of duets for eleven dancers, *Diary / Journal intime* revolves around a theme important at any age: love. Intense, energetic, a whirl of movement, Blackburn and her dancers invite the audience to share in the intimacy and power of this most personal of emotions—revealed by this most expressive of art forms.

We're thrilled to be partnering with Cas Public on this initiative, and we hope this study guide helps prepare you and your students for the exciting performance you will experience at the NAC.

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

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 ~ THE ARTISTIC TEAM...4
- 2 ~ *DIARY / JOURNAL INTIME* : A RECORD OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS...7
  - Blackburn : A lifetime of creativity...7
  - Introduction...7
  - The evolution of a dedicated choreographer...7
  - An intimate voyage into Blackburn's universe...9
  - From the beginning to the present day...9
  - Creating hybrid language...9
  - A diary of creativity...10
  - A conversation with H el ene Blackburn...12
  - Meet the *Diary / Journal intime* dancers ...14
- 3 ~ USEFUL TOOLS...17
  - What is contemporary dance...17
  - Feeling more means seeing more...17
  - The creative team...18
- 4 ~ A WORKSHOP IN THE BLACKBURN STYLE...20
- 5 ~ APPENDIX...24
- 6 ~ GLOSSARY...27
- 7 ~ BIBLIOGRAPHY...29

**1 ~ THE ARTISTIC TEAM**  
*Diary / Journal intime*

**Choreographer**

Hélène Blackburn

**Dancers/Performers**

Alejandro De León  
Roxane Duchesne-Roy  
Véronique Dupuis  
Sébastien Forgues  
Christophe Garcia  
Raúl Huaman (apprentice)  
Hanako Hoshimi-Caines  
Louise Michel Jackson  
Georges-Nicolas Tremblay  
Chen Zielinski (apprentice)

**Rehearsal Mistress**

Sophie Michaud

**Pianist**

Laurie Rajotte

**Music**

Jean-Sébastien Bach

**Lighting Designer**

Andréanne Deschênes

**Sound Designer**

Jimmy Lapointe

**Costume Designer**

Hélène Blackburn

**Costumes created by**

Denis Lavoie pour la Carré vert

**Pointe shoes designed and created by**

Luigi Luzio inc.

**Staging Designer**

Hélène Blackburn  
**Video**

Luigi Luzio

**Director of Photography**  
Henry Lemmetti

**Video Montage**  
Kamel Khalifa

**Production and Photography**  
Antonella Pagano

**Technical Director**  
Andréanne Deschênes

**Sound Technician**  
Jimmy Lapointe

**Graphic Designer**  
Lydie Revez

**Artistic Director**  
Hélène Blackburn

## **THE CAS PUBLIC TEAM**

**Artistic Director**  
Hélène Blackburn

**General Manager**  
Lydie Revez

**Development and Touring Coordinator**  
Desea Trujillo

**Development and Booking Director**  
Johanne Tremblay

**Board of Directors**

Denis Pelletier, Denis Bergeron, H  l  ne Blackburn, Rolline  
Laporte,  
Yves St-Pierre, Annie Blackburn, Lydie Revez

## 2 ~ DIARY / JOURNAL INTIME : A RECORD OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

### Hélène Blackburn: A lifetime of creativity

#### INTRODUCTION

Hélène Blackburn is a small person who is hugely passionate, dynamic, generous, and totally dedicated to her work. Any time you see Hélène, she's between rehearsals, between classes she's teaching in different locations, or between trips—not surprising, since her work is known and acclaimed around the world. Spirited, precise, complex, theatrical, sometimes even funny, Hélène Blackburn's choreographic language is as accessible as it is sophisticated.

As soon as I open the door of her dance studio, I'm swept into Hélène's creative universe. In one corner, a few dancers are practising the movements they learned the day before, while others are warming up for rehearsal. After a quick discussion with her office staff, Hélène enters the studio, glances at her notes, talks briefly with one of the dancers... and now the rehearsal can begin.

Hélène Blackburn is right in the middle of creating her latest work, *Diary / Journal intime*, which will have its world premiere at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Nine dancers and two apprentices have gathered to create a dance work about a timeless subject: love. Hélène divides the dancers into small groups and gives them their instructions. That's how her creative process works: she explores, experiments, inquires... "Do you remember your first love?" All the dancers are encouraged to participate by contributing not only physical movements, but their own personal experiences. She's asked them to bring in books, poems or pictures that speak to them of love. A strong believer in collaboration, Hélène involves the whole artistic team in her creative process. Gradually, before my astonished eyes, the dance begins to take shape, to move, to come alive. "Move a little faster there; make that gesture a little bigger..." One by one, Hélène sketches out the movements of the work, modifies them, fine-tunes them, tries out different colours, different textures. It's a fascinating process for everyone involved.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF A DEDICATED CHOREOGRAPHER

After several years of training in ballet and contemporary dance, Hélène Blackburn entered the dance program at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). She choreographed her first works between 1983 and 1989, while dancing with the late Jean-Pierre Perreault's celebrated company.

In 1989 she set aside her career as a dancer to found her own company, Cas Public, and devote herself entirely to exploring, creating and promoting contemporary dance works. A dedicated artist, keenly interested in the role of the artist in society, she worked tirelessly with a faithful core of fellow artists to develop a unique research and development centre for dance.

Her background in ethnology and theatre clearly influenced her choreographic vision, which ultimately is a study of human behaviour.



From the outset, critics acclaimed H el ene Blackburn as one of the most gifted young artists on the new dance scene. The creation of *Cath edrale* in 1988 established her dynamic, boldly innovative style, and launched her international career. In 1996 she obtained her graduate diploma in dance from UQAM. The same year, she strengthened her creative resolve and defined her style more clearly with a transitional work, *Suites Furieuses*, quickly followed by a series of pieces marked by intense energy and physicality, precise and sophisticated performance language, and an innate theatrical sense, all of which were much appreciated by audiences and critics alike.

Always mindful of the importance of shaping the audiences of tomorrow, in 2001 she created her first work for young people, *Nous n'irons plus au bois (If You Go Down to the Woods Today)*. Its accessible blend of physical and verbal language made it an instant hit with viewers of all ages. The following year she created *Courage mon amour (Courage My Love)*, which addressed the fundamental and difficult question, "Why dance?" This work marked H el ene's first foray into the world of sign language, which she used as a basis for unique dance sequences that juxtaposed elements of classical ballet with a more contemporary physical vocabulary. In 2004 she premiered her second work for family audiences, *Barbe Bleue (Blue Beard)*, a modern retelling of the fairy tale by Charles Perrault.

H el ene Blackburn's numerous awards and honours include the Canada Council's Jacqueline Lemieux Prize (1990) for the originality and quality of her work; the Bonnie Bird Choreography Award for North America (1999) awarded by London's prestigious Laban Centre; and, in 2001, the prize awarded by the Office Franco-Qu eb ecois pour la jeunesse in the "creator" category, for *If You Go Down to the Woods Today*, her first work for young audiences.

## An intimate voyage into Blackburn's universe

### FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE PRESENT DAY

The full version of *Diary / Journal intime* that you will be seeing will probably be very different from the short excerpts I saw in the studio during rehearsals. Dance is a living art form in constant evolution, and H el ene Blackburn's creation will no doubt have changed quite a bit. Even so, I'd like to revisit a few moments that really captured my attention.

The dancers take their places, begin to move, build up momentum, fall down, start over. The piece is demanding: the dancers have to be extremely talented and agile in order to perform H el ene's choreography. *Diary / Journal intime* consists of a series of magnificent duets full of intensity, energy and fire. The swiftness and repetition of the movements, the continuous spinning of the dancers on pointe bring the performers to the edge of exhaustion. Their agitation generates a sense of imbalance, almost a kind of madness. The physical beauty of the dancers' bodies hard at work is disconcerting, and draws the viewer intimately into the performance. Each duet highlights the close interaction of the two dancers; it's fascinating to see how each couple exudes a different kind of energy, each dancer bringing his or her unique personality and approach to the piece. Sensitive and intuitive, H el ene Blackburn's work is stamped with a profoundly human touch that the dancers augment by sharing their own experiences of love.

The structure of *Diary / Journal intime* is very aesthetic, the quality of the dancing very high. Beyond the beauty and fluidity of the physical movements, H el ene Blackburn's work is charged with meaning: it literally speaks for itself.

### CREATING A HYBRID LANGUAGE

Finding the poetry in a dancing body: that is one of H el ene Blackburn's primary concerns. Her choreographic style is defined by two seemingly contradictory elements: the poetry of the body, and its physicality. Never one to slip into superficiality, H el ene investigates the limits of physical endurance, pushing her dancers to the point of exhaustion. Her daring, energetic and intense physical language is conveyed with exceptional sensitivity and profound humanity; her works are a veritable living canvas, painted with traces of the dancers' own experience. Their controlled, precise and meticulous movements give rise to incredible dance sequences, and their physical exhaustion is surprisingly beautiful. It is at this moment that the viewer experiences a captivating intimacy, vulnerability and fragility: the beauty of these dancing bodies, their inherent poetry.

H el ene Blackburn's artistic practice is multidisciplinary: she incorporates sign language, the spoken word, theatre and video as important components of the structure and appeal of her work. Her subject matter—which includes such universal themes as fear, love, and courage—resonates with young and old alike, and she skilfully attracts viewers of all ages. Different age groups respond to different levels of narrative and meaning within each work: for example, *If You Go Down to the Woods Today* was designed for an elementary-school audience, but it is just as interesting for the parents, because it contains references directed sometimes at the children, sometimes at the adults. Unwaveringly committed to creating work of the highest quality,

Hélène Blackburn never lapses into simplicity or complacency, even (or perhaps especially) in her pieces for young audiences.

Her latest work, *Diary / Journal intime*, is sure to appeal to a young adult audience not only because of its subject matter but, I believe, because of its multidisciplinary format. The layering of different elements—the spoken word, sign language, dance and video—gives the piece a dynamic energy that recalls the fleeting sequences of video clips. Once again Hélène Blackburn has found a way to connect with a young audience.

### **A DIARY OF CREATIVITY**

Hélène Blackburn is fond of saying that her works are a bit like diaries, and that each new creation has its own travel journal. Like an explorer, she observes, collects, excavates, queries, examines, and assembles interesting bits and pieces that might fit into her next choreography. Her journey is her dance—the process of guiding each new project from the concept to the stage.

Her creative scrapbook contains her ideas; her studio contains the dancers without whom her work could not take shape. Hélène mulls over each new idea for a long time before she starts working on it. “Sometimes an idea will run through my mind for two years before I decide to turn it into a dance piece. Often, by the time I start rehearsals I have a very precise idea of what I want to do and what direction I want to take.”

Hélène’s dancers play an important part in her work in the studio. By assigning specific tasks to the performers, she involves everyone in the creative process. For *Diary / Journal intime*, she asked each of the 11 dancers to write a brief description of their first love. She then had some of them develop short dance sequences using their texts as inspiration; others were instructed to develop an improvisation based on a picture, a word, or a feeling. Thus, while the groups used different sources to develop movements and sequences, all were inspired by the same theme—namely, love. This process of experimentation and development can last hours, days, or even months. You might think the work is being created by the dancers, not the choreographer—but don’t be fooled! They work in close partnership, and each needs the other(s) in order to develop and shape the work.

Every choreographer finds his or her own approach to developing a unique performance language. For Hélène Blackburn, the starting point is her dancers’ bodies, which she finds easier to manipulate than her own instrument. Without constant training, the body quickly loses its physical strength and flexibility; that’s why, Hélène admits, she now relies exclusively on her dancers for inspiration. “In the past, I developed all my movements myself, in the studio, because I was still trying to define my signature,” she recalls. As her unique choreographic style emerged more clearly, she stopped relying on her own body and turned instead to her dancers. At the same time, her work took on new scope and new energy.

Hélène Blackburn is an expert at recognizing a dancer’s particular strengths and talents, and channelling them in the direction she wants the work to take. Indeed, that is the trademark of a good choreographer: the ability to identify and draw out the best in each individual performer, to the maximum benefit of the work as a whole. Choreographers are like

orchestra conductors, in a way: they know all the parts, and they know how to encourage the performers to work together to produce a sublime result. H  l  ne is quick to point out that, while movement itself is the basic element of choreography, it's the way the movement is organized and structured that makes some works beautiful and others bad. Similarly, the most accomplished movements don't necessarily make for the best choreographies. Ultimately, a choreographer's vocation is to be meticulous, to pay careful attention to detail so that even the smallest gesture is charged with meaning within the dance.

## A Conversation with H el ene Blackburn



I was fortunate to be invited to spend some time in H el ene Blackburn's world and to observe her at work. We talked about her dance pieces for young audiences, her inspiration, her choreographic vision, her method of collaborating with dancers and other artists, and her creative process .

**V eronique M enard: You're working on a new piece for young adults. Is it difficult to create a work for such a demanding audience?**

H el ene Blackburn: No, because it's just as challenging to create a show for young people as for a general audience. I try to ensure that the dance is just as sophisticated as in my other works. I want to introduce young audiences to an aesthetic vision. I don't want to settle for something simplistic or complacent; on the contrary—I know adolescent audiences can "take it." Adults have a tendency to overprotect teenagers by restricting their access to certain things on the grounds that they're not ready. Strangely enough, when I'm addressing a young audience I'm tempted to bend the rules, to push the limits, whereas usually when I receive directions I tend to follow them like a good girl.

**VM: Where do you find inspiration for your work for young audiences?**

HB: One source is my 15-year-old daughter. I'm really enjoying watching her grow up. When I was developing this work, I was fortunate enough to meet with a group of teenagers and talk with them about what interested them in general, but mostly about what concerned them in particular. The subject of love was the clear winner!

**VM: How did you choose the dancers for this piece?**

HB: I held auditions. When I'm auditioning dancers, I try to follow my instincts: I might choose them for their physical ability, their past experience, their personality. For instance, one of the dancers in *Diary / Journal intime* has a theatre background, which is interesting for me because my work involves a lot of theatre. Another important factor is how well a dancer fits in with the rest of the company.

**VM: The title of your new piece is *Diary / Journal intime*. What's it about?**

HB: *Diary / Journal intime* is about young love, first love. I want to draw a parallel between romantic love and the passion for dance. I also want to ask some questions, such as, for instance: Can the passion for dance be as powerful as romantic passion? Does being in love feel the same as being passionate about something? I see a clear link between love and the passion for dance: they can induce similar emotions—rejection and abandonment, but also affection, tenderness, intimacy.

**VM: How would you define your creative process?**

HB: Each work is like a travel journal. I collect ideas I'd like to explore; often I put together bits and pieces that, at least to me, have a common theme. Sometimes I'll reflect on an idea for several years before I actually start working on it in the studio. Often, by the time I start putting the work together I have a very good idea of where I want it to go.

**VM: I read that when you start working on a new piece you involve the whole Cas Public team, right down to the office staff—is that right?**

HB: Yes, that's very important to me. When I begin a new piece, I ask the dancers to do some research on the subject of the work; in this case I asked them to write about their first love. The dancers are a great source of inspiration, and I draw on episodes in their lives to construct the work. Once the performers have shared their experiences, we get to work and the piece gradually takes shape over a period of time.

The office staff have a big part to play as well: they're essentially our first audience, and if the piece doesn't work for them I know it won't work for a general audience.

Thus the whole team is very involved in creating the work.

**VM: Physically, how do you work with the dancers?**

HB: I show the dancers three or four movements and I ask them to improvise on them and develop a short movement phrase that I then build on and elaborate. I also really like the equation approach—that is, I give the dancers a problem to solve. For example, for *Diary / Journal intime* I wanted them to create movement sequences based on numbers (two *pas de chats*, three *pas de bourrées*, etc.). They wrote a short text about numbers and used that as a basis for their movement phrases. This approach generates a lot of ideas and movements at once, which gives me a much greater choice.

**VM: At what point in the creative process do your artistic partners come in, and what do they bring to the work?**

HB: In this case, they will come in near the end of the process. Generally speaking, I have a pretty clear idea of the look and feel of each work right from the start, but the other artists add their own special touches to the work.

**VM: Tell me a bit about the design elements of *Diary / Journal intime*.**

HB: There will be hundreds of paper lanterns on the stage, so that we can perform in natural light. As in *Blue Beard*, my previous work for young audiences, I want the set to be fragmented—maybe with canvases hung at the back of the stage, with film and slides projected on them. As for the music, there will be a pianist performing works by J.S. Bach, with the sound of the piano slightly altered. I'll probably do something with amplified voices, and I'm also interested in the sound of the dance itself.

## Meet the *Diary / Journal intime* dancers

Nine dancers and two apprentices took part in the creation of *Diary / Journal intime*. All of them are in their twenties; they come from different parts of the world, and for most of them this is their first professional engagement.



Titre : *Journal intime*  
Chorégraphie : Hélène Blackburn  
Sur la photo : Louise-Michel Jackson  
Photo : Rolline Laporte

I interviewed two of the dancers: Georges-Nicolas Tremblay, who is working with Hélène Blackburn for the first time, and Roxane Duchesne-Roy, who has been a member of the Cas Public company for two years. This is the second of Hélène's works she's participated in, but she has also performed other works with the company.

## GEORGES-NICOLAS TREMBLAY

### **Véronique Ménard: Why did you start dancing?**

Georges-Nicolas Tremblay: When I was 15, a friend invited me to go and see him dance in his high school year-end performance. I decided I'd like to try it myself, and so the following year I signed up for jazz dance lessons. At first I was taking one class a week, but within a year I was dancing whenever I could, nearly every night—much to the despair of my parents, who had to chauffeur me to and from the dance studio! And I haven't stopped!

### **VM: What do you like to do when you're not dancing?**

G-NT: I adore theatre—I studied theatre, and I also really enjoy music.

### **VM: This is the first time you've worked with Hélène Blackburn. What appeals to you about her approach?**

G-NT: I'd seen several of Hélène's works, and what struck me was all the work in pairs and duets. I really wanted to explore that. I also enjoy the teamwork side of the creative process: the communication between the choreographer and the dancers is very interesting. She gives us a lot of freedom in terms of movement and making it our own. As a choreographer myself, I think it's important that the dancers be involved in the creative process.

**VM: Hélène Blackburn certainly expects her dancers to be fully involved in the creative process. Is that difficult for you?**

G-NT: No, because it's easier for me to make a movement my own when it comes from my own body. It's easier to understand the mechanics of the movement, and it comes more naturally than if it were imposed on me. On the other hand, on days when I'm not in top form I prefer to be told what to do!

## ROXANE DUCHESNE-ROY

**Véronique Ménard: When did you first become interested in dance?**

Roxane Duchesne-Roy: When I was little, I used to dance around the house. My father was a musician, so our home was always full of music. When I was still very young I told my parents that my life dream was to dance and to travel, so they signed me up for a creative dance class. I adored it! They told me that if I wanted to dance professionally I should study classical ballet, because they believed it would give me a good foundation. I wasn't thrilled about it, but I did it anyway. I auditioned for the École supérieure de danse de Montréal. I was completely taken with that school, where everyone was as crazy about dance as I was. But I really missed contemporary dance, so I wrote a letter to the school administration asking them to add contemporary dance to the curriculum—and they agreed!

**VM: You trained with the Jeune ballet du Québec. Did that make you want to be a classical dancer?**

RD-R: No, that didn't interest me. A company like Les Grands Ballets Canadiens wouldn't have been a good fit for me; I wanted to join a smaller company that valued and emphasized mutual support, sharing, teamwork and communication. As well, I liked contemporary dance better than the classical repertoire, so Cas Public was the ideal match. The members of the company are a bit like a family: we dance together, travel together, eat together and spend a lot of time together. Sometimes we're together 24 hours a day! That kind of environment and ambiance suit me much better than a big company where the dancers hardly know each other and the atmosphere is very competitive.

**VM: What do you like to do when you're not dancing?**

RD-R: Well, I come from a family of artists, so I like all the arts. I'm also taking a distance learning university course in political science.

**VM: What do you like about Hélène Blackburn's creative approach, particularly for *Diary / Journal intime*?**

RD-R: I really enjoy the communication between the choreographer and the dancers. Many times we'll start with a few basic movements and Hélène will build on them by adding spins, repetitions, or words, or by speeding up some of the gestures. I



like playing with the medium like that. Three or four simple movements can be infinitely transformed and turned into a four-minute sequence! It's impressive to watch how dance is made.

**VM: Do you think H el ene's work will appeal to a young audience?**

RD-R: Oh, yes. Not necessarily because of the movement *per se*, but because of the way the work is structured. I think they'll respond to the parts with video and spoken language. There are also some really beautiful duets that I think they'll find impressive for the sheer physical stamina they require, and the work of the dancers on pointe.

On the other hand, some of them may be a bit uncomfortable with the close physical contact between the dancers in the duets. I remember when I was younger and I would watch contemporary dance on TV, sometimes I thought the dancers were too close and touched too much. It intimidated me. Obviously, things have changed! In this business you have to be completely comfortable with physical contact, because it's very real and very necessary.

**VM: H el ene Blackburn expects her dancers to be highly involved in the creative process. Is that difficult for you?**

RD-R: Yes, because H el ene will often ask us to create short movement sequences, and just as I start to feel comfortable with the movement she'll change some little thing, make it more challenging. Sometimes I feel technically inept and I'm not sure exactly how to go about doing what she's asking, but eventually my body figures it out and the movement starts to flow. H el ene doesn't like her dancers to feel comfortable: she can see it right away, and if we start to get too comfortable she'll do something to shake us up. That's a good thing, because it allows us to develop as dancers and to face new challenges.

## 3 ~ USEFUL TOOLS

This section includes some background to give you a better understanding of contemporary dance, and some guidelines to help you enjoy the performance of *Diary / Journal intime* that you'll be attending.

### **WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY DANCE?**

Unlike other styles of dance (such as ballet, jazz, tap dancing, breakdancing, etc.), contemporary dance doesn't have a set movement vocabulary, which means that contemporary choreographers have to invent their own choreographic language. To do that, they can incorporate a wide variety of elements: other dance forms, theatre, visual art, literature, music, everyday events... in short, just about anything in the artist's life. This huge range of possibilities gives contemporary dance its freshness and originality, and makes every work and every performance unique.

### **FEELING MORE MEANS SEEING MORE**

Learning to appreciate contemporary dance takes most people a little while. Our first few experiences of contemporary dance may seem strange: the dancing bodies may intimidate us, challenge us, surprise us or fascinate us. The dance unfolding before our eyes may not necessarily "tell a story" with a beginning, a middle and an end; we're left to construct our own narrative.

These feelings of disorientation and confusion are quite normal for anyone who is new to contemporary dance. Luckily, the more performances you see, the less confused you'll feel! In contemporary dance, we as viewers are expected to participate actively by allowing our imaginations to embrace the images, the feelings and the impressions the performance suggests to us. There are as many ways of interpreting a contemporary dance piece as there are people in the audience.

Here are a few guidelines to help you understand and enjoy the performance.

- **Put your expectations aside**

Don't watch a dance performance as you would a movie: rather, think of it as a different art form, and don't look for a conventional storyline.

Think of contemporary dance as a kind of dreaming. When we dream, we travel to different places and experience feelings that aren't necessarily linked to each other in a logical way, but because it's only a dream, we accept it all without question. Watching contemporary dance is like dreaming while you're still awake.

- **Feel, don't think**

Be open and receptive to what you are seeing on stage. Let yourself go: experience the different emotions, mental pictures and impressions the dance calls up in you.

- **Watch the images go by**

Watch the images unfolding on the stage as you would watch clouds floating by in the sky.  
Turn off your analytical brain, sit back and let your imagination run free.

All in all, enjoying a contemporary dance performance is quite simple: be open to new experiences, and let your intuition and your emotions guide you.  
*Bon voyage!*

### **THE CREATIVE TEAM**

The dance performance you see on stage is the result of the collaboration of a whole team of artists and creators, most of whom the audience never sees. Each member of the team has a specific job to do, and they work together to present the choreography (and of course the dancers) in the best possible way. They generally work closely with the Choreographer so that they'll have a good understanding of the concept of the work. Different members join the team at different stages of production, depending on the requirements of the specific work.

Here is a list of some of the creative team members and their job descriptions.

### **COSTUME DESIGNER**

A dancer's costume is like a second skin, and helps to make the dancer's movements more visible. The Costume Designer's job is to create a costume that is strong, yet supple enough to allow complete freedom of movement; lightweight, yet able to absorb sweat. Some dance works require costume changes, in which case the costume has to be built so that it can be removed easily and quickly.

The Costume Designer draws detailed sketches for each costume. Once the Choreographer has approved the sketches, the Costume Designer begins constructing the actual costumes.

### **LIGHTING DESIGNER**

Can you imagine a stage show without lights? It would be pretty sad! Besides setting up the illumination needed just to see the action on stage, the Lighting Designer uses stage lights to create different moods—warm, cool, mysterious, sensual—to match the mood of the choreography.

### **SOUND DESIGNER**

Sometimes the Choreographer will set a dance work to music that has already been composed or recorded, but sometimes he or she will ask a Sound Designer to create a soundscape specifically for a new work. Using music and sounds of all kinds, the Sound Designer composes a score that fits the mood of the choreography, then records and edits the score for performance.

**REHEARSAL MASTER/MISTRESS**

The job of the Rehearsal Master (if a man) or Mistress (if a woman) is to supervise the dancers as they rehearse and fine-tune the work in the weeks and days leading up to the first performance, and sometimes between performances. The Rehearsal Master/Mistress's eagle eye can spot the slightest error, and he or she works with the dancers to correct and improve their movements and make sure they stay faithful to the choreography.

**SET DESIGNER**

In consultation with the Choreographer, the Set Designer designs the sets and props for the dance production, and supervises their construction and placement on the stage. The Set Designer works closely with the Lighting Designer, the Costume Designer, the Video Designer, and any other artists involved with the visual aspects of the production.

## 4 ~ A WORKSHOP IN THE BLACKBURN STYLE

In the spirit of H el ene Blackburn's artistic practice, the following workshop activities were designed using a multidisciplinary approach: they combine elements of dance, visual arts, media arts and theatre. The activities are intended as a starting point for teachers and students to explore some of the themes found in *Diary / Journal intime*.

### Activity #1: *Famous Lovers*

**Subjects:** Theatre, Dance

**Materials required:** Large space to move, literary excerpts (see Appendix)

This activity uses movement and dance to introduce students to famous couples in history and literature: for example, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, Evangeline and Gabriel. A short excerpt from a novel, play or poem (a narrative passage or a conversation between the lovers) is used to inspire a verbal and physical dialogue between two students. The aim is to create a hybrid language—in the style of choreographer H el ene Blackburn—that combines language and movement. This exercise also allows students to become familiar with legendary pairs of lovers whose universal and symbolic stories have fascinated artists and readers for many generations.

*Tristan and Isolde*: 12<sup>th</sup>-century romantic tragedy

*Romeo and Juliet*: romantic tragedy by William Shakespeare (1595)

*Evangeline and Gabriel*: poem (1853) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow relating the deportation of the Acadians through the story of a young couple

#### Activity

- ❖ Choose five or six excerpts to use as starting points for this language and movement exercise. (In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, you can use Shakespeare's text or the lyrics from the 2002 musical—see Appendix.)
- ❖ Have the students translate the written phrases into **movement phrases** by developing a gesture, a movement or an action (or a combination) to express one or more words of the phrase. (They might use sign language, as H el ene Blackburn does in *Diary / Journal intime*.)
- ❖ Once the students have created their **movement phrases**, have them add spoken words to underline the meaning, or just as sound effects.
- ❖ Ask the students to link several movement phrases together to convey their character's intention.
- ❖ Each movement phrase can be varied by changing its **direction**, its **speed** or its **size**.
- ❖ Have the students work on the spoken phrases so that they reflect each character's physical and psychological traits.
- ❖ Once the students have created their movement and language sequences, have them build a dialogue between two performers, alternating verbal and physical phrases.
- ❖ Have each pair of students repeat and practise their verbal and physical dialogue until their interaction is smooth and fluid.

## Activity #2: *Word Games*

**Subjects:** English (or French), Dance

**Materials required:** Large space to move, pencils, paper

In order to create a new work, to refresh their creativity or even to develop a new creative approach, contemporary choreographers sometimes impose challenges or limits on themselves. The legendary American choreographer Merce Cunningham, for instance, who influenced an entire generation of artists, used random events as building blocks in his creative process, if not as a form of creation in themselves.

### Activity

The students are asked to define and work with a **glossary** of words related to love, and to use **random events** to inspire and shape their choreographic creations. The word association exercise helps the students generate new ideas and unexpected links and relationships.

Example: **LOVE**

**L:** lively, longing, like

**O:** open, over the moon, obsession

**V:** violent, vacuum, verses

**E:** excitement, emotional, eternal

- ❖ Encourage the students to brainstorm some words and ideas using the words related to “love” (or the base word you have chosen). Make a chart listing all the words.
- ❖ Next, ask the students to associate the first letter of their name (first or last) with one of the letters in the base word. For example, Charles **O**’Neill would be associated with the **O** (open, over the moon, etc.).
- ❖ Have the students explore different ways to express the words in movement. Suggest that they use **improvisation** to convey each letter of the word by **drawing a pathway in the air, drawing a pathway on the floor** (while standing still or moving around), or performing a corresponding **action**. For example, “emotional” could be conveyed by strong facial expressions, rapidly changing body language, etc.
- ❖ Next, ask the students to develop one or two **movement phrases** based on the results of their improvisation.
- ❖ Once each student has developed a few phrases, reintroduce the element of chance into the creative process by grouping together students whose name (first or last) begins with the same letter; if that doesn’t work, find a different way to associate the names. These random combinations will create duets, trios, quartets, etc.—for example, a trio formed by **Amelia, Andrew and Alain**; a duet formed by Peter **McEwan** and Josée **Marsolais**.
- ❖ Ask each group of students to combine their movement phrases by performing them **in sequence** or **mingling** sections from different phrases and dancing them in **rotation, superimposed** on each other, or in **unison**.

### Activity #3: *Self-Image*

**Subjects:** Visual Arts, Media Arts, Dance

**Materials required:** Digital camera or cell phone with camera, graphics tablet, drawing software

**Alternative:** Old magazines, cardboard or poster board, glue, drawing media (coloured pencils, markers, pastels, etc.)

In *Diary / Journal intime*, the set design and H el ene Blackburn's staging play an important part in setting the mood of intimacy suggested by the title. The stage lighting, the projected images, and the paper lanterns together convey the choreographer's meaning to the audience watching the performance.

Ask the students to choose one of those scenic elements and develop it in their own way. Using the projected photographs as an example:

#### Introduction

- ❖ First, ask the students to discuss this aspect of the work. How did the choreographer use the images? What did the images depict? How did the students react to them? What did the images add to the work? How were the images altered or manipulated?
- ❖ Next, ask the students to think about the images that surround them every day. What is their importance? How do they influence the students' daily lives, their values, their dreams, etc.? Do the images represent the students' reality?

#### Activity

- ❖ Have the students use the digital camera or camera-phone to take pictures of objects or scenes that convey a message. If possible, they should be allowed to find people, images and objects outside the classroom. Have them experiment with closeups and long shots, paying attention to details, small gestures, facial expressions, etc.
- ❖ Next, have the students create a virtual collage by manipulating their digital photos (using the graphics tablet or computer drawing software) to personalize the images.
- ❖ *Alternative*
- ❖ If the classroom isn't equipped with digital resources, the activity can be carried out using old magazines. Have the students go through the magazines and cut out pictures that convey the message they want to express. Next, have them create a collage that they can personalize by overlaying it with another medium (pencil, pen, marker, pastel, etc.).

#### Linking the activity to dance

- ❖ Have the students use the images as a starting point to inspire movement sequences.
- ❖ Using the collage (digital or physical), ask the students to identify images of physical positions, gestures and expressions.
- ❖ Have them take those positions and gestures into their own bodies and express them in movement. For example, have them imagine and recreate the gesture that led up to the position and the gesture that would follow it.
- ❖ Ask them to build on the movement by repeating it and varying its duration, magnitude and energy level.
- ❖ The digital images could also be projected as a backdrop for the dance and movement exercises.

#### Activity #4: *The Seasons of the Heart*

In **summer** my heart is *light*; in **autumn** my heart is *tormented*; in **winter** my heart is *frozen*; and in **spring** my heart is *on fire*.

Young people live very intensely, and they can experience a wide range of emotions in a very short time. Love changes and evolves just as the seasons do. By associating adjectives with each season, students can explore different shades of love, and the qualifying words can suggest different levels of **energy** that will shape the physical movement.

#### Activity

- ❖ First, have the students explore the feelings they associate with the different seasons by finding adjectives to describe each one.
- ❖ Next, have them “colour” their movements or actions using the kind of energy suggested by their description.  
What kind of energy is suggested by **torment**—a contained energy? What kind of space would express torment—close to the body, using twisting movements?
- ❖ The same **movement phrase** can be given different meanings by varying its **speed**, the **energy** used to perform it, and/or the **space** it takes up.
- ❖ Invite the students to imitate the seasons changing and time passing by altering the time and **space** of their creation. For example, they could use a **succession** or a **canon** technique to structure and complexify their sequence. Have them imagine time passing very quickly, then very slowly: how does that affect their movements?
- ❖ Finally, have the students discuss their observations about different kinds of energy. How do the movements change according to the energy used? Can they see a parallel with the energy of the dancers’ movements in *Diary / Journal intime*? Have them classify different forms of dance according to the kind of energy each one uses.



## 5 ~ APPENDIX

To be used with Activity #1

*Excerpt from **La nuit de la Saint-Jean** (Midsummer's Eve), from Tristan et Iseut (c. 1170) by the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas of Britain, freely translated by Diana Tyndale*

Already the sun had entered the sign of Cancer. It was Midsummer's Eve. . . . Tristan was playing draughts with Isolde within the tent. Growing thirsty, he called to a servant girl:

**Tristan:** "Go and tell our chambermaid Brangane to bring us something to drink."

And Tristan offered the cup to Isolde, saying, "Lovely Isolde, have something to drink." Isolde took a sip and handed the goblet back to Tristan, who emptied it in one gulp. Immediately he gazed at Isolde with a distracted air, and she was filled with agitation and fear.

What had they done? Alas! It was not wine they had drunk, but the magic potion the Queen of Ireland had prepared for the wedding of King Mark!

**Isolde:** "Alas, woe is me!" she cried.

**Tristan:** "Alas, alas, you have drunk your lasting sorrow and your death!"

All the while the love potion was spreading through the veins of the young man and the maiden. Sworn enemies only the day before, suddenly they were filled with desire for each other. Venus, that formidable huntress, had caught them in her net; the god of Love had struck them with his fatal dart. . . .

**Isolde:** "How much better it would have been to stay in Weisefort than to set sail on these perilous seas. Ah! How I wish I were still there, listening to your sweet words and beautiful stories, singing songs and playing the harp, my gentle master."

**Tristan:** "I have fond memories," he said, "of that time in Ireland, even though I endured many hardships and much suffering."

**Isolde:** "I'll wager you are more afraid of a woman than of the great crested dragon."

Tristan smiled. Their elbows touched; their eyes exchanged passionate messages; their feverish hands intertwined.

"What happened?" wondered Isolde. "An hour ago I despised you, and yet now I feel I could never leave you."

"It is marvelous indeed," said Tristan. "I feel the same way about you."

*Excerpt from the song **And Now She Is In Love**,  
from the musical Romeo and Juliet (2002)  
Music and original (French) lyrics by Gérard Presgurvic  
English lyrics by Don Black*

THE NURSE:

I have cared for her  
Each day of her young life  
The baby in my arms  
Is soon to be a wife  
She isn't of my flesh  
She doesn't share my name  
Her humour and her looks  
Aren't something I can claim  
My Juliet is grown up

And now she is in love  
And everything has changed  
Her feelings and her hair  
Have all been rearranged  
And while her heart bursts  
Mine's starting to break  
I am only her nurse  
So why do I find this so hard to take?

...

But she is so in love  
And every day's a dance  
And good old common sense  
Doesn't stand a chance  
I've done all I can  
What more can I do?  
When I was in love like her  
I was foolish too...  
So eager to fly  
Oh, how fragile my wings  
But then, I was in love

...

I know how she feels  
She's eager to fly  
But then she's in love  
Now she is in love

*Excerpt from the epic poem **Evangeline and Gabriel** (1847)  
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

Fair was she to behold, that maiden of seventeen summers.  
Black were her eyes as the berry that grows on the thorn by the way-side,  
Black, yet how softly they gleamed beneath the brown shade of her tresses!  
Sweet was her breath as the breath of kine that feed in the meadows.  
When in the harvest heat she bore to the reapers at noontide  
Flagons of home-brewed ale, ah! fair in sooth was the maiden.

**Beauté cruelle** ("Cruel Beauty"),  
*a poem written by Quebec poet Émile Nelligan (1879-1941)  
and heard in Diary / Journal intime.*

Certe, il ne faut avoir qu'un amour en ce monde,  
Un amour, rien qu'un seul, tout fantasque soit-il ;  
Et moi qui le recherche ainsi, noble et subtil,  
Voici qu'il m'est à l'âme une entaille profonde.

Elle est hautaine et belle, et moi timide et laid :  
Je ne puis l'approcher qu'en des vapeurs de rêve.  
Malheureux ! Plus je vais, et plus elle s'élève  
Et dédaigne mon cœur pour un œil qui lui plaît.

Voyez comme, pourtant, notre sort est étrange !  
Si nous eussions tous deux fait de figure échange,  
Comme elle m'eût aimé d'un amour sans pareil !

Et je l'eusse suivie en vrai fou de Tolède,  
Aux pays de la brume, aux landes du soleil,  
Si le Ciel m'eût fait beau, et qu'il l'eût faite laide !

*Translation:*

Certainly, one must have only one love in this world,  
One love, just one, unlikely as it may be;  
And I, on my quest for that noble, subtle love,  
Now discover a deep wound in my soul.

She is haughty and beautiful, I am shy and ugly:  
I cannot approach her except in the vapour of a dream.  
How unfortunate !! The farther I go, the higher she rises  
And scorns my heart for a glance from a more attractive eye.

See how, all the same, our fate is strange!  
If our roles had been reversed,  
How she would have loved me with a love like no other!

And I would have followed her to the ends of the earth,  
To lands shrouded in mist, to lands bathed in sun,  
If Heaven had made me handsome, and had made her ugly!

## 6 ~ GLOSSARY

Brief definitions of some of the words that recur frequently in this Study Guide

### **CANON**

A single movement phrase performed by two or more people, but with a time lag between them. For example, in a two-part canon the first person performs a movement phrase and the second person begins the same phrase before the first has finished. The two performers are never executing the same movement at the same time, but they are both moving at the same time.

### **CHOREOGRAPHER**

An artist whose medium is dance. S/he creates and writes sequences of physical movements in time and space.

### **CHOREOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE**

The unique physical vocabulary a choreographer develops and uses to express him/herself through movement.

### **CHOREOGRAPHIC PHRASE**

A series of movements linked together by a choreographer in a specific order. The same choreographic phrase can be repeated several times in the same work.

### **CHOREOGRAPHY**

A dance work consisting of movement sequences created by a choreographer and linked together in a specific order.

### **CREATIVE PROCESS**

The development of a choreography over time; the approach and techniques used in creating a work, beginning with an idea, an image or a feeling, where the choreographer, the dancers and the creative team work together to develop a choreography.

### **DANCE/PERFORMER**

An artist who learns and interprets a choreographer's movement language in order to perform it for an audience.

### **ENERGY**

The muscular tension used to perform a movement.

### **IMPROVISATION**

Making up a movement based on a suggestion, an idea, a picture, a piece of music, a poem, or a theme (such as love, for example).

### **PATHWAY IN THE AIR**

Patterns or designs made in the air by a person's movements.

### **PATHWAY ON THE GROUND**

Patterns or designs made on the ground by a person's movements, as if drawing in the sand.

### **ROTATION**

A movement sequence performed several times in a row by several people, one at a time. Rotation is a bit like a conversation: one person moves ("talks") while the other "listens," then they reverse roles.

**SEQUENCE**

A series of movements or movement phrases performed one after the other. For example, one person dances his/her movement phrase; when s/he has finished, the next person begins his/her sequence, and so on. Only one person is moving at a time.

**SPACE**

A more or less defined area (as in rehearsal space, performance space) that contains people and objects. The performers use gestures to sculpt movements within the space.

**SUPERIMPOSITION**

A set of two or more different movement phrases performed at the same time.

**UNISON**

A single movement or sequence of movements performed by several people at the same time.

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