

Photo by Ben Garver

Choreographer and dancer Dawn Lane rehearses part of 'The Square Pegs Round Whole Project.'

# The Square Pegs Round Whole Project

Dawn Lane makes dances about community, resources and activism

By Allison Tracy

Choreographer Dawn Lane knows whereof she speaks when she titles a concert, "The Square Pegs Round Whole Project." Her first (and last) ballet teacher told her right out that she had the wrong body and would never be a dancer.

She is a small, compact woman who moves with economy and spare gesture. Her hands are square and Etruscan-archtypal, as Martha Graham's feet were said to be, not like the stereotypic Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, whose exquisite arch alone caused one critic to swoon. Only Lane's shoes give away her showmanship. She has some red suede oxfords. On the day of our interview, she wears a snappy black and white pair and confesses they're Hush Puppies.

On the verge of mounting her

first major performance in many years, Lane stands amazed that she is living and earning a living in the Berkshires as an artist and choreographer. She is fully employed by Community Access to the Arts (CATA), an organization based in Great Barrington and founded by former dance therapist Sandra Newman, that uses the arts as a bridge into the larger community for those whose challenges and disabilities typically isolate them.

Four CATA participants will be dancing in the Project performance this Friday and Saturday at Lenox Memorial High School's Duffin Theatre, alongside a core group of professional dancers that have appeared in other of Lane's works for the public. But neither they nor the other company members constitute the square pegs of her title. It's the hole in the donut, so to speak, that audiences should

be prepared for. This piece is actually a work of ideas about community, community resources, and being resourceful about protecting them, a metaphor for a broad political activism that is more than skin deep.

To get to this place, Lane went to college and graduate school and earned an MFA in graphics from the Massachusetts College of the Arts. She worked as a costume designer, in a paper mill, and waitressed at any number of restaurants. She pursued her art strictly on the side.

She found her mentors in the modern dance world, not New York as much as Boston, where she worked with Dawn Kramer and Meredith Monk; and in the Berkshires, where she studied for three summers at Jacob's Pillow. There, she found other square pegs like herself, Trisha Brown,

Victoria Marks, and Liz Lerman, to name those who most inspired her.

Under Dawn Kramer, Lane learned that dance can be about anything. Her first work, "Run of the Mill," (also featuring a landscape of cardboard boxes like this new piece) was about the industrial environment; about work as variations on repeated themes, about disguising the source of one's material through abstraction. It was an exercise in releasing movement from constrictions of stereotype.

From Victoria Marks, Lane learned humanism. Marks is a Pillow graduate who essentially started dance from scratch as a grownup, slipping from under her guise as a Pillow arts administrator intern, into the leotards of a dancer. Studying with the late choreography teacher, Bessie

achieved Schoenberg, Marks has since then, considerable notoriety since then, as a choreographer. "For me, she's an example of someone who so beautifully integrates technique, craft and humanity. And beyond that, and this was a revelation to me, she's equally as nice a person," Lane says. "It's important to me that a good artist can also be a good person, and it affects the way I look at other peoples' work."

It was the first step from square peg to round whole.

From Liz Lerman, who has made a career of setting works on mainstream folk with neither training nor prerequisites for dance, movement, or even functional success, Lane took a mantra. It was, "I never want to humiliate my audience with my expertise."

It is a statement that can have many meanings. But for Lane, it is about making art that is not self-

indulgent, not so obscure that only the elect can understand it. It condemns art that is not communication but narcissism, the smirk of Superstar superiority.

Lane also learned some rules of the game from Lerman. She keeps a tiny notebook that documents interesting gestures observed in the world around her. In her dances, she frequently develops phraseology from spontaneous gesture. Lerman and Lane find art in the everyday, the manifold in the mundane. In each new work, they surrender to the bodies, beings, and perceptions of their dancers rather than molding them to meet their own technical demands. It is not the same way New York City ballet founder George Balanchine set works on his muse ballerinas, pushing their technique beyond anything they could envision.

Five years ago, Lane set a work, "Shebang," on a cast of mothers and daughters ranging in age from 8 to 80 years. She found them by placing an ad in the Shoppers Guide. CATA's Sandra Newman approached her after that concert with a part-time job offer to lead movement workshops in various therapeutic communities. "I was so excited about the opportunity, and of being considered an expert," Lane says. "Then the night before I thought, 'how in the world am I going to work with this group?'"

She came up with the classic memory game that works by accumulation: The first person says a phrase (e. g. "I'm going on a picnic ...") and names some kind of food, "and I'm bringing fruit salad." The next repeats the new phrase in toto, then adds something else, "I'm going ... and I'm bringing fruit salad and a tablecloth ..."

"I asked workshop participants to say their first names as well as a word that described themselves that started with the first letter of their first name. Mine was 'Dawn ... dare.' The exercise told me their names, something about them, and it gave a movement trace."

This was a model she used for a long time as a valuable way of working with this population; gesture, accumulation, repeating, adding, exchanging, mirroring, adapting, abstracting. It led to a wonderful piece performed at CATA's graduation recital, "Songs of Myself."

Over time, her program models have become much more inventive, while being pared into simpler and simpler instructions. "I have a serious, middle-class work ethic," Lane says. "Almost always, I over-prepare for these workshops. I might design a class agenda to explore shapes traveling

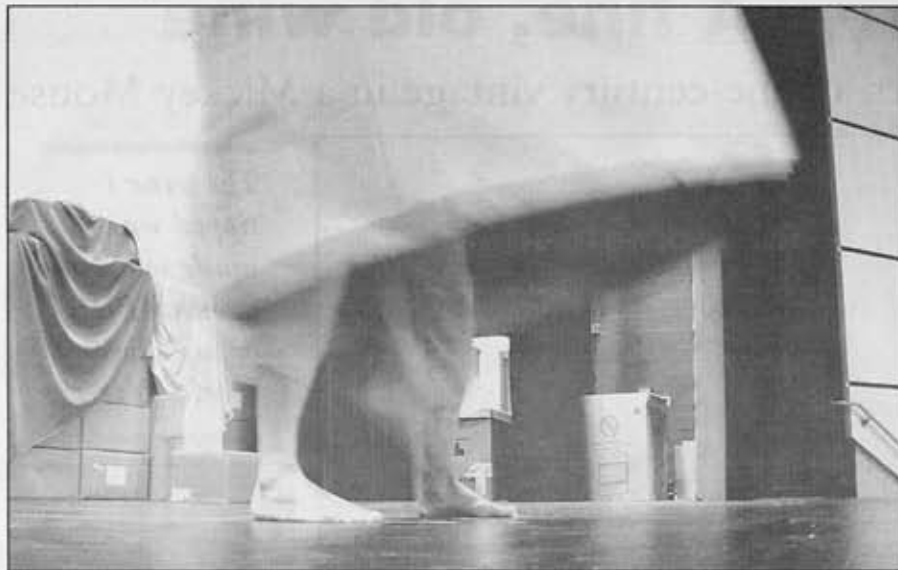


Photo by Ben Garver

**Cardboard cartons are part of the rehearsal for 'The Square Pegs Round Whole Project.'**

through space. Then I find only about one fifth of what I've projected would happen. We might just explore how many ways to make a circle. Sometimes I have to rewind, work backward. I've learned it doesn't matter. Less can lead to more."

Over time, her performers themselves have grown more sophisticated. Several have developed finely tuned consciousness of stage presence, the muscle memory to combine and repeat movement

sequences, grace and lyricism.

For the Project, Lane has brought what she learned about movement potential in her CATA work to the choreography and rehearsal process. Some gestures of her CATA performers are being set on the core dancers of her ad hoc company, and she's also asking for new material. It's a liberating role reversal that gets at the issue of equality in a new way for all of them.

But the topic is much bigger. When she began composing the

piece, she was in the throes of fighting a housing development proposed for the acreage behind her Lenox home. Her abuttor's claims were defeated. She was dismayed by the town hearing and regulatory process. She nursed a sense of apathy.

But then, she began pondering the questions that released her from stereotypes yet again. What about the regulatory euphemism, "low impact for the visual landscape;" according to whose eyes,

whose motives? What is growth and what is development; when is it overgrowth? What are our criteria for where we live, work, and visit? Crotchity square peg looking for that round whole. And she found it in this piece. "I heard a great phrase on some environment show on national public radio one day," she said. "It was, 'None of us is separate from our exploitation.'" This is the challenge Lane is grappling with.

*Allison Tracy is a regular contributor of dance reviews for the Berkshire Eagle, and serves as a grant-writing advisor to the Board of the Community Access for the Arts.*