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Dawn dancing: Choreographing delight

By **Abigail Wood**
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Dawn Lane, choreographer, dancer, educator and Program & Artistic Director for Community Access to the Arts (CATA), was never one to follow the rules of dance strictly.

"Even as a kid training," she said, "when I first put my toe shoes on and my feet were bleeding, I thought, 'There has got to be another way to do this.'"

Lane will be giving a free lecture, "The Having of an Idea, the Making of a Dance," as part of the Marty Lasker Lecture Series at the Becket Arts Center on Monday evening.

Lane's work is known throughout the Northeast dance community and has been performed at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, The Egg, the Boston Conservatory, The Founders' Theatre at Shakespeare & Co., and The Knitting Factory. In 2008, she was honored as a Distinguished Alumnae of Massachusetts College of Art and was recognized as a Finalist in Choreography by the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

"There are a lot of things that make [Lane's work] intriguing and make it so easy for people of any age really to connect with the dances that she makes," said Ella Baff, executive director at Jacob's Pillow.

Lane's lecture will touch on where exactly her inspiration comes from for her innovative choreography. In the past Lane has used everyday objects in her dances, such as dishwashing detergent bottles, irons, climbing gear, mattresses and cardboard boxes.

"Obviously, I think of my dance as moving expressions,"



she said, "but I also think of them visually. I think [the objects] help the visual aspect of the dance. Of course it also means having to lug things around the stage with me, but it just keeps happening -- like my latest piece has 14 assorted chairs. I always threaten that I am never going to use props again, but there they are!"

But what captures the attention of Lane's audiences most is her work with extremely varied dancers.

"I have a sort of fascination with using limitation as an integral component of movement," she said.

This is Lane's 16th year with Community Access to the Arts (CATA), a non-profit arts organization that provides visual and performing arts workshops for people with developmental, physical, emotional, and/or mental disabilities throughout Berkshire County.

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"Dawn is all about bringing people together and creating a sense of community," said Baff. "And she brings all of her vast choreographic skills -- because she is a very, very highly trained dancer and dance maker -- and she brings all of those skills to a mission, and the mission is inclusiveness."

Lane explained that she began exploring "who is a dancer and who gets to dance" during her three summers studying choreography at the Pillow. Although she excels at it now, Lane had to rethink chore-graphy when she began working with differently disabled persons.

"When you start a creative process, you think that you're at the beginning," she said, "but I found that working with this population at the beginning was actually a few steps back, it was a lesson in simplification. And that's good for any artist -- we

assume so much, and we can complicate so much because of our own pressure and judgments, and this work was a lesson in wiping the slate clean and starting in a new place."

Baff said she admires Lane's approach to such challenging work.

"Dawn has to be very agile and insightful about what those [dancers'] limitations are, but not have them be artistic or aesthetic limitations. It's really about Dawn looking at the potential and the positive side of the whole sort of rainbow of different kinds of bodies.... and taking it down to a real democratic baseline," Baff said.

Lane's dance democracy does not end with disability -- she also works with children through the Jacob's Pillow Curriculum in Motion program. The program pairs a classroom teacher with a teaching dance artist to "literally make the curriculum move," said Lane.

The program has been extremely successful in using choreography to develop creative thinking and mastery of core subjects such as algebra, biology, languages, and social studies.

Lane has been one of three nationally chosen dance educators to lead the program since its beginning in 1993.

"She is continually inventive," Baff said in praise of Lane's work with the students. "She always finds the appropriate material for the group -- and material that also challenges them but makes them feel very comfortable that they're going to step up to the challenge. All the things we want to see brought out in children you can see functioning in her classroom: cooperation, leadership, helping one another. ... It's an atmosphere that is a lot of fun but very thoughtful."

Lane's 2-week residency at Becket Washington School this year culminated in a performance of Signature Dance at Jacob's Pillow Inside/Out series earlier this month. The students performed an incredible piece that they created based on learning how to do cursive handwriting, said Lane.

What makes Dawn Lane an incredible choreographer and dancer is not her physical skill, her education, or even her diverse dancers, Baff said -- It's her ability to actively and continually redefine dance and to give her audience an opportunity to engage in it in a completely different way.

"Not many artists can do that."

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