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Archive for Sunday, July 29, 2007

## It's been 10 mad years

By Victoria Looseleaf

July 29, 2007 *in print edition F-9*

**Note** This article includes corrections to the original version.

THE bevy of long-limbed lovelies executing neo-Charleston moves in last year's Los Angeles Opera production of "La Traviata" would seem to have little in common with bisexual comic Margaret Cho, who, during her stage show "The Sensuous Woman," can be seen peeling off her clothes as part of a steamy striptease.

For choreographer Kitty McNamee, the guiding force behind both dance segments, it's business as usual. The heart of that business is Hysterica Dance Company, the locally based troupe McNamee founded in 1997 that is known for its raw explosive movement style. To celebrate its 10-year anniversary, 15 past and present company members will reunite Friday for "Hysterica X," a performance at the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre.

Talk about straddling high and low culture. Moving among the commercial, opera and concert dance worlds with the agility of a Cirque du Soleil star, McNamee has been a formidable presence on the L.A. scene since shortly after her arrival, some 15 years ago. It is as Hysterica's artistic director, however, that she can fully express her vision: Exposing the underbelly of pop culture through catwalk-worthy costuming and mind-warping music, McNamee wraps it in a kind of contemporary choreography that speaks – no, shouts – to today's alienated society.

This from a rather mild-mannered, Ohio-born, Texas-schooled 39-year-old who came to this city with thoughts of being an actor. But soon after hooking up with Hollywood's Open Fist Theatre Company and choreographing its plays in the early '90s, she found her real footing, dance making.

And that crossover thing? A bugaboo for many artists, it's no issue for McNamee. "I'm not upset I'm called pop," says the blue-eyed McNamee during a rehearsal break at Hollywood's Edge Performing Arts Center, where she teaches.

"We've always been considered pop-influenced, and pop is popular, so that's fine with me," adds McNamee, who choreographed a number from "Dick Tracy" for Stephen Sondheim's 75th birthday bash at the Hollywood Bowl two years ago.

Her work with Hysterica, she says, has allowed her to develop not only her own voice but also has given her confidence in other areas too.

"That," adds McNamee, "spilled into my commercial work, and the aesthetics of some of the commercial work

spill back into the company.”

Indeed, McNamee and original Hysterica hooper Ryan Heffington, the company’s co-artistic director and costume designer, also created a Busby Berkeley-like number for an episode of Showtime’s “The L Word.” Performed by a sextet of female Hystericans, the segment aired in February.

Friday’s performance, Hysterica’s fourth appearance at the Ford’s bucolic outdoor theater, will include excerpts from every show the company has ever presented, including the critically acclaimed “Sticks and Stones,” “Noir” and “Water and the Well,” the troupe’s first full-evening creation. Of the 1999 “Water” premiere, The Times’ Lewis Segal cited the women as “especially adept at giving pop dance cliches maximum credibility and then showing the exploitation and fear underneath.”

Since then, Hysterica has continued to garner kudos as well as deepen its own brand of chic postmodernism, plumbing the depths of isolation, eroticism, relationships and angst-ridden emotions coursing through daily existence. .

Since its early days, the troupe, generally numbering eight, has performed at venues ranging from the Open Fist Theatre and Highways Performance Space to REDCAT, Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and in Palm Springs, San Diego and New York City.

In addition to performing in New York three years ago at the Joyce Soho and the Manhattan School of Music, members of Hysterica took to the city’s fashion runways in September for a showing of Grey Ant’s spring collection, designed by Grant Krajecki. New York magazine said the event was “hypnotic

Company woman

McNAMEE, who grew up in Ashland, Ohio, before her family moved to Texas when she was a teen, earned a bachelor of fine arts from the University of Texas, Austin. Studying dance, with an emphasis on modern techniques, she soon discovered her strength was in performance.

After a brief stint in New York, she headed to L.A., where, she says, working with the Open Fist’s Martha Demson, “a light bulb went off and I came to my senses. Choreography was easy for me, but that didn’t mean it didn’t have value. I realized that was what I was supposed to be doing.”

The troupe’s name, Hysterica, popped into McNamee’s head for the company’s inaugural outing and stuck. “Technically, it means female madness, and it has Ophelia connotations, but it’s appropriate, because the men in my company have a strong feminine side. They’re not super butch or props like ballet partner prop guys. They’re exploring all sides of themselves and aren’t held to purely masculine movements.”

This is certainly true of Heffington, who was nominated for a Lester Horton award for best male performance in McNamee’s 2002 work “Sticks and Stones.” A techno Everyman, the wiry, wild-eyed character (Segal called him a “contemporary Petrushka”) is all twitches and trembling, someone desperately trying to escape a world that isn’t quite what it seems. The performance will be reprised in part at the Ford.

Heffington, 34, met McNamee in 1996 through Bubba Carr, a veteran of numerous Cher tours and an original Hysterica member who also is premiering a piece Friday night. Named co-artistic director of the company last year, the native Californian with lengthy commercial credits launched his own clothing line in 1999 called Sir Heffington (the tag line reads, “for the street and the stage”). The garb has been seen on rockers such as **Gwen Stefani**, J.Lo and Mick Jagger in addition to adorning the taut, toned bodies of Hysterica dancers.

Performing in nine works at the Ford, the uber-energetic Heffington also choreographed two of the show’s 17 pieces.

“The company has evolved choreographically and conceptually. Every aspect – the staging, the costumes – has made a stronger connection between Kitty and me. We have complete trust in one another. I’ll look at the pieces and she’ll tell me the concept behind them, but visually, she lets me have almost 100% freedom to create the costumes. There are no battles.”

Pulling it together

FROM baby-doll dresses and neo-showgirl outfits (plenty of nude-look netting tweaked with feathers, sequins and faux animal prints) to exposed zippers, cocky chapeaux and shredded satins, Heffington’s designs ooze cool. Although concert couture is one part of Hysterica’s draw, it’s the whole package that gets theatergoers jazzed. Says McNamee: “Most of our audience is actually nondancers. There are a lot from the fashion world, film and TV, and some dancers, but not the whole modern community.

“What matters most is that they leave inspired and wanting to see more dance.”

McNamee and her husband, director Paul Lazarus, are parents to newborn daughter Keaton (more Buster than Diane, she quips). Admitting that motherhood has made her more grounded and secure, McNamee’s trademark end-of-the-world ferocity can nevertheless still be found in her latest pieces.

One is an untitled work set to a Beethoven violin sonata, the other, a seven-minute number, “Paintbox,” features five dancers in varying states of seismic spinning and spoon-like couplings. With a commissioned score by collaborator Anna Clyne, the wheezing string track is interspersed with fragments of text that riff on the painting process.

“One of the dancers who isn’t in it said the piece had a softness or delicacy that he hadn’t really seen before,” she says. “That’s got to be coming from my daughter, because being a mother is seeping into my work, I’m sure.”

If, that is, your mother has a leg up on pushing an art form to the edge and beyond.

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Hysterica Dance Company

Where: John Anson Ford Amphitheatre, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood

When: 8:30 p.m. Friday

Tickets: \$25. (323) 461-3673

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## FOR THE RECORD

Dance company: An information box with an article about the Hysterica Dance Company in today’s Calendar section shows an incomplete telephone number for ordering tickets. The number is (323) 461-3673. ↩

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**GIVE-AND-TAKER:** McNamee says her stage work and commercial choreography influence each other.

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#### Company woman

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Photographs by MYUNG J. CHUN *Los Angeles Times*

**ING THE ENERGY:** *Dancers rehearse for "Hysterica X," a retrospective featuring 15 past and present company members.*