



IN RESIDENCE

Kitty McNamee Builds a Career in LA



From the sandy beaches of Santa Monica Pier to the golden stars along Hollywood's Walk of Fame, Los Angeles has been an artist's beacon for more than a century. While perhaps most famously recognized as the film industry's center, LA boasts an extensive performing arts scene—from Center Theatre Group to Rouge Machine—and more than 100 theatres call the City of Angels home. And yet, building a career as a freelance artist is as challenging here as anywhere, and stage choreographers are no exception. *SDC Journal* recently spoke to **Kitty McNamee**, choreographer and LA resident, about the unique professional life of a choreographer living and working in Los Angeles.

"Large-scale theatre work can be a little harder to come by because [theatres and producers] often bring productions in from elsewhere," says McNamee. "Just getting in that door—like anywhere—is the biggest challenge." McNamee has choreographed for multiple theatres across Southern California, including

Hollywood Bowl, Reprise!, Theatre @ Boston Court, and Rubicon Theater in Ventura, and she has worked at the LA Philharmonic for over 10 years. She also has experience working in opera, regularly choreographing for LA Opera and San Francisco Opera. McNamee has coached and choreographed for well-known artists such as Julianne Hough, Will Kemp, Laura Marling, Margaret Cho, Vanessa Williams, Vittorio Grigolo, Lily Tomlin, Anna

BY ALYSSA DVORAK



Netrebko, Rolando Villazon, the boys of *90210*, and the ladies of *The L Word*.

Though working in traditional—and, in some cases, not-so-traditional—theatre work, McNamee wanted opportunities to further her own artistic development, and in 1997 she founded Hysterica Dance Co. to provide herself with the creative expression she sought as a choreographer. “My first love was contemporary dance, and I wanted an opportunity to develop my work in a larger format. I didn’t want to just get hired for a job and only do a tiny bit of a bigger piece. I wanted to generate more full-length projects; there are a lot of dancers here that work commercially, but the commercial work is a day here, a day there. We weren’t really getting to *dance*.” Hysterica recently traveled to Chicago for a performance with longtime collaborator Anna Clyne, composer for Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s MusicNOW concert.

While McNamee estimates that 90% of her work keeps her within the limits of Los Angeles County, she has sought out opportunities that take her to the other parts of the world. In 2012, WET Design, a company dedicated to the design and implementation of cutting-edge water experiences, discovered McNamee’s talents at the LA Ballet and recruited her for a unique project. “I had been commissioned by LA Ballet to create new work for their NextWaveLA festival in 2012. During that

project, a man named Jim Doyle, Director at WET, saw my work and recommended me for the job.”

McNamee was hired to choreograph a water show for fountains at the Wynn Macau Hotel in China. “They had a water show running [already], but they wanted to see what else they could do with what they had, what other elements they might be able to add.” Choreographing with water was remarkably similar to choreographing with bodies. “The tempo that the water moves to, or the intensity with which the water is moving, is almost like bodies; it is very visceral.” Performance Lake, which holds the foundations at the Wynn Macau, has 200 water nozzles and holds 800,000 gallons of water.

McNamee incorporated the culture of Macau into the piece, adding traditional elements such as a Chinese song called “Strut.” “We translated the song and incorporated its story, and we thought about the colors of China and Macau. It’s actually a very famous Chinese pop song—very culturally proud.”

Earlier in 2013, McNamee once again worked with fountains, this time in LA where she choreographed site-specific works around the water elements at the Getty Center as part of Dance Camera West’s 2013 Film Festival. Other artists involved included Sarah Elgart, **Daniel Ezralow**, and Tony Testa.

Though challenging to establish a career based solely on traditional theatre in Los Angeles, the performing arts scene is ripe with possibility. “Make work as much as possible,” advises McNamee when asked if she has advice for other artists living and working on the West Coast. “Even if it’s for smaller companies or on your own, like I did with Hysterica—that way you can really build your chops and be ready for a job when the opportunity arises. Also, nurture the relationships you have when you’re starting, because typically those [are the ones that] grow and evolve.” Once that door opens, there is no telling how big a stage choreographer’s career can grow.