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## Fresh Moves

### Lifestyle: Work in Progress

By Annaliese Jakimides

*Alison Chase, artistic director and choreographer, fuses dance with everything from film clips to front-end loaders. She'll go wherever those collaborative works take her—as long as it's in front of an audience.*

Just like thousands of other young children throughout the country, including all four of her siblings, Alison Chase took dance classes, donned tights and costumes, and performed in the annual recital. She was not pining to become a dancer or idolizing the dance icons of the day, although she does remember making up dances in the basement of her childhood home in St. Louis, Missouri.



Unlike her siblings and all those other children, Alison Chase, after a short circuit into the land of intellectual history and philosophy, not only became a choreographer and dancer, but founded one of the most pioneering, innovative dance companies in the world, Pilobolus Dance Theatre. She's a grassroots visionary. Her performances have been described as "astonishing, athletic, bizarre, and mesmerizingly magical."

In 1997 she moved to Brooksville, with her family, to live in the middle of "Chase land." She severed her ties with Pilobolus in 2006 and formed Apogee Arts, a dance theater production company that invites community participation and values the collaborative nature of creating. Here, Chase is fusing film and dance, exploring multidimensional storytelling, and creating site-specific works, including Q2: Habitat, an exploration of place and change employing elements as diverse as heavy equipment operators and professional dancers. It will be performed August 7 and 8, and again, after adjustments and fine-tuning, in the summer of 2010. Like her 2006/2007 Quarryography, this piece was commissioned by Opera House Arts in Stonington and takes place in the cavernous Settlement Quarry. It is a collaborative work with choreographer and puppet artist Mia Kanazawa and composer Nigel Chase.



Scene from Quarryography

Alison Chase's collaborations involve artists, writers, designers, composers, photographers, filmmakers, projection designers, dancers, and musicians, as well as the community and the audience. She is currently at work on a number of projects, including *Motorcycle Chronicles*; *The Odyssey*, a contemporary retelling of Homer's tale; and the tentatively titled *Pentimento*, an exploration of human relationships she describes as "twisting preconceptions of rules, roles, and responsibilities" and "challenging how we experience physical form and psychological function."

Chase has taught at Dartmouth and Yale, and received many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and most recently, the Maine Arts Commission Individual Artist Fellowship in the Performing Arts. She has choreographed for La Scala Opera, the Geneva Opera, Radio City Music Hall, and others. In addition to performing in a range of venues, from small theaters to large international stages, Chase has also danced on *The Tonight Show*, *60 Minutes*, and *Sesame Street*, and, of course, in quarries.

**Your BA is in intellectual history and philosophy. How did you come to dance from that perspective?**

At the end of my junior year, I wanted to take a gut course. I'd danced as a kid, so I decided to take the history of contemporary dance. It was amazing, how dance was a mirror of what was happening in society. By my senior year I knew where I was headed. I went on for my master's in choreography at UCLA.

**Did your undergraduate studies influence how you come at your work?**

Aesthetics was never central to intellectual history and philosophy. You learn you can have an idea, a vision, a philosophy, but you have to be willing to chuck it if you need to. Really, one develops one's stagecraft, or one's creative craft, by doing and responding to what resonates with you as an artist.

**And so you allow yourself to go wherever you go.**

You have to; otherwise, you don't get where you need to be. For example, one time I was setting out to create this duet and I thought I'd have two men in Elizabethan drag and I ended up suspending them by their ankles, bare-chested in fatigues and combat boots. I am so happy to be working with that kind of freedom again.

**Was it gone?**

Well, to have real freedom you need an artist-driven model, which is what Apogee Arts is. Pilobolus was in the beginning, too, but by the time I left I was a cog in a big organization driven by a board.

**Last year, you received the Maine Arts Commission's Individual Artist Fellowship for performing arts. What did that mean to you?**

It's enabled me to work on Apogee's inaugural work, an interpersonally dense collaboration with a videographer and photographer. It explores the way people come together, in twos, threes, fours. Male/female? Individual-based? Gender-based? Is it a group? How they fuse into unexpected configurations. Slowly we're beginning to call it *Pentimento*, although that can change. It seems like the underpainting, that subliminal chemistry, subliminal psychology, underneath all relationships.

**When will the work be ready?**

We hope this fall. We meet for clusters of days and then go away, into our own lives and spaces, to work on what percolates up. And then weeks later we come together again. Sometimes we work with dancers and sometimes not. The grant has enabled us to really dig into the work, to take the time it demands.

**Your work seems to indicate a willingness to not just step outside the box, but shatter the box. Does it ever feel that way to you?**

Well, sometimes it feels like it's a Sisyphean act. You roll a great big ball to the top of the hill. It rolls back down, and you start all over. Every time you begin again, it's as if you've never done it—yes, you have craft and a big history behind you, but still you ask, Am I crazy? Is this going to work? Will anybody like it? You go through the self-doubt.

**Your work is so much about change. Is there anything about today's dancers that strikes you as a dramatic change?**

Because of the accessibility of things like YouTube, there's a really exciting hybridization in movement vocabulary.

**Like what you did in *An Urban Nutcracker*?**

Yes, in a way. It's taking street dance and trained dance and blending it all together. It's raw and intense.

**What do you want from your performers?**

I want them to make choices, to have input, to respond. I work a lot with improvisation. When you do site-specific work you have to be able to deal with the unexpected. I want them to trust themselves. In Quarryography the performers could feel what was successful and learned how to amplify the movements. Those additions are enriching. I never had an outside director when I was performing for Pilobolus. It gave me great license. I think that control is deadening.

**Do you love the process?**

I'm addicted to the process. Even when it's difficult, I am always aware that what we're creating is for an audience. The audience is always in sight. This isn't experimentation for experimentation's sake. I'm looking to find imagery that has a deep reverberation with others.

**Writers have books, musicians have CDs, visual artists have the painting, the photograph, the sculpture, but a dance goes away between performances.**

Yes, it vaporizes. It's a very ephemeral art form.

**When you're in the middle of creating works like *Q2: Habitat*, are other pieces clawing for time, and how do you handle that?**

Ideas are always coming at me. I keep lists, like an idea collection. When I find the right opportunity, I remove them from my cranium and get them in front of an audience.

**There's that audience thing again.**

Without it, there's nothing.

The original article appears online here:

<http://www.bangormetro.com/media/Bangor-Metro/August-2009/Fresh-Moves/>