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Alison Becker Chase

"I don't think there's a choreographer going – none of them will admit it, of course – who hasn't been affected by the reach that Pilobolus has taken into what is possible in the shapes and forms of the human body," Charles L. Reinhart, the president and onetime co-director of the American Dance Festival, told Lesley Stahl for the television newsweekly *60 Minutes* (February 15, 2004). Pilobolus – formally, the Pilobolus Dance Theatre – germinated in an introductory class in modern dance taught in 1971 at Dartmouth College by



the choreographer and dancer Alison Becker Chase, widely considered the "mother" of the troupe. Chase, at 24, was not much older than the seniors among her students when the class first met. "I realized that I couldn't teach them as I would teach dancers," she told Lisa Traiger for the *Washington Post* (December 6, 2002), "so I started teaching them improvisation and choreography instead." Several of the students began to experiment with "body-linked" acrobatics that blurred the lines separating modern dance, gymnastics, pantomime, and slapstick; accomplished athletes, they developed routines centered on an array of visually striking formations, displaying what one student – Moses Pendleton – dubbed "collective muscle," as he recalled to Alan M. Kriegsman for the *Washington Post* (April 13, 1977). In 1973 Chase joined her former students as choreographer and dancer and, with another addition to the group, Martha Clarke, enhanced Pilobolus's aggressively physical routines with touches of femininity. Pilobolus became hugely popular on college campuses and other venues in the U.S. and overseas, and in 1977 the troupe made their critically acclaimed debut on Broadway. The company, then comprising Chase, Clarke, Pendleton, and three others, struck the dance critic Anna Kisselgoff, writing for the *New York Times* (November 25, 1977), as "American free enterprise's best advertisement. Investing in a little ingenuity, they have come up with something different and fresh. Yes, it is dance if the definition of dance is stretched. Certainly, it is an experiment in a new movement vocabulary and in an appeal to the senses. That appeal, incidentally, cuts across all ages and all

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audiences...Pilobolus is a Mad Hatter's tea party: Children of the 60's and 70's, they have created their own wonderland. The marvelous part is that all of us enjoy ourselves at the party."

Individually or with others, Chase choreographed more than 40 major works for Pilobolus and performed in many of them before was ousted from the company in 2005 by the board of directors – an action almost universally regarded as unconscionable among those in the world of dance. As the artistic or co-artistic director of the troupe, she won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980 and the Connecticut Governor's Award in 1997. Pilobolus, meanwhile earned the Scotsman Award for performances at the Edinburgh Festival, in 1973; the Berlin Critic's Circle Prize, in 1975; the New England Theatre Conference Prize, in 1977; a Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, in 1978; the Connecticut Commission on the Arts Award for Excellence, in 1979; a 1997 Primetime Emmy Award for outstanding achievement in cultural programming, for a televised performance at the Kennedy Center's 25th anniversary celebration, held in 1996; and the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for lifetime achievement in choreography, in 2000. In 2005 Chase received a commission (funded with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts) to choreograph a piece for Professional Flair/Dancing Wheels, a company that includes disabled performers. In 2006 she directed the first of two proposed summer workshops at the Island Heritage Trust's Settlement Granite Quarry, a preserve in Oceanville, Maine. The goal of the project is the development of a performance work that will include dance, puppetry, percussion, and the operation of quarrying machines.

Alison Becker Chase was born on January 3, 1946 in Eolia, Missouri, just north of St. Louis, where she grew up. She attended the Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day School, in Ladue, a St. Louis suburb. In 1964, after she completed her secondary education, she enrolled at Washington University, in St. Louis, where she studied philosophy and history; she also took a class in modern dance taught by Annalise Mertz, who established the school's first degree program in dance. Chase earned a B.A. degree in 1969. She next entered the graduate school of dance at the University of California at Los Angeles. She earned a master's degree in 1970, and the same year she was hired as the choreographer-in-residence and as an assistant professor of dance at Dartmouth College, in Hanover, New Hampshire. According to Paul Ben-Itzak, writing for the *Dance Insider* (June 20, 2006, on-line), her resumé includes training with the modern dancers and choreographers Merce Cunningham and Murray Louis and with the European-born ballerina Mia Slavenska.

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Dartmouth, which was then a men's college, required all students to take at least one class in art, music, or dance. Chase's introductory modern-dance class attracted athletes with no prior training in dance. Instead of teaching classical technique, Chase encouraged experimentation and improvisation – in particular, a form of contact improvisation in which “partners in small groups give and take their weight by leaning, carrying, and lifting one another in unscripted, gamelike fashion,” as Lisa Traiger wrote. Chase watched her students transform simple exercises into idiosyncratic, interdependent acrobatics that were more reminiscent of artful gymnastic maneuvering than of modern ballet. “They had a sports vocabulary,” Chase told Jennifer Dunning for the *New York Times* (July 18, 1996). “They brought in terrifically fresh choreography...They were fresh and off the wall and radical because they didn't know. They didn't come with all the baggage.” She told Tim Matson, the author of *Pilobolus* (1978), “I tried to see that from the beginning they choreographed and performed and got used to performing and to bringing in pieces of choreography everyday, the way a writer gets used to writing every day.”

After Chase encouraged them to organize their improvisations into repeatable arrangements, three students – Jonathan Wolken, Moses Pendleton, and Steve Johnson – came up with what John Skow described for *Time* (November 20, 1978) as an “acrobatic slapstick, abstract-expressionist mime, [a] muscular, head-over-heels tableau vivant,” a dance that offered explosions of flailing arms and legs and other movements, all intermingling to form seamless formations of torsos, limbs and heads. Wolken named the 11-minute dance for a species of fungus, *Pilobolus*, which, in releasing its spores, “explodes with unearthly energy,” as Pendleton explained to Anna Kisselgoff for the *New York Times* (March 5, 1976). The students “took shape as one rather than as individuals...[resembling] a gigantic ball that would re-shape and re-group,” Chase said to Jennifer MacAdam for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (January 19, 1992). “I was struck by the exchange of weight between them, the counter-balances and the leverages.”

In 1971 Wolken, Pendleton and Johnson performed *Pilobolus*, to music by Jon Appleton, as the opening act for the progressive-rock musician Frank Zappa at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. The audience's highly enthusiastic response to the work led Chase to select *Pilobolus* to represent Dartmouth in a 12-college dance festival held later that year at New York University (NYU). When Murray Louis saw the dancers perform at NYU, “I was knocked off my socks,” as he recalled to Paul Ben-Itzak for *Dance Magazine* (June 1996, on-line), and afterward he invited the men to dance at the space in New York City in which he and the choreographer Alwin Nikolais rehearsed their own companies. The troupe's informal New York debut took place on December

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29, 1971 at the Louis-Nikolais Dance Theater Lab, with Pendleton (then using the given name Robb) and Wolken, both of whom had graduated from Dartmouth by then, joined by two undergraduates, Robby Barnett and Lee Harris. (Steve Johnson had entered medical school.) "The group displayed amazing physical fearlessness, humor, inventiveness and unselfconsciousness...", Anna Kisselgoff wrote in a New York Times (December 31, 1971) review that brought them to the attention of the dance world. "That they can do so much with so little is astounding." In 1972 Pendleton, Wolken, Barnett, and Harris named their quartet the Pilobolus Dance Company. The following year Pilobolus performed at the American Dance Festival, an influential showcase for modern dance, at the invitation of Charles Reinhart, its president. "Out of their innocence," as Reinhart recalled to Lesley Stahl, "they created a new artistic direction based on what they knew, which was athletics, science and bodies." In 1973 Chase left Dartmouth, and she and Martha Clarke, a classically trained ballerina who had been a member of Anna Sokolow's modern-dance troupe, joined Pilobolus to form a sextet. "[The] male relationship began to go stale. We needed the input of female energy and sexual tension," Pendleton told Hubert Saal for *Newsweek* (December 5, 1977). Chase and Clarke softened Pilobolus's edgy, super-physical antics, layering the acrobatics with elements of eroticism, intrigue, romance, gentleness and delicacy, and bringing "a theatrical element to the company," as Chase noted to Jennifer MacAdam.

Among Pilobolus's early dances was the vaudeville-inspired *Walklyndon* (1971), which demonstrated the artfulness and tremendous skill of the performers' bumps, clumps, romps, kicks, and leaps. In *Ciona* (1974) the dancers bent and leapfrogged in one fluid motion, resulting in the "unlikely blend of primitive physicality and sophisticated humor, practiced with an innate seriousness that [is] cloaked in playful irony," as Dunning wrote in 1996. With *Monkshood's Farewell* (1974) the group "began to organize the material with a dramatic logic," Pendleton recalled, as quoted in Robert Coe's book *Dance in America* (1984). In *Untitled* (1975) two Victorian women evade a pair of eager suitors, until, after they "grow" to a height of nine feet, their billowing skirts reveal the hairy legs of the two nude men who hold them aloft. Later the men are "expelled" in a surreal depiction of birth and become the women's beaus. *Untitled* struck Saal as "a comic, Freudian, dreamlike excursion into personal relationships." *Day Two* (1980), set to music by the Talking Heads and Brian Eno, which purportedly depicts the second day of creation as described in the Bible, mirrors the release and freedom the dancers felt when, after a frustrating workday, they cavorted during a thunderstorm; it ends with the dancers sliding vigorously across the stage through puddles of water. For some time the Pilobolus dancers refined their routines while living and working together, first at a farm in Vermont and then in the Washington Depot, Connecticut, in what Jennifer Dunning described in

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the *New York Times* (December 20, 1981) as "an extension of close, communal college living that set the pattern of their dance." By early March 1976, when they performed to sold-out audiences at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in New York City, they had abandoned their cooperative living arrangements.

Early on in the troupe's development, the fashion designer Pierre Cardin became a Pilobolus fan; he provided financial assistance to the group for three years in the 1970s, and he helped fund their tours of Europe and South America as well as their Broadway debut, at the St. James Theatre in 1977. At that time Pilobolus still consisted of two women and four men (with Michael Tracy having replaced Harris). In one of the two programs prepared for their premiere, Chase and Pendleton performed *Shizen* (which they had choreographed together), accompanied by music for Japanese bamboo flute by Riley Lee. A "knowing but beautiful love duet," *Shizen* showed Pilobolus "at its most sophisticated," as Abba Kisselgoff wrote for the *New York Times* (November 25, 1977). In another duet of their creation, *Alraune*, Chase and Pendleton "play[ed] upon the theme of two equals one . . . with some striking geomorphic forms," in Kisselgoff's words. The critic also wrote, "Steps have no meaning for Pilobolus but motion does, and 'motion studies' would not be a misnomer for the ever-changing flow of linked body shapes that the troupe molds and remolds into space with skill and sophistication. There is a kinetic and visual impact to these designs that other dance does not have."

In 1979 Clarke left Pilobolus. The next year Chase and Pendleton, while remaining with Pilobolus, launched an offshoot dance group called Momix, which provides "entertainment with beautiful bodies doing amazing things" and "performs dance for people who don't like dance," as Pendleton said to Susan English for the *Spokane (Washington) Spokesman Review* (April 5, 2001, on-line). At the 1980 Winter Olympic Games, held in Lake Placid, New York, Pilobolus performed *The Empty Suitor*, a series of seemingly unconnected gags that Kisselgoff, in a *New York Times* (March 23, 1980) review of a Pilobolus concert at the McCarter Theater Center, in Princeton, New Jersey, described as "very funny." In the same review Kisselgoff praised Chase's performance in her solo piece *A Miniature*, in which Chase danced on a dark stage, holding two flashlights that provided the only light. "The solo was a detailed self-analysis, a tour de force because of its combination of subjectivity and objectivity," Kisselgoff wrote. "Objective because it described a woman looking at herself, a view dependent upon what the flashlight revealed...Subjective because character was illuminated as much as body parts. Fears, fantasies and yearnings were implied in the silhouettes and do-it-yourself spotlighting by the performer."

In the 1980s Pilobolus added to its staple of dancers a pickup pool of 50 others. "I find that it's through the dancers' bodies and minds and souls that this stuff is

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birthed,” Chase told Laura Bleiberg for the *Orange County (California) Register* (December 3, 2000). Also during that decade, as Jack Anderson pointed out in the *New York Times* (July 22, 1992), the group “increasingly tried to invest its gymnastic technique with dramatic significance.” The two-character *Cedar Island*, (1990), choreographed by Chase, Duffy Wrede, and Nina Winthrop, is an example of that trend. A meditative work that explored family relationships, it was danced by Chase and a 10-year-old boy at its premiere, at the Joyce Theater in New York. According to Jack Anderson in the *New York Times* (December 28, 1990), it was “notable for its sweetness and delicacy,” and its choreography, “though always tender, avoided cheap sentimentality.” In another example, in 1992 Chase and her Pilobolus colleagues created *Sweet Purgatory*, a melancholy dance set to Dmitri Shostakovich’s Chamber Symphony. In 1996, to mark Pilobolus’s 25th anniversary, the company’s four artistic co-directors – Chase, Tracy, Barnett and Wolken – choreographed *Aeros*, a fantasy about a space traveler who finds love on a distant planet.

By the late 1990s creative tensions had begun to mount among the artistic co-directors. Chase began to work exclusively with Michael Tracy, while Robby Barnett collaborated with Jonathan Wolken on most new works. With her family, Chase moved to Brooksville, Maine, and focused her energies on her own projects, while occasionally teaming up with a few others. “I found that I was able to listen in a different way to what was being generated,” she said to Gia Kourlas for the *New York Times* (June 23, 2002). “I’ve always needed a little time or distance. Instead of having someone buzz in my ear, saying, ‘Well, gee, I think this is the wrong direction,’ you just sit and listen and feel. It made a huge world of difference, and I found that I really enjoyed it.” She also acknowledged that Pilobolus was “born and raised on collaboration, and I think that it will always be a part of our process...You might have to change it to keep it invigorated, but I think that we will always be collaborative souls.” In *Ben’s Admonition* (2002), a dance loosely based on an event involving Benjamin Franklin and the Continental Congress, Chase and the Pilobolus members Ras Mikey C and Matt Kent experimented with “upper torso hydraulics...that whole illusion of float,” as she described it to Lisa Traiger, by having Ras Mikey C and Kent hang upside-down in midair and then twist and turn acrobatically. Gia Kourlas, in reviewing *Ben’s Admonition* for *Dance Magazine* (November 1, 2002), described the dancers as seeming “at once urban and otherworldly. Clearly, Chase’s ability to conquer both qualities is a credit to her choreographic sophistication and understanding of theater.” Chase joined with composer Edward Bilous and the documentary filmmaker Mirra Bank to create *Lucid Dreams* (2005), which explored new ways of perceiving dance movement through music and video.

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A \$50,000 deficit led Pilobolus' board of directors, in 2004, to establish a new position, that of executive director, with responsibility for restructuring the troupe's management and business practices, and they hired the theater director Itamar Kubovy to fill it. Kubovy's bottom-line, corporate-minded agenda alarmed Chase. "He began dismantling the fabric that was the artistic soul of Pilobolus. As this autocratic regime was being established, I realized this was stifling me creatively," she told Daniel J. Wakin for the *New York Times* (July 24, 2006). Chase particularly objected to Kubovy's insistence that Pilobolus retain copyrights to already produced work, including her own. For his part Kubovy argued to Frank Rizzo for the CTNow Web site (August 6, 2006), "[Pilobolus] began as a collective in every great sense of the word. We paid salaries to artistic directors...You make work, and that work is owned by the company." In October 2005, after several weeks of contentious negotiations, Chase was ousted from the Pilobolus board and given a few weeks to sign over her creative rights to the company. When she refused, she was fired. Chase told Paul Ben-Itzak for *Dance Insider* in 2006 that Kubovy and the three remaining board members maintained that their stance mirrored that of the Martha Graham Dance Center, which, in a so-called work-for-hire case, sued successfully in federal court in 2002 for ownership of all Graham's choreography. In the introductory paragraphs of the *Dance Insider* article, Ben-Itzak wrote, "This is the story of the day a dance company fired its mother and lost its soul. This is the story of the day an artistic enterprise founded on collaboration...acted like a corporation...This is the story of a dance company which shows every intention of performing the work of a fired choreography/director against her objections and without her supervision of the work, which the company apparently insists it owns."

In an appreciation of Chase for the *Dance Insider* (June 20, 2006, on-line), Rebecca Stenn, who danced with Pilobolus Too, a Pilobolus offshoot, for six years after a seven-year stint with Momix and now heads her own dance company, described Chase as "sweet, funny, and incredibly demanding in the best possible way...From Alison I learned stamina and grace...I think it is her sense of humor, and her enthusiasm that gave her the fortitude to achieve all that she has over the years. She is a creative force, a whirlwind..., irreverent and loving." Chase taught theater studies at the Yale School of Drama, in New Haven, Connecticut, from 1991 to 1997, and she has given classes in improvisation for YARD (Youth at Risk Dancing), a program affiliated with the Cleveland School of the Arts. She lives in Brooksville, Maine, with her husband Eric Chase, an architect, who occasionally designed scenery for Pilobolus productions. The couple have three children.

- D.J.K.