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She's a Standout

By Susan Reiter

The solitary female force behind Pilobolus, Alison Chase, turns a corner with some new choreography.

Her voice over the phone sounds gentle and refined, but Alison Chase confirms, "I can be quite explosive." Over the years, she has had plenty of practice holding her own among the guys. As one of two original female members of Pilobolus, the always inventive and surprising dance troupe that opens its annual four-week season at the Joyce Theater Tuesday, she had to make her presence felt amid a rambunctious quartet of eager jocks who had refocused their athletic skills on crating their own brand of dance.



Tsu-ku-tsu

These days, she's the lone female among Pilobolus' four artistic directors – a most unusual arrangement among dance companies, where there is one clear leader calling the shots. Decisions are made collectively, just as the troupe's choreography over the years has been a collaborative process. But being a one-person minority can be tough.

"As a woman, I feel I have to get their attention and make them realize that certain issues are really serious. I have to be aggressive and louder than is my natural instinct," says Chase, while marveling that the arrangement has endured

Newsday

nearly 30 years. “There’s definitely tension. It’s not an easy formula. We all see ourselves as co-equal in a horizontal relationship, which drives everybody crazy sometimes. We have a pact to agree to disagree.”

Since moving to Maine in 1997, Chase, 54, has had the added disadvantage of being geographically out of the loop. The other three directors live near the rural Connecticut town of Washington Depot, where the Pilobolus studio and office are. The move gave her the opportunity to choreograph individually for the troupe, and in recent seasons she has specialized in character studies and solos. The dancers participate in the creative process, building from improvised material, but she is the primary choreographer.

This year, she happily got her chance to choreograph the major new full-company work, after “waiting on the tarmac patiently to get my turn.” “Tsu-ku-tsu” is set to an original percussion score by Japanese Taiko drummer Leonard Eto, a former member of the dance company Kodo. At its premiere Tuesday, and during most of the season, Eto will be onstage performing live on his imposing array of drums and other percussion instruments.

Chase explains that this work has been an unusually close collaboration, with Eto’s presence during rehearsals playing an important role in shaping the dance. “Leonard was very much a part of the process,” she says. “He was there while we made the choreography. The movement and the music were generated interactively in the studio. The first few days, the dancers were exhausted, because you can’t deny the energy of the drums. Because of that energy, they produced movement that is at the high end of physicality.

“It was an exciting and different collaboration that produced an abstract and edgy piece,” she says. “In the past few years I’ve been very wedded to melody, and almost a storyline. This was very different, because it was clearly going to be an abstract piece.”

Eto speaks some English (enough for Chase to admire his “fabulous sense of humor”), but the collaboration was, she says, “wordless. Everybody knew instantly when it was working. Language was never a problem.”

“This new piece is kind of stark, which is very different than what we’ve usually done. It has a ceremonial feel to it,” says company member Rebecca Anderson. “Alison’s choreography is very intuitive and well-crafted. She likes to allow things to happen and to hear our input and our ideas about where we think the piece is going.”

Eto had to become accustomed to the Pilobolus process, which is exploratory and inventive and necessarily time-consuming. “We don’t string along pre-

Newsday

established steps in a nice pattern,” says Chase – a sentence that could serve as a company credo. “We had to do our improvisational research and figure out what was the body of material that really worked with this sound.

“There were times when I would say, ‘Leonard, we need a moment to fix this’ – and then an hour and 10 minutes later we had it,” says Chase. “He couldn’t believe that it took so much talk and time to create this stuff! Luckily, he was patient enough to wade through all of our slow moments.”

The exasperation and exhilaration that collaboration entails has been a Pilobolus hallmark from the start. Chase could claim credit for the troupe’s beginnings, since she was teaching the Dartmouth College dance class in which four young men’s imaginations were ignited back in 1971. “They had never seen dance, so they didn’t know what was supposed to be considered ‘modern dance.’ They came to it with great freshness,” Chase says. “They had a lot of energy and enthusiasm and gravitated much more to improvisation and composition.”

After finding initial success as a male foursome, Pilobolus soon expanded to include Chase and Martha Clarke, broadening its range to include more intricate lifts and configurations and to venture into quasi-narrative pieces. Chase continued touring full time until the early 1980s; Clarke, now well-known for her original dance-theater works and for directing in theater and opera, left a few years earlier. The company has never deviated from the four-male, two-woman lineup.

A more equal ratio is maintained in Pilobolus Too, a two-dancer offshoot that was launched in 1997. Chase is the director of P2, as she calls it (she says she held out for naming it “Duobolus” but was outvoted). Composed of Pilobolus veteran Adam Battelstein and former Momix dancer Rebecca Stenn, it will perform two Wednesday matinees at the Joyce (July 12 and 19), offering a fast-paced program of Pilobolus duets and solos spanning the company’s three decades.

“Luckily, Alison has stuck with it and kept the female component very much alive in a company that is very male oriented,” Anderson says admiringly of Chase. Recently, the two founding Pilobolus matriarchs were comparing notes over the phone, and Chase cites approvingly the following observation by Clarke: “One thing about working with all those Pilobolus guys is that it sure makes you know how to stand on your feet and say what you want.”

Susan Reiter is a freelance writer.