

# Bangor Daily News

## Brooksville choreographer to debut new show in Orono

By Emily Burnham  
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The brown wooden walls and floors of the gymnasium in the Brooksville Community Center will look familiar to anyone who went to high school in Maine. Decades of basketball playing teenagers, town meetings and after-school programs have left the lingering scent of human activity.

But in that small gym recently has been a rather unusual kind of human activity. Dancers of the highest caliber have rehearsed there on and off for the past two months, leaping and falling, skipping and lifting, contorting into outwardly impossible shapes and hanging, literally, from the rafters. The seeming incongruity — muscular, graceful dancers shaping their bodies into art, inside the well-worn center of a quiet Down East town — isn't so strange when you consider the reason they're there.



That reason rests on the creative shoulders of choreographer Alison Chase, who earlier this year asked seven dancers to join her new

company, Alison Chase Performance, which will have its debut production Friday at the Collins Center for the Arts in Orono. The five pieces the dancers are working on in Brooksville will be performed at that show.

“There’s a long sea of details one has to polish, when creating new works and working on older ones with new dancers,” said Chase. “There are always new connections to make, new ideas to pursue.”

Chase is known internationally as a co-founder of the renowned modern dance troupe Pilobolus, a founding member of another boundary-pushing dance company, Momix, a Guggenheim fellow and a professor at Yale University and Dartmouth College. She’s known here in Maine as one of the creative forces behind Opera House Arts’ Quarryography productions at Settlement Quarry in Stonington, and as a 2008 Maine Arts Commission Performing Arts fellow.



But primarily, she’s known as an innovative choreographer, envisioning the human body as a tool to inspire an emotion or evoke things both concrete and abstract. Somewhere in between ballet, yoga, jazz, gymnastics and the art of storytelling is the dance that Chase creates.

She left Pilobolus in 2006, citing creative differences with the way the troupe was treating the works she had choreographed. She has long needed a new outlet for her work, and her new troupe meets that need.

“I wanted to train new dancers and create new work. That’s really what it’s all about,” she said. “I wanted a group of dancers that I could always work with, to maintain that kind of continuity, so we’re on the same page and not moving new people in and out. The dancers are my muse.”

She chose Maine as the place to debut her new company for many reasons. She could have chosen New York, Boston, Chicago, or any other major urban area, but instead, she opted for rural Maine — not exactly a hotbed of contemporary dance. But Chase, whose husband’s family has lived in the Brooksville area for generations, and who has herself lived in Brooksville for 13 years, knew Maine was the right choice.

“We needed a partnering sponsor with a theater that would allow us to have a few days to set up and rehearse, and the Collins Center was game for it,” said Chase. “And we have the most unbelievable support here. Blue Hill, Deer Isle, Brooksville. It’s been a dream. The people here couldn’t be better. I get inspired here.”

Help came in the form of such things as being able to borrow the large van that the Blue Hill-based Atlantic Clarion Steel Band has to transport the dancers around. Chase secured

a place for the dancers to stay, with a guesthouse donated by a friendly community member, and got use of the Brooksville Community Center.

“Resources like that are nearly impossible to come by in a place like New York,” said Chase. “We’re incredibly fortunate.”

The company is composed of Christopher Grant, Jay Curtis, Jessica Bendig, Stephanie Fungsang, Manlich Minniefee, Shane Rutkowski and dance captain Mark Fucik. An eighth dancer, Rebecca Anderson, will perform a solo piece titled “Femme Noir” at the CCA production. Five of the dancers have worked with Chase before on “Quarryography” performances in Stonington.

Of the five pieces to be performed Friday, only one is a world premiere. “Devil Got My Woman” features female dancers Curtis, Bendig and Fungsang as Converse sneaker-clad sirens who lure a young man, Rutkowski, into a playfully sexy dance that ends up as a fierce pas de deux between Rutkowski and Curtis. Grammy-winning Blue Hill pianist Paul Sullivan composed the bluesy music.

“Tsu-ku-tsu” is an abstract piece set to the sounds of Japanese Taiko drumming. As huge percussive sounds echo across the dance floor, dancers assume difficult, visually striking poses while leaping off shoulders, standing on another dancer’s back, and lifting each other using muscles the average person is probably unaware they possess.

“It’s so physically demanding that knowing it isn’t enough,” said Rutkowski, 23, the youngest member of the company. “You kind of have to inhabit it in both a physical and mental way.”

“Ben’s Admonition,” another piece on the program, was originally a Pilobolus dance that Chase has brought to her new company. Two dancers, Fucik and Grant, begin the piece hanging side-by-side by their ankles and feet from a long cable with two loops attached to the end. By the end, they’re right side up. The strength and concentration involved in the piece make it riveting to watch.

“It’s about unexpected proximity,” said Chase. “These two men never intended to be here together. They could be survivors from a war incident, marooned on a desert island, survivors of a plane crash. They have to learn to co-exist.”

The fifth piece is “Star Cross’d,” a full company performance on a Romeo and Juliet theme, using circus silks for dancers to climb, swing and, at times, appear to fly with. Chase often places her dancers aloft on steel cages, silks, ropes and other things, to attain the look and feel she wants.

As a director, she’s a gentle leader, though her commanding vision guides the entire process of shaping a dance.

“She can leave the room to us to figure it out on our own,” said Fungsang, 24. “It’s hard to have one person guide the whole thing. You have to find it inside yourself.”

Fucik, who has worked with Chase for nine years, has embraced the all-inclusive process that Chase has worked in over the years.

“If you find it for yourself, it gives you a certain kind of ownership. You are invested in it,” said Fucik. “There’s a long oral and physical tradition in dance, that gets passed along from dancer to dancer. We learn from each other. We’re all passing along our skills and memory and whatever wisdom we’ve gained.”

Far from the cliché of the browbeating, bullying dance company leader, Chase embraces a kind of organic method, during rehearsals and up to performance. The end result feels less like a recital, more like a group of humans, onstage, making unique, captivating art with their bodies.

“You can’t be domineering,” said Chase. “I trust them to following their internal intuition. They need space to breathe and to think about what they are doing. It creates a certain alchemy. We’ve developed a wonderful kind of chemistry. That’s what I try to instill in all my dancers.”

Alison Chase Performance will premiere at 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 19, at the Collins Center for the Arts in Orono. Tickets are \$27 and are available by calling (800) 622-TIXX or visit [www.collinscenterforthearts.com](http://www.collinscenterforthearts.com).