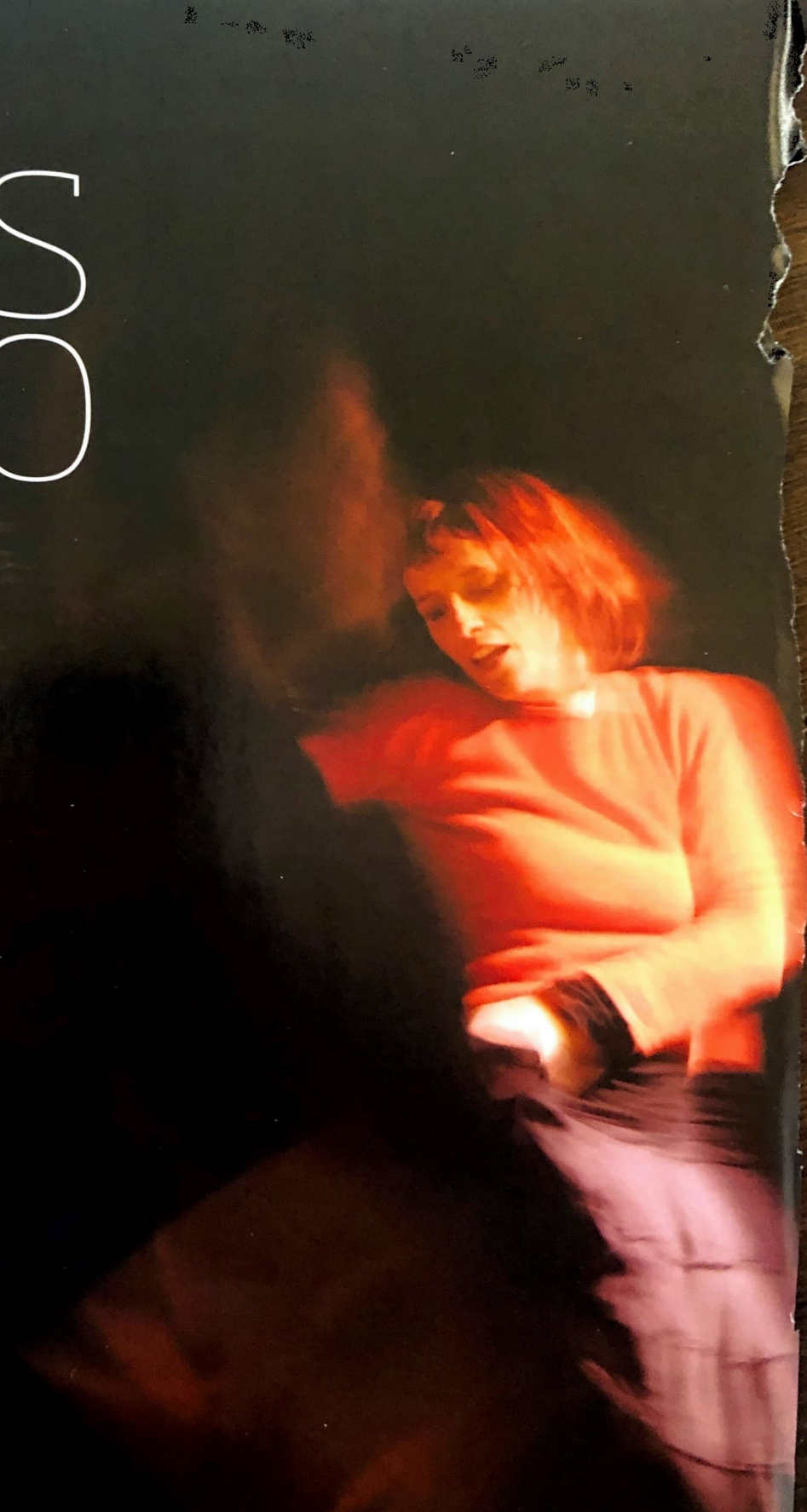


# Miles to GO

**Undergoing constant reinvention, the iconoclastic Mile Zero Dance Society reaches the quarter-century mark — with no end in sight**





**You may have** seen them during International Dance Day, crawling spiderlike through Churchill Square like a slow-motion flash mob, or spinning, contorting and genuflecting in workman's overalls in the May Day Parade in a manner reminiscent of *Monty Python's* Ministry of Silly Walks. Maybe you have chanced upon one of their weird and wonderful salon events around the city, typically featuring a motley crew of dancers and other artists in a series of performance art miniatures. It's all just a slice of the whimsical world of the Mile Zero Dance Society, a true Edmonton treasure, which this year celebrates its 25th year of creativity run amok.

There are several dance companies in Edmonton, but Mile Zero Dance is surely the city's most offbeat — forever colonizing new venues, absorbing new media and challenging preconceived notions of what dance can be.

A member-driven, artist-run outfit with an emphasis on improvised dance, interdisciplinary collaboration and unorthodox performance venues, Mile Zero Dance has consistently defied any sort of categorization. Since its inception in 1985, it has been a central pillar of Edmonton's contemporary arts scene, focusing in equal measure on performance, training and mentorship (including school outreach), and research and development. Gerry Morita, current artistic director, choreographer

and dancer, explains the name "Mile Zero" refers to the idea of a starting point, a fresh beginning — as it was for company founders Debra Shantz and Andrea Rabinovitch.

"Mile Zero is like this great flowering weed that pops up between established rows," says Tamara Bliss, modern dancer and head instructor of the University of Alberta's Orchestis dance program. "With a lot of dance companies, you have a set idea of what to expect, but Mile Zero does things you'd never expect to see." Such twists have included the integration of video and other visual media, and settings such as water fountains, public squares and the Badlands outside Drumheller. "They're always finding new ways to present dance," says Bliss. >>

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Under Artistic Director Gerry Morita (right), Mile Zero Dance has adopted a distinct style of dance strongly influenced by Japanese avant-garde dance esthetic.

“And this is very important to how dancers view themselves.”

Under the inspired leadership of Morita, Mile Zero has over the past decade adopted a distinct style strongly influenced by Japanese avant-garde dance esthetic, characterized by extremely slow movement and surreal imagery. Morita’s relationship with the style began in Tokyo under the mentorship of Japanese dance legend Saburo Teshigawara. It has persisted to the present; *Bad Lands (Good Luck)*, Mile Zero’s 2009 multimedia-dance production, featured an up-and-coming Japanese dancer, Hideo Arai.

“I find the esthetic exciting,” says fellow contemporary dance choreographer Brian Webb. “Her expression of [the Japanese esthetic] has a certain authenticity. It’s easy to slide into cultural appropriation, but what Gerry does is very true to its origins.” At the same time, Webb says, that Mile Zero’s relationship with this far-flung form is intrinsically Canadian. “In terms of the Canadian concept of diversity and globalization in the arts, this type of conversation is very important,” he says.

Morita, who came from a farm community outside Lloydminster, has worked in Vancouver and Montreal. But she says that above all else, her company’s repertoire is largely influenced by its home turf. “There’s something to be said of the expansiveness of the space around here, and that affects your choreographic ideas,” explains Morita. “I think the wide-open space combined with our lack of our own venue has led to some pretty interesting work in bizarre spaces.”

According to Morita, the company’s mandate is as much about creating artistic community as it is about performance. In this regard, they have proven immensely successful, supporting a total of 117 artists of various disciplines last year alone. “In other cities, things can become very rigid, and people tend to work with the same people for 20 years,” she explains. “In Edmonton it seems like a lot of people are doing different projects here and there with different people. It’s a good place to be creating art.”

Shawn Pinchbeck, an Edmonton-based electro-acoustic composer and longtime Mile Zero collaborator, says the dance company has played an instrumental role in fostering this climate of interdisciplinary collaboration in the city. “Mile Zero has done something really special in driving collaboration with artists



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This year, Pinchbeck and the dance company renew their relationship with the second instalment of *Knowledge Box*, a multimedia project. The company will continue to push the boundaries of creativity with the sequel to last year’s acclaimed performance, *Secret Diary of a Collapsed World* — a cabaret-inspired show featuring accordionist-vocalist Wendy McNeill and a cast of Mile Zero dancers — as well as putting on its regular shows, the annual Dance-A-Thon fundraiser and salon series.

Aside from its high-level productions, the company’s community outreach activities and classes in modern dance, contact improv and hatha (physical) yoga continue out of The

Landing Pad. And the ongoing dialogue with the Japanese modern dance world presses on with the inclusion of Mari Osanai, artist-in-residence for 2010, the dancer’s third such stint with Mile Zero.

As Mile Zero Dance passes the quarter-century mark, a performance space to call its own is number one on the company’s wish list. Says Morita: “We didn’t even have our own studio space until five years ago and we’re still kind of at the camping-out stage. But we’re now trying to get ourselves into a more permanent space that we can use for performances.” Beyond this, the artistic director explains, “it’s really difficult to project very far ahead because funding is so unstable. Things are always just one step higher than tentative.” ■