

Orange County's laboratory of dance

Experimentation, sans commercial constraints, drives the National Choreographers Initiative.

By **KAITLIN WRIGHT**
STAFF WRITER

"I really like to make things, and I want to practice making them," said Chicago-based choreographer Stephanie Martinez, who has come to Orange County for three weeks to do just that.

"This is really a one-of-a-kind experience to work on your art form without stress. I'm just so satisfied. Who in the hell gets three weeks to create something? Anything?"

Martinez is one of four choreographers invited to explore new material during the 13th annual National Choreographer's Initiative, a project created to nurture the development of new choreography.

Artistic director Molly Lynch was inspired to start the project after seeing a similar concept applied to the introduction of new scripts in South Coast Repertory's Pacific Playwrights Festival. Lynch began thinking about how she could adapt the model for dance.

"Playwrights can write a play without the actors, but choreographers can't really do that," said Lynch. "But if we give them time in the studios and dancers, we can produce this sort of laboratory for dance."

If dance is going to have a future, it needs new choreography. Through the National Choreographers Initiative, Lynch has provided a work station with



Erica Felsch and Thomas Baker work out their moves as dancers rehearse for the National Choreographers Initiative at UC Irvine. An informal concert of four never-before-seen works crafted at NCI is scheduled Saturday.

all the tools needed to build experimental ballet works – dancers, studio space and, most importantly, time.

"Having a block of three weeks is such a rare opportunity," said choreographer Nicole Haskins, who is a company member at Smuin Ballet in San Francisco. "It's incredibly helpful to the creative process because sometimes the trial-and-error approach gets lost when you just have to hurry and get done."

Part of what intrigues Lynch about dance is the creative process. At NCI, that process is the focus even more so than the final product is. Choreographers can use their time at NCI to work on pieces they hope to sell to interested



Sabrina Holland, left, is carried by A.J. Abrams and Felsch is carried by Baker during rehearsal.

companies, as well as prepare work they've already been commissioned to set.

Ben Needham-Wood, a choreographer and Smuin Ballet company member, for example, is working on a piece commissioned by

the Kentucky Derby that is based on the varied stories of racehorses and their jockeys and how they eventually all meet for a single event.

He said crafting this future dance narrative while

at NCI gives him the freedom to create without the looming intimidation of presenting a polished masterpiece. With the threat of expectation removed, Needham-Wood and the other NCI choreographers say they feel they are able to be more innovative and more imaginative.

"I think if you don't have space to experiment, you don't push boundaries," said Needham-Wood. "Sometimes it seems safer to present what dance already is versus what dance could be, but (at NCI), our risks are supported."

As the mastermind behind this enterprise, Lynch selects the four choreographers – this year from a competitive pool of nearly 60 applicants – as well as eight men and eight women

National Choreographers Initiative

Where: Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive, Irvine
When: 8 p.m. Saturday
Tickets: \$19-\$60
Info: nchoreographers.org; thebarclay.org

from professional ballet companies across the world. This year's roster of dancers also includes three apprentices from Orange County.

From there, Lynch is mostly an observer of the process. She may offer subtle suggestions, or act as a sounding board, but her main goal is to remove the parameters commonly given to choreographers.

Where there is usually a requested style, a week or two of rehearsal and a general expectation of greatness, NCI asks only for a commitment to creation.

"Everything is about dollars and cents, everyone wants you to make the next 'Hamilton,'" said New York City-based choreographer Tom Gold. "Here we have the luxury of trying without the pressure of delivering."

In a showcase at the Irvine Barclay Theatre on Saturday, audiences will be treated to an informal concert of four never-before-seen works performed by trained dancers.

Said Martinez: "NCI and (Lynch), they let me dream. I'm allowed to dream up whatever I want. To stop thinking about being perfect. To give (my choreography) soul instead of just thinking about task."

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