

DANCE

magazine

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SUMMER DANCE FESTIVALS

move and be moved.

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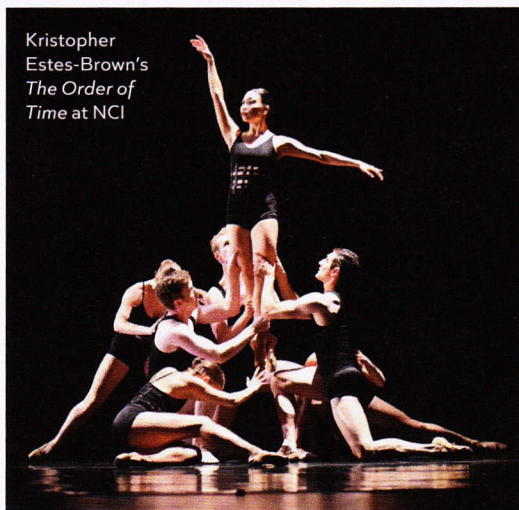
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A showing of Carrie Ruth Trumbo's *Nuit Blanche* at the 2023 National Choreographers Initiative

Innovation Incubator

Molly Lynch on nurturing creativity with the National Choreographers Initiative **BY PHILIP MAYARD**

For 20 years, Molly Lynch has been the driving force behind the National Choreographers Initiative. A choreographer, an artistic director, and a professor in the dance department of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts at the University of California, Irvine, Lynch has cultivated a unique opportunity for ballet-based choreographers from across the nation. At NCI's annual event, artists are given freedom to create, explore, and refine their artistic ideas without pressure to complete a work.

Each summer, four choreographers and 16 professional dancers are chosen to participate in the three-week project, which culminates in an informal performance and Q&A. Lynch, founder and artistic director of NCI, sees a growing interest in and need for this type of project: 104 choreographers and 130 dancers applied for the 2024 program. This year's NCI choreographers are Charles Askegard, Cherice Barton, DaYoung Jung, and Donna Salgado, and the showing of their work takes place July 27 at the Irvine Barclay Theatre.

I wanted to give ballet choreographers the opportunity to experiment and create something without the pressure of having to "premiere" a new work. When I was artistic director at Ballet Pacifica, I started a project that was modeled after South Coast Repertory's NewSCRipts Readings series. They do informal readings of plays and then get audience responses. I remember thinking, Why can't we do that in ballet? Choreographers need dancers in a studio in order to practice and experiment; I wanted to give them a "laboratory" setting with professional dancers where they can do whatever they want. That project at Ballet Pacifica was so popular, I later began NCI as an independent initiative, using the facilities at UC Irvine during the summer when studio space and dorms were available.



Molly Lynch

There was always a hunger for this type of project, and over the years it has continued to grow. I don't recruit, it's all word of mouth. People contact me, and I give them the information to apply each January. There are so many dancers who want to be a part of the creative process, and, for ballet choreographers, there aren't enough opportunities. There are more festivals and workshops for modern choreographers, but not for ballet, so that's where I focus my attention. That doesn't mean they have to create something on pointe, but I look for choreographers who are interested in working with ballet dancers.

I love using my curatorial eye to bring in different choreographers. Some may be more classical, neoclassical, or contemporary, or they might want to tell a story. I don't tell them what they have to do, but by looking at snippets of their work, I get a sense of where they are headed. I try to bring in choreographers from different backgrounds and experience levels, to make it interesting not just for the audience, but for the dancers.

My hope is that the choreographers will take a risk. I tell them not to plan too much or to even choose their music. I don't want them to feel locked in. In a way, I hope that every once in a while the choreographers' preconceived ideas don't work, and that they decide to do something completely different.

There's a camaraderie and informal creative process that happens between the choreographers. They stay at the same hotel, they share cars, watch each other's rehearsals, go to dinner together, and talk about their works. I'm not a mentor. Some choreographers have come to me with problems or roadblocks, but I usually encourage them to just put that aside and do something else.

There is a performance at the end, but choreographers don't have to present a completed piece. The choreographer gives the audience context about the work beforehand, but I don't want them to say too much. At the end of the show, we do a Q&A. When an audience member asks a question like "What did you mean by this part?" my reaction is "What did you see? What did you think?"

What I didn't expect when I started NCI was that some of the pieces created here would go to other companies. It's been wonderful to see some of the works live on or get finished and premiered in other places. That wasn't a goal, but I love it. I've also seen real communities being built. Dancers go back to their companies and talk about the people they've worked with. People get jobs and different opportunities across the country because of NCI. ■

Dave Friedman, Courtesy NCI (2)