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- At Juilliard, Crazy Dolls and a Flighty Flotilla

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Juilliard dancers rehearse "Die Puppe," choreographed by Rachelle Scott with music by Michael Lee.

Reporting and Photographs by Jimmy So

"I was bought by a woman who gave me away to her daughter, but her son kidnapped me and used me for all these strange sex experiments and torture!" one of the dancers sitting on the floor of a studio at Juilliard said. "It's hard to trust anyone, and I don't relate well to others. I'm kind of aggressive, so watch out. I'm Nicolette!"

Nicolette, it turns out, is a doll; or rather, she is a doll character that a dancer will be playing during this weekend's "Choreographers and Composers" performance, which is set to open Juilliard's dance season this weekend.

During a recent Thursday-night rehearsal, the 10 dancers were sitting in a circle, like a support group. Among them was 20-year-old Rachelle Scott, a petite, French-born choreographer who performed for President George W. Bush when she was 11. She came up with the idea that each of the 10 characters of her rousing and ruffling work would have a unique personal history and be given a name, just like any respectable doll.



Rehearsal for "Chariot," choreographed by Zack Winokur with music by Conrad Winslow

It is a charming and hyperactive conceit, one that, in keeping with the spirit of the concert's title, was inspired by Michael Lee, Scott's composer and collaborator, who suggested that there ought to be a fugue.

"That blew my mind away, like, oh, my God, I can do so much really great things now. I just love layers," Scott said. Her eyes lit up when she recalled the genesis of polyphony in her work, titled, "Die Puppe," German for "The Doll." "I feel like when you have overlaps like that, ... you can start playing with so many different qualities, so I loved it when he came to me with that."

Lee, a Korean-American who was sitting next to Scott, cocked his head toward her in delight. "Oh, you were excited about choreographing to a fugue? I didn't know that."

The cross-pollination of dance and music, redolent of Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, is on display in this culminating performance of choreo/comp, as the course pairing six third-year dance students and six grad-level composers is nicknamed. The venerable Juilliard music faculty member Pia Gilbert, who was always interested in the artistic process as much as in the artistic product, started the program in the 1980s to explore the essence of collaboration. The choreographer Janis Brenner and the music advisers Jerome Begin and Daniel Ott now lead the class.



Ernesto Breton and Madeline Swenson rehearse for "Die Puppe."

In fact, as a master composition student at Juilliard, Ott took part in the choreo/comp class when Gilbert was still teaching it. He opened a three-ring binder and pulled out a facsimile of the original program for the concert in 1999, the year he composed a piece called "Fold."

"Someone found it and Xeroxed it, and I put it in my folder," he said. "It's a little sad to think that it's archival at this point."

Choreo/comp affords choreographers an opportunity that most dance professionals don't often get: original commissions.

"There's no money!" exclaimed Brenner, who, as director of her own dance company, knows this better than most. "Dancers and choreographers cannot afford that, unless you're Peter Martins at City Ballet, or maybe Paul Taylor."

And even when professionals do collaborate, the process isn't always symbiotic. Taylor's 1957 "Epic" was choreographed to the voice of a telephone operator saying, for 20 minutes, "At the tone, the time will be ...". His recasting of classics such as Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring"—he called it "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)"—or setting "Arabesque" to a medley of Claude Debussy shorts, suggests not only the "found" music of Cage but also the Balanchine method: Find a piece of music, set it to dance.

And speaking of *not* collaborating, Cage and Cunningham, though they were lovers and partners in art, would raise from the void their creations separately, sometimes not hearing or seeing each other's work until the night of the show. To the avant-gardists, the audience ought to make artistic associations—or not—when the two independent spheres of dance and music collide, by "chance."



Gillian Abbott, left, and Ingrid Kapteyn rehearse for "Chariot."

Choreo/comp leaves room for random daftness, but it is more concerned with fostering concord. Consider "Chariot," the work of another student pair, the 21-year-old choreographer Zack Winokur and the 25-year-old composer Conrad Winslow. They were inspired by Baroque aesthetics that led them to deform and torque the idea of ascension, an obsession of ballet ever since the days of Louis XIV (*pointe* shoes that make you seem taller and lighter; Nijinsky's aversion and uncanny immunity to gravity). Winslow stretches the welcoming trumpet call from Monteverdi's "L'Orfeo" Prologue into a perverted, precipitous climb. The choreography matches the contrivance, and in the golden moment the dancers gather to form a chariot, an athletically aloof armada. The costuming assists the design, with one dancer presented in an absurdly voluptuous dress connected to four massive helium balloons.

“That’s another deformation,” Winslow said. “It’s like she is taking off.” Said Winokur, “It’s a sort of skewed grandeur and presentation.”

As for Scott’s piece, Nicolette tosses and turns in anguish, her tortured back bent as the harsh, rustic rhythm of Lee’s music nearly drives his own lyrical melodies to the ground in a dense sonic vertigo. Or witness the opening of the piece, in which you’re assailed by a massed attack of dancers at once crying, laughing, and screeching while an accordion, a saxophone, and two cellos cry, laugh, and screech in sympathy. It is concentrated violence, unbridled emotional extremes.

“It’s funny, because I didn’t intend it to be such a dark piece,” Scott said. “It kind of just happened and evolved into something crazy.”

And meet the other dolls: Elizabeth Swan, Maria Patterson, Wayne Brown, Wesley Chestnut, and poor Sir Lance, who’s been trying to have a baby with another doll for the past nine years, until someone bought his wife and broke up his family.

They spring free, like Chucky in *Child’s Play*. And these artists, too, are springing free, hand in hand, and demonic vision in demonic vision.

Juilliard’s Dance Division opens its 2010-11 season with Choreographers and Composers ... Plus, featuring new works by six pairs of student choreographers and composers plus seven new works by student choreographers, on Friday, December 10, at 8 p.m., and Saturday, December 11, at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., in Juilliard’s Peter Jay Sharp Theater, 155 West 65th Street, New York. The event is free, and no tickets are required. For more information, call [\(212\) 769-7406](tel:2127697406) or visit www.juilliard.edu.

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