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Out With The Concrete

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artist profile . rachel thorne germond.

Modern dance? What it is, how this artist forms her style, and a glimpse into how this genre is faring in Chicago.

by Jenaeth Higgins

Rachel Thorne Germond's initiation into the world of modern dance was something of an accident.

Fresh out of Cornell University, she arrived in New York City in 1986 with a BA in Comparative Literature, a BFA in Studio Art, no job, and an uncertain future. Fate or instinct intervened, and Germond chanced upon an advertisement posted by a nearby dance studio. She responded to the ad, and her spontaneous performance gained her the accolades of one of the most acclaimed choreographers in New York, Mary Anthony.

In fact, Anthony, hailed "the grandmother of modern dance," was so impressed with the talent and potential of the fledgling dancer that she awarded Germond a full scholarship to train at her studio. She began taking seven classes per week with Anthony who "channel[ed] her creative energy" into a realm of movement, performance, and personal expression destined to shape her career for years to come.

Germond, who currently works in both New York and Chicago and is preparing for an October 25 show, is an administrative member of the local arts cooperative Sparerroom, near North and Western, and also performs regularly with the Chicago Kings—a Chicago-based drag king troupe—usually as Elvis.

While involved in so many projects to further the larger scope of "art," it seems fitting that Rachel's particular focus, modern dance, actually began in part as a rebellion against late 19th century ballet.

In the 1930's, pioneering artists such as Anthony and Isadora Duncan rejected the restrictive confines of corsets and point shoes in favor of loose flowing garments and bare feet. Shedding far more than the symbolic trappings of traditional ballet, the new school revolutionized conceptions of movement. Rather than "trying to defy gravity, modern dancers began to use the energy of the earth to create momen-

tum." Natural dethroned unnatural, and an entirely new mode of expression was born.

Of course, the designation "modern dance" encompasses a wide range of styles and techniques, and Germond explains that a variety of choreographers inform her developing vision. She evaluates her own choreographic voice in terms of an "element of tension and release" that animates her performances. The goal is not just "beautiful movement," but the

ing of aggressive clapping, pushing, shoving and screaming that ultimately gives way to synchronized kicking, frantic jumping, and running circles around the studio.

Strange? Yes, and wonderfully so. Germond's work is all at once fluid, expressive, violent and powerful. And for the audience, irresistibly thought-provoking.

This notion of a relationship between performer and audience is vital to Germond's choreographic style. "Part of

and audience alike. Germond gains, through this interactive exchange, a fuller understanding of the pieces she has created.

To achieve this kind of communication, she often supplements the visual aspects of performance with music or excerpts of text. These sound effects not only create an atmosphere, but add an entirely new layer of meaning to a choreographed piece. Music can also serve as an interpretive tool by suggesting or clarifying the



Left: Rachel Thorne Germond. Right: Germond's work more closely resembles performance art, a gutsy dramatization of struggle transporting both dancer and viewer from unease to transcendent liberation

"Tell someone in New York you're a dancer, and the response is jazz or modern—at least they know you're not exotic," Germond said. "Chicago has Hubbard and Joffrey, and you certainly see a lot of publicity for some of those choreographers. But no one is writing about the avant garde."

tangible and powerful presentation of a message.

In this respect, Rachel's work more closely resembles performance art, a gutsy dramatization of struggle transporting both dancer and viewer from unease to transcendent liberation. This animation of conflict is particularly evident in her 1996 duet, "Dishette." The piece depicts an initial confrontation encounter between two dancers consist-

my work draws on a post-modern inclusion of the audience; I don't create an artificial wall," she explains. "There's an element of interaction that arises from the acknowledgement that people are watching."

She asserts that each individual brings new observations, new interpretations, new analysis of a piece, allowing it to take on a whole new life. This process ultimately has an educational value for artist

theme of the dance. Germond particularly favors using pieces that "have resonance in popular culture," a place in our collective history that can serve as a starting point for shared artistic experience.

Past works drawing on this idea of collective historical memory have included *5 Marylins* (exploring the many faces of Marilyn Monroe), *Double Elvis*, and *Evil Elvis*, both examining the enigmatic Elvis Presley. Her most recent choreographed