

Rites of passage

Oberfelder choreography converts stories of life into modern dance steps

By TRESKA WEINSTEIN
Special to the Times Union

Jody Oberfelder thought she wanted to be a writer until she took her first modern dance class. It was right then that she discovered she didn't want to write books; Oberfelder wanted to write dances.

In the 25 years since, Oberfelder has created a body of work that draws from the stories of her life — and life in general — making art out of rites of passage and everyday encounters.

"From the beginning, I realized that my strong suit was physically enacting something that felt real," she said last week from her home in New York City.

Her dance film, "Rapt," was set to kick off the 11th annual Dance on Camera Festival at Lincoln Center that night; the next day she was heading north with her company, Jody Oberfelder Dance Projects, for a 10-day residency at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Mass. The residency culminates with a work-in-progress showing Saturday evening at 8 p.m. at the museum.

"I like to make dances that have something to do with my perceptions and what I'm going through, and it's hopefully not myopic because we're all human," Oberfelder said. "I want (my dancers) to convey a spirit, an idea."

Jody Oberfelder Dance Works

■ **When:** 8 p.m. Saturday
■ **Where:** Mass MoCA,
87 Marshall St.,
North Adams, Mass.
■ **Tickets:** \$10
■ **Info:** (413) 662-2111;
<http://www.massmoca.org>

In her 1986 solo, "Head First," which encapsulated the passionate, risk-taking period when she was launching her career in New York City, Oberfelder spent much of her time upside down in a crash helmet. Four years later, expecting her first child, she choreographed a "duet" with her unborn child — "the opposite of running around like a punk in a crash helmet," she said.

Then came "Expectant Tango," featuring seven pregnant women; "Rock Me Mama," with parents and their babies, which was featured on an Emmy-winning episode of ABC's "Nightline"; and "Mother Other," performed with her daughter, then 6.

"The moment you say you're a mother, people think you're less of an artist," she reflected. "For me, that has enriched my sense of who I am and my art in a big way."



JOY OBERFELDER.COM

JOY OBERFELDER'S dances are athletic and sometimes astounding. "Landmarks of Dreams" (2004), inspired by the art of Marc Chagall, blends day and night dreams with images of wanderers, refugees, animals, acrobats and lovers.

Now 53 and the mother of two teenagers, Oberfelder is addressing a new stage of life. "LineAge" and her dance film "Life Line," premiered in 2005, focused on aging and the passage of time. Her new dance, "The Title Comes Last," set to premiere in June at the Flea Theater in Manhattan, "started off as investigation of the five senses, but it's morphed into (a dance) about savoring life, savoring what is essential," she said. "It follows the trajectory of dancers who start out unfeeling and mechanical, to their discovering this sensual world of lushness."

Her company shows the new work Saturday along with a piece tentatively titled "Heavy Light," about how moments, relationships and lives can flip from funny to tragic and back again.

The vocabulary Oberfelder has developed over the years is acrobatic, athletic and often astounding, although "I try not to make something amazing just because it's amazing," she says. "There's a lot of contact between dancers, not just spatially but really touching, really giving and taking weight."

Growing up, Oberfelder was the kind of kid who always wanted to be moving, she recalled. "For me,

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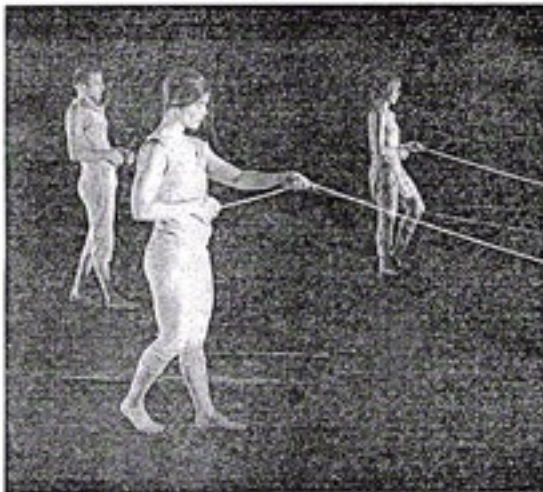
movement was always a way to connect with my own creativity and learning." She trained in gymnastics, water ballet, springboard diving and competitive swimming, and was even a cheerleader (an experience that she drew on in her 1994 dance, choreographed with Kim Irwin, "Wanted: X-Cheerleaders").

But she was always happier moving to her own beat rather than dancing other people's steps. In an audition for the choreographer Elizabeth Sreb one day in the late 1980s, she stopped trying to learn the combination and started

looking around the room in search of other people like her — athletic, powerful movers with a unique style and passion.

She found enough of them to form her own company in 1988 and now works collaboratively with her five dancers — Elise Knudson, Carlton Cyrus Ward, Rebekah Morin, Luke Guttsell and Brandin Seiffensen — whose backgrounds encompass aerial dance, gymnastics, the circus arts, contact improvisation, opera and musical theater. Oberfelder brings ideas into the studio and allows them to mutate and evolve on her dancers' bodies while she takes a role she compares to that of a sculptor with a piece of clay, who knows intuitively "when the piece is taking shape and what it's trying to be." Recent works include "Landmarks of Dreams," inspired by the paintings of Marc Chagall, and "The Story Thus Far," which draws on Grimm's fairy tales.

"I get really depressed after I've finished a work," Oberfelder mused. "You feel like you'll never have an idea again. I like the time now, when you're developing the work, when it's on the rise."



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"LINEAGE" (2005) is a suite of short dances that plays with concepts of lines, age, and evolution.