



## **Suspended Fates: With her Career up in the Air, Pilobolus Co-founder Choreographs a Gravity-defying Meadows Show**

By Margaret Putnam - November 1, 2006

Alison Chase casts a watchful eye as Matt Walfish swivels effortlessly, suspended from a wrist harness. When he lands, everyone in the studio lets out a long "ooooohh."

Alison Chase says the idea behind her new work, *Lucid Dreams*, was to suggest "a state of being aware of the progress of dreams while asleep and dreaming of it."

Other dancers give the harness a try. One swings in long, luxurious arches, another comes down to earth spinning and two others pair off swaying to an invisible breeze. After a few more days of rehearsal, the dancers will be filmed, and the images of flying will be projected on stage when Ms. Chase's new work, *Lucid Dreams*, debuts Thursday night at Bob Hope Theatre. The dancers are members of Southern Methodist University's Meadows Dance Ensemble, and their program also includes Petipa's classical *Paquita* and Max Stone's *Throw*.

The flying is an apt image for Ms. Chase, whose life has recently turned topsy-turvy.

A co-founder and one of the most important choreographers of Pilobolus Dance Theatre, the Connecticut-based company noted for its acrobatics and organic formations, Ms. Chase got the boot in December. The new executive director had given her an ultimatum: Give up all rights to your work, or leave.

She refused, putting her career in limbo. The showdown came just when Pilobolus was appearing at the Joyce Theater in New York. "I thought about picketing. I did not receive an invitation for the show, or a ticket."

Pilobolus executive director Itamar Kubovy responds that "Pilobolus has always owned the works, so there is no controversy. We have worked very hard with her to ensure she can do works with Pilobolus and elsewhere. We wish her well."

Ms. Chase has not been idle. This spring, she staged one of Pilobolus' earliest works, the 1975 *Alraune*, for the Meadows Dance Ensemble, and in the summer, took on a project that was pure Pilobolus. Using the Settlement Quarry on Deer Isle in Maine as her starting point, she involved students from SMU, as well as an excavator from the gravel pits. His job was to pick up 25-foot puppets and put them down.

*Lucid Dreams* is pure Pilobolus, too. Originally commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra with an original score and performed at Carnegie Hall last year, it featured two dancers, a full orchestra and a projection of dancers "flying." When Ms. Chase was invited back to SMU, she re-created *Lucid Dreams* for six couples. Her idea was to suggest "a state of being aware of the progress of dreams while asleep and dreaming of it."

“By having the dancers suspended over the ground, the relationship to gravity is altered, and it creates a different state. I like it that everyone is not glued to the ground,” she said after a rehearsal in September.

Dance Department chairwoman Myra Woodruff says her program values "the quality and newness" of Pilobolus' work. "We have our favorites, and Alraune was one. When Alison came to set the piece, she was a ray of sunshine, and had a natural rapport with the students. She was so inspired she offered for them to be part of her Quarry project in Maine. I thought this would be a fertile time for her to return, and invited her to create a new work."

Working with the students at SMU is nothing like her experience teaching 36 years ago at Dartmouth, where Pilobolus got its start, says Ms. Chase. The students at SMU, she says, "are pre-professional level. I thought I might have to take [Lucid Dreams] down a few notches, but not so. The kids are collaborators."

The Dartmouth students, all male, were mostly jocks having to take music, dance or theater class to graduate. Only a few years older than her students, she did not attempt to teach dance technique, but encouraged them to improvise. And thus Pilobolus was born.

A year after Pilobolus got under way, Ms. Chase and her new female ally, Martha Clark, tentatively suggested that maybe they "could add some sophistication." Otherwise, it was "totally testosterone-induced." Ms. Chase's contribution was invaluable, offering a yin to the men's yang, and her output impressive: more than 50 works in the repertory.

Right now, she gets not a penny in royalties. "Who owns the works is on shaky grounds. I believe artists should own their own work."

If the board of Pilobolus were true to the original purpose, she says, "they would take the higher road."

In any event, she envisions a future creating full-evening, multidimensional works fusing dance, music, narrative and film. She has a creative team and ideas, and now needs a producer. "I like the students and faculty here so much, we are talking about some kind of project in the future. I just don't know what it will be or when."

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