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Updated: 11:00 a.m. Monday, Feb. 8, 2010 | Posted: 5:54 a.m. Friday, Feb. 5, 2010

## Project Forklift takes a new look at everyday movement

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

AMERICAN-STATESMAN ARTS WRITER

Allison Orr has a challenge for her dancemaking peers.

The award-winning Austin choreographer, who under the umbrella of her company Forklift Danceworks has created evocative modern dances for such nondancers as firefighters, Elvis impersonators and most recently, City of Austin sanitation workers and their trucks, asked five choreographers to do the same: Make dances for people and the everyday moves they do on the job or during the course of their day.

Hence massage therapists, cooks, waiters and a police officer will be just some of the performers in "Project Forklift," which opens this weekend for five performances at the Off Center.

And to push Orr's paradigm of using untraditional performers a little further, Sharon Marroquin - three-time Austin Critics Table winner for Outstanding Choreography, will present a dance for 74-year-old retired Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo dancer Frank Yezer.

"It's really about bringing awareness to physical movement we might see every day or how certain people move," says Orr of her creative challenge and overriding aesthetic philosophy. "It's a way to say to an audience, 'Here's another way to look at human movement' or 'here's another way to consider how you move.'"

And it's also a way to say, here's a way to take a chance on modern dance.

Orr's challenge to her dancemaking peers is also part of her larger artistic mission to build the audience for modern dance, an art form not known for its wide appeal. Never mind the recent popularity of television shows such as "So You Think You Can Dance" or "Dancing With the Stars." A recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that a mere 7 percent of the public attends live dance concerts of any kind, ballet, modern or folk dance or otherwise.

Orr's own data-gathering backs up those findings. Based on surveys she's conducted during the last few years, about 40 percent of the Forklift audience are first-time attendees at a modern dance concert, she says.

"People are often baffled by modern dance," says Orr. The abstract moves, the frequent lack of a narrative - modern dance's very modernities are not always readily graspable.

People might not be so baffled by the gestures a traffic cop makes, though.

After her successful "Trash Project" performance - which in August brought an estimated 2,000 people to a rain-slicked tarmac to see 45 employees from the Austin sanitation department - Orr received a note from an audience member. Had the Austin choreographer ever seen the graceful moves of the female police officer who directed rush-hour traffic every Thursday at Second Street and San Jacinto Boulevard?

Sgt. Melissa McGrath of the Austin Police Department didn't really think she was performing when she worked the weekly off-duty gig directing traffic. But meeting with Orr and listening to the choreographer's philosophy, the 19-year veteran of the police force came around.

"I've always prided myself in being clear with my hand signals, and that's my goal on the job," says McGrath. "But Allison challenged me to think of what I do (as dance)."

An avid triathlete, McGrath, 47, has found the grind of a rehearsal schedule, like athletic practice, familiar. Same with the attention to perfecting the detail of physical movement. But the painstaking crafting necessary to create just a eight-minute dance has opened her eyes to the minutiae of artistic development. McGrath performs solo in front of a rear-projection screen as footage shot during her traffic directing stint plays.

"I've been amazed at the creative process," she says. "I didn't realize all the details, all the technical aspects. It takes a lot of concentration," especially learning to count her moves to music (Austin composer Graham Reynolds wrote music for the piece) and getting familiar with theater terms such as "upstage."

Choreographer Zenobia Taylor had to introduce some new terms to the performers she selected for her piece, "Prix Fixe." Taylor plucked her dancers from the many waiters, cooks and bartenders she knows from her decade of working in food service. In fact, she still holds down waitress positions at Olivia and Counter Café while also being co-artistic director of the Getalong Gang Performance Group, an indie troupe.

"There's a rich movement vocabulary to restaurant work," Taylor says. Cooks sharpen knives and chop, stir, toss. Waiters balance plates and trays. Bartenders juggle glasses.

"There's also very interesting social and personal dynamics and relationships - interesting hierarchies - at play among those who work in restaurants," she says. "There's often a lot of acting involved on the part of a waiter or bartender that maybe the customers don't always realize. The jobs are kind of performances in themselves."

"Prix Fixe" follows the trajectory of one night in a restaurant. Taylor chose saccharine 1960s French pop music for the aural backdrop to her lighthearted, 10-minute dance.

Though teaching her food service co-workers the ins and outs of transforming their moves into performance has been a challenge, simply working with restaurant personnel has nearly defied Taylor at several moments in the process.

"This show opens Valentine's Day weekend - one of the biggest weekends in the restaurant business," Taylor says. "I've had lots of people say they'll participate (in the performance) but then have to drop out."

Taylor added that it's also hard to get physically exhausted restaurant workers game for showing up for rehearsal after a long day on their feet.

"This has been a big lesson in flexibility on my part as well," says Taylor. "But the natural movement of cooks and waiters is natural dance."

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### 'Project Forklift'

**When:** 8 p.m. Feb. 12-20, 2 p.m. Feb. 21

**Where:** Off Center, 2211 Hidalgo St.

**Cost:** \$12-\$20

**Information:** www.forkliftdanceworks.org

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