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DANCE

United they move, L.A.

Three choreographers help and challenge one another for the group show 'Unearthing Sleeping Beasts.'

By Susan Josephs
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IN the past, choreographer Maria Gillespie wasn't a fan of participating in group shows. "I was opposed to them because they didn't allow me to dive deep enough into my own vision," she says.

But when Gillespie was offered the opportunity to join forces with two other L.A.-based contemporary choreographers, she experienced a change of heart. And, she says, "I wound up taking the most risk artistically that I ever have."

The results of that gamble will be onstage Friday at the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre, when Gillespie, 36, and her Oni Dance company join Holly Johnston's Ledges and Bones Dance Project and Kate Hutter's L.A. Contemporary Dance Company to kick off the theater's Target-sponsored summer dance series. The group show, "Unearthing Sleeping Beasts," reflects the dual desire of all three choreographers to push beyond their artistic comfort zones and to foster a more palpable sense of a contemporary dance community in the Southland.

"We're all interested in the raw, carnal and human aspects of movement," says Hutter, who initially approached the other two about applying for a slot at the Ford. "But we're also three artists at different phases in our careers, and I thought we could all benefit from each other in different ways."

In a city with a limited number of producing dance venues and funding sources, it's not surprising that choreographers with shared artistic affinities would want to team up. "But I also think that in spread-out L.A., there's more of a desire to know each other than to carve out territory separate from one another," observes Johnston, 33. "The vibe out here is different than in a city like New York, where there's such a dense concentration of dance artists. I feel like we're competing with ourselves but not with each other."

To that end, the choreographers made a concerted effort to pool resources and involve one another in their respective artistic processes. Hutter, for example, who at 24 is younger and newer to L.A. than her colleagues, took on a greater share of the producing tasks with her company's co-founder, Michelle Mierz. Johnston and Hutter, tenants of the recently created Diavolo Lab Space in Lincoln Heights' Brewery Arts Complex, shared rehearsal studios. Several male dancers juggled working for more than one company, and at the end of May, the choreographers held an informal showing of their works to solicit input from one another.

"Even if I disagreed with it, the feedback was incredibly helpful and amazing to get outside an academic setting," says Hutter, a recent MFA graduate from Purchase College in New York. "I feel like you'll see the residue of this at the show. We're not following the format where you just show your individual piece at a festival and that's it."

For the Ford evening, Hutter took on the challenge of revamping a six-minute duet called "Passion Plays" into a 30-minute piece for 19 dancers that explores the struggle between individual desires and the rules and rituals of a larger community. "Without adopting any particular moral stance, I wanted to grapple with how people withstand or succumb to passion," she says.

Having never worked with such a large cast, Hutter says, she also found herself drawing on her ballet training. "In a way, this dance is a story ballet," she says. "I've learned to embrace my classical influences and figure I have plenty of time to be more cutting-edge if that's what I want to be."

Johnston's new work, aptly titled "Departures From Common," also poses new challenges for its choreographer. Set on eight performers, the dance wrestles with ideas about gender.

"I've always worked androgynously," says Johnston, who grew up in Southern California and was a founding member of Stephanie Gilliland's Tongue Dance Company. "I've always been opposed to the conventional ways of partnering. But this time I wanted to dissect the physical habits of men and women and understand how much of that is rooted in gender archetypes."

Johnston, known for turbo-charged, knee-pad-required, gravity-defying movements, says her new work "isn't as robustly athletic. Kinetically, I used to be all about risk. Now I'm exploring different territory."

Ditto for Gillespie, whose "The Splendor of Gretel" uses a commissioned score by a local musician who goes by the name Ginormous, along with a four-wheeled, rectangular metal contraption that the choreographer has nicknamed "the Beast." Created by New York-based visual artist Michael Berens, the Beast serves as the dance's set and lighting source, and Gillespie has structured the work so the dancers must constantly interact with it, often with unpredictable results.

"In the past, I'd make a phrase, set it on my dancers, and they'd get it," she says. "But now there's this structure, and I can't communicate with it the way I can with my dancers. There's an element of chaos to this work, and being a complete control freak, this scares me."

Conceptually, Gillespie's dance delves into some of the darker themes of the "Hansel and Gretel" fairy tale, such as child abandonment. "I grew up with one parent," she says. "And I've always been drawn to fairy tales and the way in which they portray archetypes."

For Gillespie, who moved to L.A. in 1996 and has a sizable following as a dance teacher, "The Splendor of Gretel" also represents a turning point in her career. "I had found a way of making work that flowed for me, but I knew if I continued in that direction, I'd get in a rut," she says.

In addition to harboring a collective urge to venture into uncharted choreographic territory, these three dance artists seem united in their view of trying to make it in Los Angeles. "Reflexively, I'm a rebellious underdog," says Johnston, laughing. "I feel like L.A. has been really marginalized as a place for contemporary dance, and it makes me want to dig in my heels."

Hutter, for her part, considered moving to New York City when she finished graduate school but felt that too much was established there. "I saw more limitations than opportunities," she says. "I feel like L.A. is the frontier, where you have a lot more freedom and you're not constantly concerned with trying to prove your validity."

As for Gillespie, she says: "It took me some time, but I found a home and a sense of myself here. In New York, it's so easy to become just another red pinpoint on the map. Here, you have ample room to spread out and lay down your own aesthetic. But what I'm realizing now is that no one person's view is ultimate, and we need to feed each other."