



(From left) Gary Schaufeld, Aaron Carr, Brandon Courney and Matthew Baker in Larry Keigwin's *Contact Sport*



Monica Bill Barnes in *Mostly Fanfare*



(From left) Jaclyn Walsh, Emily Schoen and Ashley Browne in Keigwin's *Girls*



(Here and below) The cast of Al Blackstone's *Freddie Falls in Love*



(From left) Matt Doyle, Ricky Ubeda and Gaby Diaz

C'mon, Get Happy

Why choreographers are exploring the lighter side of contemporary dance

By Maggie McNamara

You trip and fall onstage, and the audience erupts into laughter. A total nightmare, right? Not if you're choreographer Monica Bill Barnes, who's made a career out of presenting delightfully funny contemporary work. "When the audience laughs, I know they're paying attention," Barnes says. "They're connecting with the piece."

From the competition circuit to the concert world, contemporary dance has acquired a certain reputation for angst, with choreographers regularly tackling heavy subject matter. But more and more artists are beginning to explore contemporary's uplifting potential. "I've recently found myself wanting to create things that are just beautiful to watch, and that make people happy," says Still Motion artistic director Stacey Tookey. In search of laughs, smiles and that good-all-over feeling, these choreographers have broadened the scope of contemporary dance.

Looking on the Bright Side

Pain can be a powerful source of inspiration. So why set heartbreak and loss aside? For choreographer Larry Keigwin, exploring happiness through dance just comes naturally. "If you think about the pure act of dancing—social dancing at weddings, a baby dancing—it's a celebration of the human spirit, an adrenaline rush," he says.

Choreographer Al Blackstone has found that creating uplifting work just requires a shift in perspective. His most recent full-length piece, *Freddie Falls in Love*, was inspired by a breakup—yet it was anything but sad. "I realized that a lot of my work revolves around being in love, and I wanted to explore how someone could see the beauty in the world on their own, and not through their partner's eyes," he says.

The Cheese Factor

While dances inspired by grief and sadness earn audience respect quickly with their natural gravitas, finding a non-cheesy happy place can be delicate work. "Showing happy pieces creates the same anxiety you get when you throw your own birthday party," Barnes says. "You want everyone to have a good time, because if they don't, you feel like you've failed in some way." Along with

her partner, Anna Bass, she devotes months—sometimes years—to generating new movement before whittling it down for show. "We're thrilled if we get 15 minutes from four hours of material," she says. And the cutting process doesn't end when the curtains close on opening night. "We kill about 50 percent of a show after our first performance based on audience reception," she says. "It can be brutal, but not everything we think is funny or interesting is going to make sense to complete strangers."

Blackstone notes that when you create uplifting work, you risk being labeled as cutesy. To avoid that trap, he focuses on staying connected to an authentic inner joy. Melanie Moore, a dancer in *Freddie Falls in Love*, finds it easy to immerse herself in Blackstone's happy work because of his commitment to story. "He keeps us thinking

about why we're doing each step, like, 'What are you saying with that pas de bourrée?'" Moore says.

Keigwin accesses authentic happiness by keeping his creative process playful, inviting his dancers to use prompts and games to generate movement. Keigwin + Company dancer and rehearsal director Brandon Courney remembers learning *Contact Sport*, a piece inspired by Keigwin's relationship with his brothers. "He told us stories about childhood games they used to play—pranks, trust falls, Red Rover," Courney says. "By experimenting with all that, we found movement that was filled with a really honest joy."

Happy How-To

Want to take a journey to the light side with your choreography? Try starting with music.

"Find a song that makes you feel joy and just start moving," says Still Motion artistic director Stacey Tookey. "It doesn't matter if it's a terrible '80s song. You can always set the movement to different music later!" Choreographer Larry Keigwin recommends making a playlist on Spotify with a wide variety of songs. "Give yourself the opportunity to investigate new music, and take note if you're getting stuck in one mood," he says.

When it comes to adding a touch of comedy, choreographer Monica Bill Barnes finds smaller is better. "If you want to do a trip, a giant one will kill the joke," she says. "It's so much funnier to watch someone sort of trip, and try to cover it up." As in stand-up comedy, it takes practice to find the right pacing. If you're going for funny, give yourself time to figure out what will get the biggest laugh. —MM

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So why all this happiness now? "The world is stressful these days, and dance can provide an escape from that," Keigwin says. But he thinks the shift also stems from contemporary's evolution physically. "Artists are finding more rhythm—and more playful, witty and daring ways to move their bodies," he says.

Courney sees the happiness surge as less of a trend and more of an indication that the climate of the contemporary dance world is broadening. "Think about all the commercials and music videos showcasing contemporary dance right now," he says. "Choreographers feel like there's more room in the emotional spectrum for them to explore their creativity."

In the end, Blackstone thinks, the goal should be to keep that spectrum balanced. "If choreography is purely joyful, or purely sad, it loses effectiveness," he says. "People appreciate something sweet so much more after having something salty." DS

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(FROM LEFT) MATTHEW MURPHY, COURTESY KEIGWIN + COMPANY; MALLORY LYNN, COURTESY MONICA BILL BARNES; MATTHEW MURPHY, COURTESY K + C; (2) MATTHEW MURPHY, COURTESY AL BLACKSTONE