



# **Nieuwe Nederlandse Dans: On the Dutch Hothouse and the Blossoming of Dance**

By Lisa Kraus

Nieuwe Nederlandse dans: Dance from The Lowlands in Philadelphia

# On the Dutch Hothouse and the Blossoming of Dance

BY LISA KRAUS

**NIEUWE NEDERLANDSE DANS / NEW DANCE FROM THE LOWLANDS IN PHILADELPHIA**

**Jérôme Meyer & Isabelle Chaffaud**  
**corps à corps** (excerpt) & new creation with Philly Dancers  
Painted Bride Art Center  
230 Vine Street/Old City  
September 7-9, 2006 @ 6pm  
Tickets: \$15  
Box Office: 215.413.1318  
Web: [www.livearts-fringe.org](http://www.livearts-fringe.org)  
D A N C

**Emio Greco | PC**  
**Hell**  
Perelman Theater  
Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts  
260 South Broad Street/Center City  
September 14-16, 2006 @ 8pm  
Tickets: \$20  
Box Office: 215.413.1318  
Web: [www.livearts-fringe.org](http://www.livearts-fringe.org)  
D V

**Dylan Newcomb**  
**Burn**  
The Performance Garage  
Jeanne Ruddy Dance  
1515 Brandywine Street  
(Art Museum area off Broad)  
December 1-2, 2006 @ 7:30pm  
Information and reservations: 267.350.4970  
Admission is free, but seating is limited per Performance Garage  
D V

Photos by left to right: Joris-Jan Bos, Laurent Ziegler, Robert Benschop

Photos by (l - r) : Joris-Jan Bos, Laurent Ziegler, Robert Benschop / Design by n/a designlab

Living in Holland I learned that the flower auction in Aalsmeer is the primary one in the world. Located conveniently near Amsterdam's Schiphol international airport and run with the efficiency developed over several hundred years of smart merchandising by the Dutch, this auction in a country of just 16 million people has turned Aalsmeer into the commercial flower hub of the world. Not only is there an abundance of flowers grown on Dutch soil (or in an ultramodern twist, not even touching soil), but flowers grown in South America might be auctioned in Aalsmeer before making their way back across the ocean to a Philadelphia flower stall.

For dance, the Netherlands provides a crossroads too. With a generous system of subsidies and support mechanisms for both the development and touring of dance, it has attracted artists from other countries eager to work in an environment that values artists as professionals, and supports technical excellence, high production values, and fresh thinking. The Netherlands has made a significant investment recently in creating relationships with international presenters to foster tours by Dutch groups.<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia was the beneficiary of this cultural outlay through *Nieuwe Nederlandse dans: Dance from The Lowlands in Philadelphia* where four groups working at different strata of the Dutch dance ecosystem came to teach, develop, show, and discuss their work between June and December 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Events ranged from a long, slow simmer to a quick burst. Working with a group of four Philadelphia dancers over six weeks, [Jérôme Meyer and Isabelle Chaffaud](#) developed *Seed*, a new piece that they showed at the [Philadelphia Live Arts Festival](#) along with an excerpt from their duet *Corps à Corps*. Anouk van Dijk's dance company [anoukvandijk dc](#)

gave a week of classes and a talk, and showed an excerpt from van Dijk's *STAU*. [Emio Greco | PC](#) was presented as a featured international dance company in the 2006 Live Arts Festival, performing *Hell*. And Dylan Newcomb danced his solo *Burn* and gave a two-day workshop.

As an "embedded journalist" for all of *Nieuwe Nederlandse dans*, I reflected on each of these dance offerings and on the conditions in which it was created—the hothouse that Holland has built for dance. And being American, it was inevitable for me to contrast those nurturing conditions with the more Spartan ones in which American dance artists must function.



Photo of *Hell* by Laurent Ziegler



Photo of *Hell* by Laurent Ziegler

## *Hell*

In describing Emio Greco | PC's work several critics hit on the word "terrifying." Maybe that's because *Hell* emerges out of and recedes back into an inky darkness in which its denizens endure ongoing duress. As the work begins, Greco's motley crew, having fully digested the mechanics of pop-culture magnetism, delivers a puzzling but infectious rendition of lip-synched classic rock. They understand the lowered gaze, the "come and get me/I'm off limits" pout, the strut and shimmy of *American Idol* (and, just as glitzy, Italian RAI-TV). Is one definition of "hell" our global media culture? We are so easily seduced. But nothing is that simple here—we are seduced because entertainment is entertaining!

Greco and Pieter C. Scholten (dramaturg and collaborator whose initials provide the PC of the group's name) seduce and then abandon us. After we are fully drawn in by the "pre-show," they leave us looking into a silent bleak space with three signs of "life": an archway rimmed with bare light bulbs, a single leafless tree worthy of Beckett, and a robot that tootles around like R2D2, casting its glance in beams of bluish light. Greco learned well from [Jan Fabre](#), the Belgian director for whom he danced, about crafting stunning stage pictures.

Just as vital to the work as its fierce activity are silent interstices that function like a drug, sedating us into the timelessness of *Hell*. As the empty stage gradually repopulates, dancers accumulate, one at a time, taking turns smoking a cigarette as the others stand still. What pristine light. What gorgeous costumes—very thin long knit dresses on both men and women. As this image develops, finally it's Greco himself smoking, in an ill-fitting black wig, sending up a fat column of smoke. It's absurd, disturbing, and intriguing.

Greco's dancers touch only in rare moments of gentle partnering. They neither oppress each other nor bring each other succor. They are all acted upon by a force outside themselves, driven to ratchet up their dancing to a demonic fierceness. The movement builds on familiar movement trajectories but makes them bigger, faster, and sharper. It simultaneously deconstructs the body by breaking down actions so that dancers' legs drag and slither and their bodies seem possessed of more joints than a normal human body. Treating stillness as a kinetic midpoint, the dancers traverse it, wobbling and trembling on either side.

The unison dancing is feathered, just slightly out of synch. An arm is higher on this dancer, a leg arcs wider on that, a choreographic choice that prizes individuality. The tall bearded man and the shorter, compact woman, though each bald, look worlds different, especially near the end of the piece when everyone dances naked.

The whole enterprise confronts us with a myriad of possible interpretations of the meaning of “hell.” Is dance itself one version of hell?—triple pirouette hell (the tyranny of perfection), merciless/ endless jump hell, dance-’til-you-drop *Red Shoes* hell? Is hearing a classical warhorse for the zillionth time hell? Or, in choreographing to Beethoven’s Fifth, does Greco manage to refresh our hearing?

Despite the fact that much of the dancing, punishing as it is in its speed and demand, was riveting, my initial take on *Hell* was uncomprehending. It looked glam and felt pretentious and superficial. This impression was reinforced by how Scholten and Greco play with notions of fashion and fame in a magazine called *Hell* that they created in tandem with the performance. In it, the dancers are photographed in designer clothes and one “ad” features the (actual?) new perfume, “Extremalism.” This evoked for me psychologist Abraham Maslow’s notion that “self-actualizing” self-expression will only take place after a host of other needs are met, including those for food, shelter, safety, belonging, and so on; I thought, “you have to be really well taken care of in terms of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs to be able to indulge in such an arcane game.”

In time, I could better perceive the ironic distance Greco and Scholten took from their material and from the act of creation altogether. It reminds me of the detachment witnessed in a [Cunningham/Cage](#) collaboration. Their use of chance might be seen as presaging Greco/Scholten’s posture of dance as a “locus of reflection.” *Hell*, rather than seeming a controlled “product,” reads more as an accumulation of possibilities, with a mysterious unfathomability that even its makers appear to be studying in order to penetrate.

In part, what brought me around to taking full pleasure in the work’s irony and intelligence was recognizing that Greco and Scholten are ready to subvert expectations at any moment. At the end of a condensed version of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, for instance, the dancers bow and exit the stage. The audience hesitates, unsure that this is the ending. Nothing happens. Audience claps. Then the true ending comes, through a simulacrum—more dance to classical music, this time Debussy played on a fuzzy-sounding electric guitar, and then, as the dancers get fully into their now familiar clump, hanging their heads and executing unison whip turns, there’s a sudden break, silence, and lights out. It’s rude. And right.

## Beauty’s Price Tag

Just as in *Hell*, the seventeenth-century still-life painter Abraham Mignon places his subjects—lasciviously vibrant flowers—against a velvety black background. On view in a small branch of the famous Rijksmuseum recently built within Schiphol airport the painting drips with excess and richness as luscious peonies and parrot tulips overflow their vase and a snail, a bee, and a caterpillar wiggle on the table below. Seeing the painting in that unexpected place, just off the airplane from Philadelphia, highlighted two things for me: for one, that the Dutch value high quality art in public places; they invest in it. For another, the history of the country includes extremes of indulgence in aesthetic pleasures. Some tulip bulbs, originally from Turkey, were said to have fetched the price of an Amsterdam canal house.

Today exotic and garden variety flowers are for sale all over Holland, inexpensively too, everywhere from market stalls to upscale shops. They figure into Dutch daily life: if you are met by a Dutch person after long-distance travel, you will receive a bouquet. Flowers are given to men and women, students, and people of all stations. If you celebrate a birthday, a baby, a promotion, a new house, or just have an empty vase, you’ll get flowers. Shopping list: cheese, coffee, tulips.

**DDWW**  
**Dutch Dancers:**  
**Work Week Philadelphia**

A dancer residency coordinated by  
**Group Motion Dance Company**  
 and **Susan Hess Modern Dance**  
**February 6-11, 2006**

"This week is an exchange between dancers from two cities—Amsterdam and Philadelphia. We will share dance language and performance concepts and investigate what fills the space between us."  
 — Manfred Fischbeck, artistic director, Group Motion Dance Company

"I hope the exchange provokes discussion about dancer development in the Dutch and Philadelphia contexts: From whom do dance artists get guidance after training? What are the support systems for freelance dancers? How is a career sustained?"  
 — Susan Hess, artistic director, Susan Hess Modern Dance

D A N C E A D V A N C E

All photos by Jerry Remkes / Design by n/a designlab

## Wie niet groot is...

The only Dutch choreographer in the *Nieuwe Nederlandse dans* project was Anouk van Dijk. Three of her four dancers are German; one is American. While Pieter C. Scholten is Dutch, Greco himself is Italian and their dancers represent many countries. This international amalgam holds true for each of the companies brought to Philadelphia during the project.

This cosmopolitan attitude can be understood as a manifestation of the saying "Wie niet groot is moet slim zijn," which paraphrased means, "If you're not big, you'd better be smart." The Dutch have long taken care to learn the languages of their neighbors in order to facilitate trade and exchange, and it's quite common for a Dutch person to be fluent in four languages. Without many natural resources on which to build industry, the Dutch became skilled at seafaring, trade, and banking, drawing to their shores the best in merchandise and culture from around the world.

And with regard to culture, you can hardly find a greater contrast of sensibilities than that between the Netherlands and the United States in the post-"culture wars" era. The Dutch tradition of tolerance certainly contributes to the hothouse atmosphere for the cultivation of art. The saying "Je moet iedereen in zijn waard laten" ("to each their own") is taken so seriously that it is legislated in variety of ways. Having a right to choose your own lifestyle has meant that religious and political entities have been granted government support to form their own schools, newspapers, and television and radio stations. This phenomenon, known as "pillarization," has long been an accepted part of Dutch life and takes as its premise the notion that differences can effectively coexist, that consensus is possible amidst variety.<sup>3</sup>

In Holland the tension between individual expression (seen as important) and the collective good (even more so) seems to play out continually, creating a balance in the culture as a whole. In the arts, training opportunities, fiscal largesse, and an arts-embracing atmosphere magnetize aspiring and professional artists from around the world. The dance school where I taught (the European Dance Development Center, Arnhem) enrolled students from eighteen countries, including South Africa, Brazil, China, the US, and much of Europe.

## Spot Lit

A few hours after seeing the Mignon still life at Schiphol I wandered into a Rotterdam flower shop. Like the painting's background, the shop was painted a blue so dark it was almost black, and featured spectacular masses of exotic flowers. Here they were lit dramatically with halogen pin spots, like red-carpet stars, and I asked the proprietor if he chose the background color because the classic seventeenth-century flower paintings used a similar one. He was vague, friendly, and, it being nearly Christmas, eager to keep making sales. Later that evening, seeing Anouk van Dijk's dancers picked out of the darkness by focused spotlights reminded me of the shop's flowers. Their fleeting nature had been highlighted through their dramatic display, just as the momentary encounters of dancers with each other and with audience members had been singled out and carefully framed.



Photo of STAU by Jerry Remkes



Photo of STAU by Anouk van Dijk

Anouk van Dijk wrote that her dancers have increasingly become “people who are conscious of the choices they are making: people who are vulnerable in their attempts to stand their ground.” These dancers are stunning. They have the ability to “eat space.” Their limbs know no directional limits. Their faces are transparent, their intelligence, punk, and mischievousness attractive.

Van Dijk, a knockout dancer herself, has formulated a training concept called Countertechnique, which was taught by her company members over the course of their week-long residency to a large group of Philadelphia dancers. They took the dancers through a series of set exercises and sections of repertory that emphasize both the classical skills of refined articulation and control, and movements that edge brazenly beyond their body's kinesphere (the space surrounding the body in stillness and in motion which includes all directions and levels both close to the body and as far as the person can reach with limbs or torso). Seeing a Countertechnique class, I thought that continued training using this method could indeed produce great dancers.

In hearing Van Dijk speak about her indebtedness to William Forsythe for his “improvisation technologies,” I realize that she brings forward ideas from both Rudolf von Laban (whose points-on-a-cube model Forsythe has adopted as a way to locate movement in space) and F. Matthias Alexander, whose Alexander technique emphasizes cultivating space within the body through understanding proper alignment and movement as always happening in two directions simultaneously. These ideas form the core of van Dijk's approach: counterbalance produces stability and increased range. She has taken Trisha Brown's model of 360 degrees of movement potential a step further.

Van Dijk, having spent time studying and touring in the US, is fully cognizant of the differences between her situation in the Netherlands and how dance companies survive in the States. With “structural subsidy” from the Dutch ministry of culture, her company is assured of funding for a four-year time span. (The best most US companies can hope for is to do time consuming project-based fundraising from myriad sources.) Her dancers don't have to have other jobs; they are paid as top professionals in any other field might be. (In the US the “day

job” is a necessity for most dancers, whose pay is generally modest.) They work consistently, and with the support of an administrative team. (In the US artistic directors and often dancers must wear multiple hats, carrying out demanding administrative and production-related duties on top of creative work.) Their mise-en-scène can be developed with sufficient time and space, including the time, usually a week, for working out lighting and other production elements within the performance space. This last element is particularly rare in the US, even for top artists, a fact which no doubt contributes considerably to what international presenters see as the lack of sophisticated production values in the United States.



Photo of *STAU* by Jerry Remkes



Photo of *STAU* by Jerry Remkes

In *STAU*, van Dijk has made a profound study of intimacy and distance. Usually seen carefully lit and visually orchestrated relative to its surrounding space, this work still registers in an empty studio. In a very limited excerpt of *STAU* in Philadelphia, dancers moved first within a tight square defined by seated spectators, and then in the midst of the spectators, who were freed to walk about and watch from any vantage point. This mobile audience in turn shaped the viewing experience. For any one viewer, the rest of the watchers framed the viewing. Huge sweeps of a dancer’s leg or arm (as potentially dangerous as any martial arts kick or jab) were executed a hairsbreadth away from onlookers. The four dancers grouped and regrouped, seemingly drawn by a sense of potential—“this is the place”—that kept evolving. Their encounters ranged from inquisitive to cooperative to combative. We feel that what’s happening is fresh and true for the performers: real encounters that bring out their individual vulnerability, playfulness, and strength.

What has impressed me deeply about *STAU* is the contrast between the performance of the piece as captured on video just after it was made and the way it was performed in December, 2006 (two years later) when I saw it live in Rotterdam. In the latter viewing, van Dijk demonstrated that she’d managed successfully to wrestle with the questions the work poses about how to forge a true connection with the audience and integrate them into the dance. She and her dancers developed strategies for performing—becoming truly “open” yet not invasive—that brought the audience more and more literally into the piece as performers themselves, and as participants in brief “encounters.” What made this possible was the countless performances that transpired between my viewings. This repetition through performance, I believe, is what allows a work to burnish and deepen to the limits of its potential.

## Play It Again

Each city of any size in the Netherlands has its own *Stadsschouwburg* (city theater). Jerry Remkes, van Dijk’s manager, estimated their number at roughly 150, each subsidized by the government and hosting a full season’s programming of all performing arts disciplines. Following a premiere it’s not unusual for a dance piece to be presented within the Netherlands for a series of 28 or 35 performances. And this is happening in a country with the population the size of metropolitan New York City. Imagine the same situation in the US—playing a new work for over a month to sizeable audiences without even needing to tour.

This distinctly Dutch phenomenon means that there is an audience ready to see new work, a network to distribute it, and, artistically, an opportunity for choreographers to incrementally deepen and amend their productions. Performers are able to feel utterly “at home.” I think it may be this developmental time that allows the work to ripen which, even more than providing funds for producing dance, distinguishes the Netherlands’s ability to nurture the evolution and maturity of an artist’s *oeuvre*.

One project that received numerous performances was *Kamerdans (Living Room Dance)*. Created by Jérôme Meyer and Isabelle Chaffaud in The Hague in fall 2006, it is described this way: “Two Angels can be called to come to your home. They will perform a special dance for you only. This action will be gratis. These angels will bring a breath of peace in your home, genuinely with simplicity, and beauty. They will not speak, they will respect your home and they will go the way they arrived, by the door after 22 minutes.”

Their intention recalls the quote from Mahatma Gandhi, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Aware of war, they want to BE and to bring peace. Rather than charging money, they solicited contributions for [War Child](#), an organization that provides humanitarian aid to children affected by war. Queen Beatrix herself opened her royal palace to this work. It’s a pretty cool country where the Queen takes part in a *kamerdans*. I wonder what the flower arrangements looked like!

**Jérôme Meyer & Isabelle Chaffaud**  
**corps à corps** (excerpt) & new creation with Philly Dancers  
September 7-9 | 6:00 pm | 60 minutes | \$15 | Moderated post-show discussion each night  
Painted Bride Art Center | 230 Vine Street | Old City, Philadelphia | Wheelchair Accessible

**NIEUWE NEDERLANDSE DANS / NEW DANCE FROM THE LOWLANDS IN PHILADELPHIA**

Dancing developed by: Kate Jordan, Gabrielle Revlock, Renee Robinson-Buzby, Daniele Strawmyre, Ben Wegman  
Production technical director: Sarah Higgins

D A N C E A D V A N C E

Photo by Joris-Jan Bos

Photo by Joris-Jan Bos / Design by n/a designlab

## Diary entry: July 2006

Meeting near the Philadelphia Art Museum, a civilized Sunday. Brunch place all brick and banquettes. I like them, Jérôme and Isabelle, their unvarnished openness and vitality. He’s Swiss, she’s French. Both have wavy long hair and inquiring, receptive faces, I think of the image of a hand squeezing itself in a fist, and the way that pumps blood. They feel active even in quietude.

The first word to describe the coming work is physicality, not concept or theme. Meyer and Chaffaud start with the body. They want to offer the dancers a physical way into their work, to pass on body knowledge without being academic. To push them but give them the time and clues it takes to embody the movement. A balance between what is achievable and how far they can stretch themselves as dance artists.

Watching their workshop, the gap between Meyer and Chaffaud and the dancers is clear. Where Meyer demonstrates his squishy-footed hand twinings, curling fingers like a fast-growing plant, the dancers show more the outer form and less the inner experience.

As Chaffaud shows a phrase, the degree of information she transmits physically is exponentially greater than what the dancers display. Some of what she does is about changing actions without a transition. She goes in one direction and, without a visible in-between, heads in another, with a different energy. Her moving expresses an exhilarating wildness, like a horse tossing its mane, kicking its legs. Powerful. It also trusts that moving far beyond the center axis of movement, of pushing beyond the normal kinesphere, should not be feared: “you don’t have to fall or damage yourself, stretch movement out to the max, like a superhero dancer.”

Meyer and Chaffaud seem to have absorbed salt and sun from their time dancing for Batsheva in Israel. The body for them is less about representation and philosophy, less a site for discourse than a vehicle of experience. Their physical practice is rooted, tactile, and hypnotic. Dancers enter, carrying out long stretches of exploration of one action—a weight shift with feet grounding sequentially into the floor as arms twine, or a lilting shuffle of a jump with shoulders bobbing up and down and arms flinging energy to the fingertips in response.

I observed this process from the first rehearsals with the Philadelphia dancers where the contrast in degrees of feeling between Meyer and Chaffaud and the dancers was starkly clear, to the final performances in which each dancer had been helped in her own way to find and savor subtler degrees of physical articulation and commitment. Reminiscent of van Dijk’s taste, Meyer and Chaffaud are also interested in the extreme—a lunge is not interesting if it is partial; it must be a deep stretch with the straight leg stretching far back into space.

To help the dancers with “embodiment,” weeks of work transpired without any phrase-making or setting of structure. The dancers were plunging into a depth of attention to sensation evident in Meyer and Chaffaud’s own dancing and daily life.



Photo of Isabelle Chaffaud in *Corps à Corps* by Joris-Jan Bos



Photo of Jerome Meyer and Isabelle Chaffaud in *Corps à Corps* by Joris-Jan Bos

It is the very fact that they are partners (now with a baby, born the December after their residency) that makes their working presence so fascinating. Watching them I often thought of the Greek notion that each person before birth is separated from a twin, whom they later find as their soul mate. They move between an easy give and take, one continuing an idea the other initially set forth, and disagreement. They move forward together by stretching against, or pushing from behind and moving in accord with each other.

*Corps á Corps*, excerpted for the Philadelphia performance, is all about the coming together of two distinct, separate creatures. I use the word “creatures” advisedly, implying how fully they seem driven by animal-like needs—to rise to the surface for air, to slither downward digging toward mud, to ripple and quiver, to stretch and burrow. This is dance that has abandoned the airborne gravity-defying uprightness of so much of their prior training. One senses that although they apparently could do anything, Meyer and Chaffaud choose to take these “creatures” and place them in contexts where a tension develops for the spectator, a curiosity about how an enigmatic situation will resolve.

The ripeness and inevitability of their duet stood in contrast with *Seed*, the dance made with the Philadelphia dancers, which came to the stage newly-minted. As with *Hell*, the group of four dancers seemed acted upon by external forces. In *Seed*, a powerful repetitive sound score and darkened space set a desolate frame. Through a build-up of repeating sections of movement, moments of tension were brought to fever pitch in sound and exertion, exemplifying the “tension bow” concept that Meyer has articulated in [recent writings](#). Meyer has argued for filling an image to completion, intensifying distinct sections through repetition, contrast, and amplification of elements until change must occur.

Showcasing the extraordinary physical lushness that Meyer and Chaffaud cultivated in the dancers, this piece remained a study, with bits of text by Pablo Neruda that required more time and practice to be spoken convincingly. Still, a favorite section was one where dancer Gabrielle Revlock (who under Meyer and Chaffaud’s watch exponentially developed her theatrical presence) stage-whispered into the ear of Renee Robinson-Buzby. Revlock’s darting eyes and conspiratorial stance were as exciting as any movement.

## The War Onstage

The beginning of *Seed* proved most provocative: four dancers stood equidistant across the proscenium, facing the audience to a soundtrack of machine gunfire and shouting. They backed up slowly, looking the audience directly in the eye, registering nothing. Something this literal is quite difficult to introduce without contextualization or elaboration. And it certainly flavors anything that comes after.

Performance is one way we make sense of our world. As Greco has said, “something emerges when we face the cruelty of life” ([Helma Klooss, Dance Magazine, April 2005](#)). Chaffaud spoke in reference to the machine gun sound and the Iraq War: “It makes sense to put this into this work, [and] also not to make a big deal out of it. It’s a suggestion, just to acknowledge the fact that it’s there. We just say the word, without making a statement about it.”

Still, I feel that effectively engaging societal issues in such a direct way requires consummate skill and prodigious effort on the choreographer’s part. I would hope Meyer and Chaffaud could skillfully float the potential associations of an image or sound prompt without pressing “hot buttons” and then leaving viewers to make sense of their effects in a work unaided (as they did here). The fact that the choreographers began their group piece with machine gun fire because it’s part of our world (and, similarly, Dylan Newcomb’s solo *Burn* touches on torture) reminds us how unsettled we are by these features of our life. But it also calls into question the most effective ways of communicating about them.

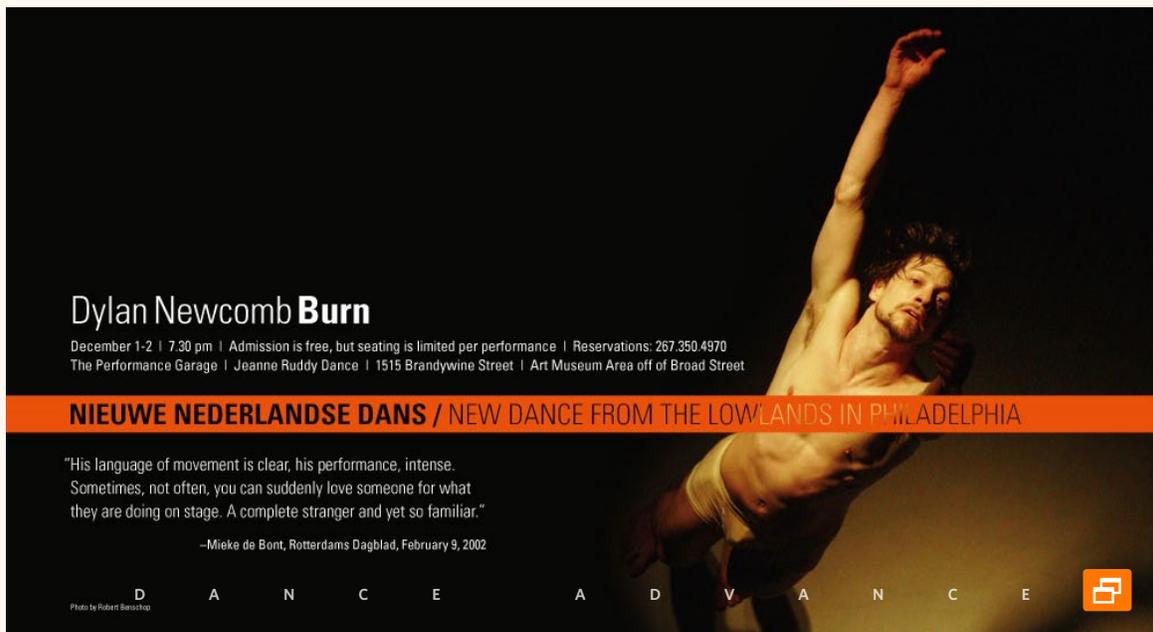


Photo by Robert Benschop / Design by n/a designlab

A Juilliard-trained composer and dancer, Newcomb is also a theorist. His interest in locating the area of awareness from which we operate comes from recognizing that most of us have a default vantage point. He considers his own transition through various physical and mental states to be a kind of “trailblazing,” opening out possibilities for his viewers. If he embodies receptivity and consciousness of “perceptual filters,” he feels viewers might recognize their own potential to do the same. He has evolved a detailed schematic system to describe the factors involved in perception, all of which interconnect with and impact on each other. The areas of concern move from “object and individual” to “relation and collective” on one axis, and from “inner” to “outer” on the perpendicular axis.

In teaching his Philadelphia workshops Newcomb explored these options through improvisation, looking for unguarded responses in the participants that, contrary to most training, could assist in breaking down dancers’ tendency to shape a moment to look a particular way. In *Burn*, his solo performance, he presented himself in a series of states or conditions that, in relation to his perceptual scheme, provided him just enough “conceptual framework to let my intuition go.”

Newcomb’s research on presence is based on the premise that a performer’s own consciousness of the content of her action is a prerequisite to allowing the viewer to experience it. Yet Newcomb in *Burn* exemplifies what I’ve seen so often in performance—he is much clearer verbalizing his conceptual framework than he is in embodying its concepts through actions onstage.

Choreographically *Burn* is made up of part set and part improvised movement material danced within an intimate space inspired by an African village circle. Newcomb performs in close proximity to the audience, which sits in two concentric circles that form a playing area perhaps twenty-five feet across. He comes close to the viewers, fixing his gaze on one, then over the head of another. His well-muscled body becomes an easy site for our projection? He is beefcake, he is athlete. Stripped to underwear he is an enemy undergoing torture; later, he is Icarus striving vainly for the heights and toppling repeatedly. What is initially an abstract exercise? He traces the circle’s periphery with a repeating rolling and jumping sequence, building in intensity transforms into a more “personal” one as he sheds clothing and dances more off-balance, projecting images of vulnerability.

The most fragile moment shows him hooded, lying in a fetal fold, and moving with tremors and shocks that are so obvious a link to the images of Abu Ghraib that it's hard to take them in any other way. He sweats and contorts, clearly subjected to the torments of an unseen oppressor.

From a zoomed-out perspective, it is Dylan Newcomb submitting Dylan Newcomb to this condition. I find the representation of politicized suffering unconvincing. In this performance is he less successful than usual in connecting to the charge and meaning of his own gestures? Or is there something fundamentally lacking in the work's ability to establish a link between his own and the audience's experience?

Anouk van Dijk commented that rather than creating a sense of vulnerable connection as one might expect, the incidence of nudity in *STAU* produces a feeling of remove. Newcomb's physical proximity and seeming struggle engenders an empathetic response for some in the audience, as revealed in a post-show discussion. But for me, because he performed solo, relating only to us and his mental landscape, our watching seemed an exercise in collective complicity. Because he did this dance for us, we were implicated in his seeming suffering. Was that the primary aim: to highlight

that, as American taxpayers, we are implicated in the suffering of Iraqis? That closeness and exposure can create discomfort? That the role of voyeur may engender a feeling of remove rather than intimacy?

Newcomb's sound score resembles natural sound: wind, rain. Taped text periodically announces shifting time frames—"three years, three minutes, next week"—bringing a welcome lightness and disorientation. Then, "maybe now, maybe stop." And so he ends.

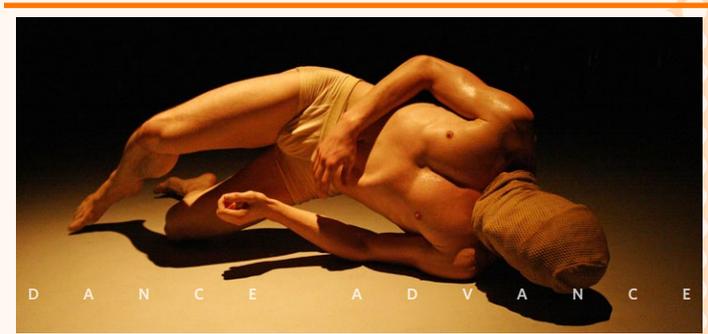


Photo of Dylan Newcomb in *Burn* by Robert Benschop

## Full Support

Fortunately, instead of supporting choreographers based on a thumbs-up/thumbs-down approach decided on the basis of a single piece, the Dutch "hothouse" system shows allegiance to an artist over time. [Korzo](#), one of several "production houses" in the Netherlands, provides a foundation over the course of two or three years for developing artists. Newcomb, Chaffaud, and Meyer all work under its auspices.

Leo Spreksel, artistic director of Korzo Producties, spoke as part of a roundtable discussion called "Points of View: Five Visionary Dance Programmers Shape History" at the Live Arts Festival in September 2006. He talked about the Korzo mission and how it includes a commitment to artists and the development of their work over time rather than focusing on final products. Spreksel and his staff shape the way dances are presented to the wider public, building bridges to audiences through placing choreography and the use of the body in inviting and clarifying contexts. Artists working at Korzo are "produced" at every level of need, from the inception of a work's research and conceptualization to its eventual production and touring.

Initiatives to assist choreographers in developing new work do exist in the US as well. Claudia La Rocco recently wrote about artists taking part in Dance Theater Workshop's Outer/Space program ([New York Times, December 28, 2006](#)). DTW's idea is to offer affordable rehearsal space to choreographers—something that is essentially unavailable in Manhattan. Because the spaces are in outlying areas, artists must traipse to the far reaches of the five boroughs. That takes significant time on top of all the other promotional, fundraising, and creative tasks these choreographers must carry out.

One participant, Miguel Gutierrez, had been forced out of his own work and living space in Bushwick, Brooklyn to make way for upscale housing. Now investing significant time in traveling to and from rehearsal, his schedule is further compressed. He says he badly misses “rumination time, which I feel is probably the time when the best art emerges, not even the rehearsal time but the time around it. It’s this really tricky and weird thing to make art in these boxed-off hours all the time. You really see that in the work in New York.”

Gutierrez, whose work is among the best in his generation of young American choreographers, blending “real life” and performance with a deceptively artless sophistication, will be produced in the Netherlands at [Springdance](#), a festival of experimental dance in Utrecht in April 2007. In 2006 Gutierrez took part in the “Dialogue” session at Springdance festival-sponsored “think time” for artists invited to Utrecht in the off year of the biannual Festival. The Dialogue is another example of the Netherlands as dance hothouse, providing gestation time that enables artists to simmer and clarify their work.

Simon Dove, director of Springdance and founder of the Dialogue, emphasizes the necessity of taking time to evolve a developed conceptual ground before beginning to make a piece. Dialogues have been held in New York and Moscow under the Springdance aegis in partnership with US and Russian organizations. Bringing international dance artists together, having them present their ideas and work to each other for clarity and cross-fertilization, extends the Dutch hothouse in a hopeful way. Not unlike the green tip of a bulb peeking up through the ground.

## Afterword: Bringing it Back Home

Even without the ideal conditions of a proper hothouse, flowers can and do grow. Forbidding conditions may stunt them, or just make them more compact, as with alpine varieties which are better suited to withstanding buffeting winds and inhospitable temperatures.

In studying the effects of “nature vs. nurture,” researchers have followed twins who’ve been raised in differing circumstances. Similarly, I’ve followed with curiosity the career paths of three choreographers who in the eighties danced together in my company: John Jasperse, Meg Stuart and Sasha Waltz. In the nearly twenty years since, they’ve each “apprenticed” with a major choreographer, danced with shifting groups of collaborating colleagues, and developed many landmark works. Stuart (American) was a recipient of Klapstuk support and is now based in Berlin; Waltz (German) works in Berlin too with a building under construction to house her projects; and Jasperse remains based in New York.

In both Stuart’s and Waltz’s work, you can readily see what money can buy elaborate and highly inventive sets, exquisite and exquisitely strange costumes, well-funded periods of rehearsal with the pick of excellently trained dancers.

Jasperse, functioning on a comparative shoestring, has recently been investigating unconventional uses of space. As in *STAU*, he has placed himself and his dancers in and amongst audiences for unsettling moments of intimacy and hair-raising danger (in *Just Two Dancers* and *Prone*). These works were no less groundbreaking for being produced in straitened circumstances (interviewed recently for an article on dancers and livelihood in the *Village Voice*, he has publicly estimated his personal income at a shockingly modest \$23,000 a year).

Among the most prominent younger US artists Jasperse has had his share of glory—commissions from the Lyon Opera Ballet and Mikhail Baryshnikov, and appearances at Brooklyn Academy of Music, whose imprimatur signals, for those in the “downtown” world, that an artist has made it into the bigger leagues.

At a recent showing Jasperse introduced his new work for BAM, saying it's about "living without capital in a capitalist society." He explained that everything used in the piece is scrounged, borrowed, or stolen. We saw bunches of mops and brooms hauled from place to place, one or another inevitably slipping through the carrier's grasp (the Keatonesque comedy of the impossible-to-complete task), and oversized blue jeans, as costumes and props, being thwacked, knotted, and turned inside out in a unison duet, and as instruments of bondage. One image, of Jasperse binding his limbs by slipping them through jeans legs, has him standing mid-stage on one leg, flamingolike, as hurried dancer/passers-by jostle him. Again and again he is buffeted, teeters, and, remarkably, holds fast. His ability to remain standing is a poignant feat, a metaphor we know to be painfully but inspiringly true.

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## Biography of Lisa Kraus

Lisa Kraus is a choreographer, teacher, and writer whose career has included dancing as a member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, choreographing and performing extensively with her own company and as an independent, teaching at universities and arts centers, and writing reviews, features and essays on dance for internet and print publication. She has trained in many forms and aesthetics including Graham technique, Indonesian dance, and the work of the Judson Church experimentalists.

Ms. Kraus has a longstanding professional relationship with the Netherlands. She first performed at major Dutch venues with the Trisha Brown Dance Company in a 1980 tour organized by the Netherlands Theater Institute. That same year, she began a ten-year association with School for New Dance Development as an annually-invited guest teacher. In 1990 she relocated to the Netherlands to teach dance technique, composition, and improvisation at the European Dance Development Center in Arnhem for nearly a decade. Her recent public dialogue with Anouk van Dijk at Philadelphia's Susan Hess Studio rekindled her curiosity about the similarities and differences in U.S. and Dutch culture.

Ms. Kraus has created over 30 performance works, several with her former New York-based company featuring John Jasperse, Sasha Waltz and Meg Stuart. Presented by venues across the U.S., Europe and Australia including London's Dance Umbrella, Sydney's Performance Gallery, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and New York's Danspace Project, Dance Theater Workshop, the Kitchen, and P.S. 122, her work has been awarded support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, Dance Advance, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and other foundations and private sponsors. A resident of the Philadelphia area since 2000, she is currently on the faculty of Swarthmore College and is the New Edge Resident Artist in Dance at the Community Education Center, developing *the Partita Project*, a work in collaboration with virtuoso violinist Diane Monroe.

Lisa Kraus began writing to chronicle her teaching of Trisha Brown's *Glacial Decoy* to the Paris Opera Ballet in 2003. Since then she has become one of two main dance critics for the Philadelphia Inquirer and is a frequent contributor to Dance Magazine where she has written on such subjects as "Americans Abroad" (April 2006) about U.S. dance artists based in Europe. Recent writings have also appeared in Dance Research Journal, the Contact Quarterly, and the Dance Insider.

## Footnotes:

1. The [Theater Instituut Nederlands \(TIN\)](#) recently coordinated a multiyear program, the Netherlands American Dance and Theater Project 2004-2006, with the support of major funding agencies in the Netherlands and in partnership with the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York, and the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Ottawa.
2. *Nieuwe Nederlandse dans: Dance from The Lowlands in Philadelphia*, a dance development project was supported by the Netherlands Culture Fund; the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York; Theater Instituut Nederland; the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Korzo production house in The Hague; the Dutch Fund for the Performing Arts (Fonds voor de Amateurkunst en Podiumkunsten); and by Dance Advance, an artistic program of the Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by The University of the Arts. *Nieuwe Nederlandse dans* has also been made possible through the generous support of the [Netherlands-America Foundation](#).
3. The current political climate has called pillarization into question. Some, most notably neoconservative spokeswoman Ayaan Hirsi Ali, have called for a revision to this ethos, demanding more complete acculturation and assimilation of immigrant groups within Holland to prevent violence and the continuing suppression of women.

## Suggested Reading:

van der Horst, Han. *The Low Sky: Understanding the Dutch*. London: Cyan Communications, 2004.

## Appendix I: The Hothouse Hierarchy

### An Outline of Stages in Dance Artists' Development and How the Dutch System of Support Serves Them

Each of the choreographers mentioned in this essay served an by dancing in established companies: Greco (Troubleyn/Jan Fabre), van Dijk (Amanda Miller and Pretty Ugly), and Newcomb, Meyer, and Chaffaud (Netherlands Dance Theater). Dancers in these European companies earn a full-time wage comparable to other professionals (and do not have to take up other work or multiple dance jobs to earn a livelihood as in the US). This is a factor in improving dancers' level of technical excellence.

Within a *werkplaats* (workshop), young choreographers can develop single projects with space provided by the state, and in community with other young artists. (For van Dijk, this period was when she devised her system of Countertechnique.)

**Production houses** such as Korzo in den Haag (which supports Newcomb, Meyer, and Chaffaud), or Klapstuk in Belgium (where Greco started) offer assistance of all kinds to developing choreographers on a multiyear basis. Not solely involved with space and subsidy, they may also work to book the artists' tours, craft their promotional materials, and fashion appropriate contexts in which their work may be seen.

The next step, of going "out on one's own" depends on **project-based funding**, which is available from the Dutch ministry of culture and an artist's city and province.

Necessary at every level is the participation of the **stadsschouwburgs** (state-funded theaters) in every part of the country. They program a huge volume of work and often house both a large and a more intimate theater. Even a small provincial city like Arnhem (population 141,000) presents artists of the rank of Anna Teresa deKeersmaeker and, in its smaller theater, the newest experimental groups. The furthest distance one might travel from Amsterdam or den Haag to one of these theaters would be two-and-a-half or three hours. The opportunity to present multiple performances of a single work without the burdensome expense of bringing a company on tour is also a huge boost for a choreographer's development; they are able to ripen work through gradual refinements and deepened performance quality.

A very select group of artists make it to the level of **structural subsidy**, significant funding that is guaranteed to companies for a four-year period. Greco and van Dijk's troupes are in this category. These companies are assessed through periodic review, and if it is determined that the quality of the work is not maintained, they may be demoted to the level of seeking single project-based funding.

The very largest groups like the Dutch National Ballet, Netherlands Dance Theater, and Scapino Ballet receive **permanent subsidy**, and are assured of receiving funding. Losing a major dance institution, as witnessed recently in the US with Dance Theater of Harlem, would not happen in the Netherlands.

## Appendix II: Money and Art

### Two Lists: Money and the Development of Dance Artists

#### Money can buy:

Time  
Space  
Training  
Dancers' salaries  
Dramaturgy  
Technical know-how

Technical facilities  
Visual and musical collaborators  
Management  
Publicity  
Promotion  
Touring support

#### Money can't buy:

Energy  
Self-empowerment  
Collaboration  
Collegiality  
Connection to audiences

Meaning  
Belief  
Vision  
Genius



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