

# raising the barre



## Halifax's only full-time contemporary dance company is blazing an ambitious trail

BY AUSTEN GILLILAND

**T**he lights go up at Alderney Landing Theatre in Dartmouth. A tall young woman walks on stage and sits down on a chair. She is holding a microphone and a spinning top and is talking about time. Sarah Di Quinzio is funny. She talks about trying to beat the clock; how long it takes to eat a banana, to find a parking spot on Spring Garden Road (“Thirteen minutes. Impossible. Park somewhere else”). She could be a stand-up comedian. In fact, Di Quinzio is a dancer, and this is inFlux, the season opener for Mocean Dance, a professional contemporary dance company based in Halifax.

After months of collaboration with choreographers Roger Sinha and Howard Richard, inFlux opened on Feb. 25. The

second half of the show, called “Petite Cuisine en Famille,” choreographed by Richard with dramaturgy by Mary Ellen MacLean, is as an intimate look at sisterly relations. Sinha’s piece, “5 Breaths,” is described as a meditation on time.

In her opening monologue, Di Quinzio complains that Sinha always wants her to move faster. He has been challenging her for a month to perform a dance combo in less than a minute, but she can’t. He gave her the top and challenged her to beat it. She’s skeptical. She’ll try, she says, but just for us. She pumps the top, sets it spinning, and is immediately in motion.

Arms, legs, head moving, Di Quinzio is dancing in the chair. The top spins and soon starts to wobble. Almost impossibly, she speeds up. She counts louder, hissing the

numbers through her teeth, one eye on the top that’s tilting down. She finishes and grabs the top just as it begins to fall.

Di Quinzio exits the stage and is replaced by Carolle Crooks, Sara Harrigan, and Alicia Orr. The permutations of the women dancing in pairs appear endless as “5 Breaths” continues to a mesmerizing musical score. It’s impossible to watch all four of them at once, yet it’s impossible not to.

### PASSION AND PRAGMATISM

In 2001 five young Halifax women—Crooks, Di Quinzio, Harrigan, Orr, and part-time member Lisa Phinney—formed Mocean Dance. Since then, the group has become well-known for both its artistic integrity and its approach to the business of art. The dancers attribute their success to a combination of



HOLLY CROOKS

passion and pragmatism. “Art is first and foremost,” says Orr. Adds Crooks: “But to make art survive, you need to look after the business side.” Di Quinzio agrees. “You have to understand it or get help and learn, because if you deny that it’s important, it won’t work out. You need to acknowledge that it’s essential to your success.”

When Mocean needs help with the business side of things, it turns to its board of directors. The board has six members, each of whom has valuable expertise in business and the arts. Anne Muecke has been involved in fundraising and various other roles for Halifax Dance for more than 20 years and brings that expertise to her role as vice-chair of the board. “The girls do all of the artistic planning,” she says, “and then we help them look at it through an economic filter, to make sure that it’s feasible.”

Muecke adds that careful financial planning has been as crucial to the company’s

## Mocean’s **no-nonsense approach** to the business of dancing has **impressed** members of the local dance **community**

success as the artistic work that the dancers put into their performances. “If you want to put on a professional production with impact, you need good costumes, lighting, and props; a good venue; and a choreographer. That’s all expensive,” she says, explaining that work on fundraising and grant applications is ongoing. “It’s never easy, but the dancers and the board members are all working toward the same goals. We believe in them, and we’ll do whatever we can to help them succeed.”

Mocean’s no-nonsense approach to the

business of dancing has impressed members of the local dance community. Penelope Evans Spicer, a member of the artistic executive at Halifax Dance, believes that the members of Mocean are leaders in both art and business. “In addition to being committed and focused performance artists,” says Spicer, “they are the only new company that built a business prospectus, gathered a board of directors, connected with nationally known choreographers, and made sure the business plan was in place before they went into the studio.



HOLLY CROOKS

Really, they have approached the administrative side of their company as a small business. They're also helping dance progress to the next level of respect in the business community."

### NO REGRETS

By the time they formed Mocean, the five dancers already were well respected in the dance community. They had taken classes together at Halifax Dance throughout their childhood and adolescence, until the pursuit of university degrees took them in different directions. When they all ended up back home in 2001, they discovered they had much in common. Most importantly, they all wanted careers in dance and to stay in Halifax.

"For a long time, it was assumed that to dance professionally, we'd have to go away," says Di Quinzio, who, after receiving her degree in microbiology and immunology from Dalhousie University, left to study at Les Ateliers de danse moderne de Montréal. She earned a diploma from that school's professional training program and then returned to Halifax.

Crooks, Harrigan, Orr, and Phinney also

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were in Halifax. Crooks was in law school at Dalhousie, and Harrigan had just returned from New York, where she had graduated with a degree in dance performance at Purchase College (part of the State University of New York). Orr was teaching dance and had just completed her degree in neuroscience at Dalhousie. Phinney was studying physics at Dalhousie. When they weren't busy with their studies and budding careers, they were dancing. "At that time, we all wanted to dance [professionally]," says Orr, looking around at her fellow company founders. "We were constantly asking ourselves, who are the people we can work with who are as dedicated as we are and that we could dance with?"

The answer was obvious. They had known each other and worked together for

years. Their personalities meshed well, and their strengths complemented each other. One final agreement: They didn't want to have any regrets. In late 2001 Mocean Dance was born, and the company was incorporated in early 2002.

The three years since then have been busy. At first Mocean was a part-time endeavour, with hours of training, rehearsals, and administrative tasks squeezed into daily schedules already filled with obligations to work or school. It wasn't long before they decided that part-time wasn't enough. "In order for the company to move forward, to be on par with other companies in Canada, we had to commit," says Orr. With the exception of Phinney, who remains part-time while she finishes her master's degree in

atmospheric physics, the dancers went full-time last September.

"We are the first full-time, multi-member, dance company in the region in 20 years," says Di Quinzio, trying to explain the initial wariness some people had about their proposed venture. "People knew that what we were trying to do was tough. They just wanted to make sure we knew what we were getting into."

On the other hand, "If we had listened to the naysayers," says Crooks, "we wouldn't be here today." The dancers weighed everyone's input, but their gut feeling was that they would be successful. "We have no fear," say Harrigan and Orr, almost in unison. "We wanted it—we went for it."

### GUNG HO

Mocean is different from most professional dance companies in several areas. For example, there is no artistic director to steer creative development. Instead, the dancers share the responsibility for decision-making and taking direction. In addition, although

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– Carolle Crooks

they do have the backing of a board of directors and a management consultant, they do the administrative work—from marketing to finances—themselves. "We do it all," says Crooks. "We're the dancers, administrators, and artistic directors, but we all work together."

Also, Mocean didn't start out with a big show, hoping to build a name for itself before seeking community support and arts funding. Instead, as part of the business plan, the dancers began applying for grants long before starting work on their first performance. It was that approach, says Harrigan, that made them a rarity. "We received an \$18,000 Canada Council grant before our first show,"

she says. "That's virtually unheard of."

Best-laid plans aside, the first show didn't evolve without challenges. Mocean staged "Quintecentric" in early October of 2003, just days after Hurricane Juan. Three choreographers, a lighting designer, and a guest performer were in town when the storm hit, and the group missed a valuable day of rehearsal. With power outages across the province, no one was sure if the show would go on. The dancers set up a telephone hotline for ticket holders and rehearsed double time with no power to make up for the day they had missed—and ended up performing in front of four sold-out audiences. That first performance was captured on film for a half-hour

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# The work shows no sign of letting up: Mocean's schedule is planned right through to 2007

special that aired twice on Bravo in early 2004 and later on CBC.

Audience members represent a wide range of backgrounds. The company's varied repertoire, built through collaborations with choreographers from across Canada, appeals to dance fans eager to see what is current. The mastery of technique appeals to fans of form and function, and the sheer emotion appeals on a human level—even to those with no background in modern dance. "Their new work is challenging but not obscure," says Muecke. "It's accessible to everyone. They have a mature understanding of dance and are dynamic. So is their dancing. It's a big part of their appeal and their artistic success."

As one of the companies-in-residence at Halifax Dance, the members of Mocean have shown many young dance students the scope of modern dance. They teach classes and hold workshops and often can be seen rehearsing in one of the studios or eating lunch in the common area of the building. Last fall they visited 14 junior high and high schools and they'll visit another six this spring. For some students, their performance was a totally new experience. "It's important for us to share and educate others, to try to introduce dance to the education system," says Orr, who finds the school visits rewarding.

The touring schedule is just a small part of Mocean's yearly roster. In March the dancers

travelled to San Francisco, where they performed during an evening of dance with two other American companies. In May another performance is scheduled at the Sir James Dunn Theatre in Halifax, this time a collaboration with Halifax dancer and choreographer Gwen Noah. Add to that endless hours of training and rehearsal, preparations for special events, fundraising, filing grant applications, and the daily duties of running a small business, and the calendar fills up quickly. "We thought it'd get easier when we started doing this full-time, but we're still so busy!" says Crooks, laughing. "But it's our passion. Like anyone with their own business, some of it's laborious, but we love it."

The work shows no sign of letting up: Mocean's schedule is planned right through to 2007. The dancers also have a pretty good idea of where they would like to be in 2010. "We want to go national," says Orr. "The quality of the dance isn't the issue, it's getting the recognition." That's a matter of time and exposure, but, rest assured, they have a plan for that too. □

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