

## **GINA GIBNEY DANCE/MOVING WITH A MISSION**

**C**onsidered a pioneering force in linking dance with social service, the company's groundbreaking community initiatives use the transforming power of movement to assist members of disenfranchised communities and survivors of violence to heal, find their voice and build new lives. Annually, these community initiatives serve thousands of participants through three distinct programs: the Domestic Violence Project, Keep Moving! and Moving the Community. Founded in 2000, the Domestic Violence Project is the company's central community initiative. This highly regarded project helps survivors of domestic abuse to regain their sense of self determination by uniting them with professional dancers, who have been trained to control their physical environment with freedom and confidence. In New York City, the Domestic Violence Project is

a partnership with Sanctuary for Families and Safe Horizon. Keep Moving! is a free arts partnership that encourages youth at risk to dance, create and collaborate. The company newest initiative, Moving the Community, promotes health and wellness for individuals affected by HIV/AIDS by providing them with effective tools to heighten self-confidence, reduce stress and improve their wellbeing.

### **GINA GIBNEY**

(Artistic Director) Gibney's choreography has been widely presented and commissioned in the United States and abroad at such venues as Danspace Project, The Duke on 42nd Street Theater, WORKS & PROCESS at the

Guggenheim Museum, Yale

Repertory Theater, Joyce SoHo, Central Park SummerStage, Symphony Space, The Joyce Theater's Altogether Different series, Joe's Pub and DanceNOW NYC, Kaatsbaan International Dance Center, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Cleveland Public Theatre, the New York platform of the Rencontres Chorégraphiques Internationales de Seine Saint-Denis, L'Agora de la Danse (Montréal), Maison de la Culture Frontenac (Montréal), Maison de la Culture Rosemont (Montréal), Gibraltar Point Center for the Arts (Toronto), and elsewhere. In response to her growing concern about the status of women in the professional dance world, she reorganized her company as an all-female ensemble in 1997. Since that time, she has created six evening length works: *Coming from Quiet* (1998), *Objects No Longer Present* (2000), *Several Truths* (2001), *Time Remaining* (2002), *Thrown* (2004) and *unbounded* (2005). In 2000 she launched the innovative Domestic Violence Project that offers dance and creative expression to women who are survivors of domestic abuse. She is the founder of Studio 5-2, an officer of Danspace Project's Board of Directors, and a recently elected trustee of Dance/USA. Gibney graduated with honors and received an MFA in Dance from Case Western Reserve University. Individuals who have influenced her work include Kathryn Karipides, Kelly Holt, Hanya Holm, Mark Morris, Jocelyn Lorenz, and the many gifted performers with whom she has worked.



photo by ShaLeigh Comerford

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” — Lao Tzu

## REFLECTIONS ON A SIX YEAR JOURNEY

This year, Gina Gibney Dance begins our seventh year of service to domestic violence survivors. The Domestic Violence Project currently offers over 300 workshops annually to help survivors rebuild self-esteem and move forward with confidence. Those six years have been a time of learning, inspired by struggles and triumphs of the women with whom we have worked. As we look to the future, we know that there is more to be done. We are developing a new program to better serve the children whose lives have been uprooted to a domestic violence shelter. We are refining our work with women to strengthen the connection between our artistic work with the women and the goals of the clinical staff members who are working with them day in and day out. We also want to make sure that the tools and techniques we offer the women are useful to them in their daily lives, and we are developing take away tools that our clients can use when confronting stress.



photo by ShaLeigh Comerford

We are eager to spread the word about the work we do in hopes that dancers in this community will be moved to serve the community of domestic violence survivors. We are thrilled that White Bird has made it possible to bring the company’s artistic and community work to Portland.

## WHY DANCE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Through our work we have learned that there is a powerful synergy between dance and domestic violence. Women in contemporary dance have dedicated their lives to understanding the connection between their bodies and minds. They have learned to move freely and confidently, using movement as a means of expression. Survivors of domestic violence have had the opposite experience: their actions and instincts have been restricted and repressed due to repeated abuse, and they have been stripped of the basic right to control their own lives.

Women in the professional dance community care deeply about community issues and want to make a difference, however their skills, talents and sensitivities are often grossly underutilized. Survivors need gentle experiences to develop sentient awareness, reduce stress and tension, explore self-expression, and develop a sense of confidence and well-being. Ironically, in most domestic violence shelters and support groups, little attention is paid to the body or to experiences in creativity and self-care that will reestablish the clients’ sense of confidence and wellness.

If trained and sensitized to the issue of domestic violence, professional dancers can bring movement, creativity and self-care to survivors as part of their journey to more healthy futures. We believe that there is tremendous potential in replicating the work that we have explored through the Domestic Violence Project as a way to mobilize the skills of movement artists to help survivors take their whole self forward – mind and body.

– Gina Gibney

“The movement workshops your company has provided on a regular basis to the women and children at Sanctuary during the last 6 years bears fruit that is not only viewed on a public stage. We see it in our daily interactions and behind the closed doors of a counseling group where women learn for the first time or perhaps reclaim the art of self-expression. We see it with children who move more freely, rediscovering their bodies with a sense of whimsy and imagination.

– Beth Silverman-Yam, Sanctuary for Families

**FAQ: COMMUNITY**

**Why does the company have a dual mission?**

**Gina Gibney:** I have had a life-long commitment to both dance and working in the community. That is why I believe that my company's mission needs to be about artistic excellence and working to make our community a better place.

**Why dance and domestic violence?**

**GG:** This project brings the issues faced by domestic violence survivors together with the technical skills of our dancers. The dancers in our company have been rigorously trained and have learned to make physical choices and move with confidence. Their bodies are their vehicles for self-expression.

Victims of domestic violence have had the opposite experience: their actions and instincts have been restricted due to repeated abuse, and they have been stripped of the basic right to control their own lives. When working with domestic violence survivors, members of my company use specialized training and sensitization techniques to encourage these women to be physically free and, to break out of the physical and psychological restrictions that dictate their choices. This experience helps them to explore and control their choices and emotions in a safe environment, to break down barriers and to move forward toward healthy and safe futures. Our participants are encouraged to find a new voice through movement, which will empower them to rebuild their lives.

**Why do you as a choreographer want your all-female company to be so deeply involved with community work? What does this project do for the members of your company?**

**GG:**The Domestic Violence Project provides our dancers with new skills, credentials, and enhanced economic opportunities. It is important to bear in mind that in the contemporary dance community, women face increasing eco-

ny. My hope is that this program will expand into the field and that members of the dance community at large will commit themselves to working with survivors and their families.

**How does your community work relate to your artistic work? Are they separate or interconnected concerns?**

**GG:** I am often asked how our community work connects to my choreography.



conomic hardship and lack of parity with their male counterparts. In a field that was pioneered by such legends as Ruth St. Denis, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham, women have lost ground. While this situation is beginning to be acknowledged, it is far from addressed. Talented, educated, sensitive and highly trained women dancers lack artistic fulfillment, good paid employment and basic respect. I think that the Domestic Violence Project rights some of those wrongs for members of my own compa-

The answer lies in two fundamental concepts—process and collaboration. Additionally, I want to create a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere where participants are free to explore - and be in control of - their own movement choices and emotions.

All of my work in the studio and the community is driven by three actions: reflect, express and collaborate.

**Reflect:** I encourage dancers and workshop participants to think, reflect and be true to their own choices.

**Express:** My process often involves solving simple movement problems that bring the inside out, allowing participants to express their uniqueness through movement.

**Collaborate:** I encourage exchange, combination, sharing and compromise. I want the people I work with to be surprised at what they have been able to

**Are the sessions supervised?**

**GG:** Typically, Domestic Violence Project sessions are offered in conjunction with shelter support groups, under the supervision of a clinical social worker. Support groups are an important service to clients, providing a safe place for women to share their experiences and work together. Working under the supervision of the clinical staff with an established group ensures that the work done by the dance company will

the company's work through bi-weekly support groups for the Teaching Artists, information and advice regarding their work with domestic violence survivors.

**What are the challenges and benefits of working with an all-female group?**

**GG:** My current work is driven by a full exploration of the physical and emotional range of women and is framed by issues of identity and community. I use intricate partnering to demonstrate the powerful and uncompromising way that women can relate. I am developing a concept for partnering called cooperative virtuosity in which the sheer strength of traditional partnering is replaced by complex maneuvers that require a shared purpose, intense cooperation and the creation of an alliance. I am interested in what a group can accomplish when working together selflessly.

One of my chosen challenges in working with an all-female company is to present the dancers as strong individuals, each with a unique and interesting performance presence, yet clearly playing an important part within a cohesive group. I enjoy the challenge of finding the balance between the individual and group.

**What is your process?**

**GG:** Since 1992, most of my dances have been evening length projects that delve into a specific choreographic inquiry. These works start from a central question or premise that is fleshed out through a thorough, intricate creative process. This process requires the dancers to participate fully and to excavate their own relationship to the subject matter. Through collaboration, we discover what is common among us. I want our viewers to share these experiences as well.



accomplish when working in collaboration with others.

It is amazing what evolves when women are given the tools and encouragement to create - whether they are young dancers in a field that lacks appreciation for their work - or survivors of domestic abuse in a shelter. Our work in the community has everything to do with what I believe in as an artist and as a woman.

be well-integrated into the women's clinical recovery program.

**FAQ: ARTISTIC**

**How are the dancers trained?**

**GG:** Intensive training and supervision is provided on an ongoing basis by experts in the field, most significantly by the clinical staff of Sanctuary for Families and Dr. Dan Laukitis, a clinical psychologist specializing in trauma. Dr. Laukitis provides ongoing guidance of

**Why do you create evening length works?**

**GG:** I enjoy working slowly, allowing an idea to unfold over time - with jolts of speed and intensity thrown in from time to time to enliven the process.

Choreographically, I like to see ideas that have been fully explored in ways that trigger thought or provoke reconsideration. I want the viewer to have time to experience, think about and feel what is happening on stage

**How has your work changed?**

**GG:** Over the past several years, my work has become more physically dynamic and emotionally intense. I have become interested in investigating extremes - from still to ferocious, gentle to tumultuous, urgent to detached. I want the viewer to experience through the dancers the sensations of their own bodies and limbs, the trepidation and elation of taking a risk, the intensity of life.

**QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS**

*Every time we end our dance session, I thank [the dancers] and embrace them because it is therapy for me. It allows me to express myself where I wasn't able to in my abusive marriage.*

*The dancers really made us feel comfortable. Nobody did anything that could be wrong in any way. You could express [what you felt] in any way. We will take all of this with us to the next level. In the past I felt that I was stupid, I was dumb, and I did the wrong thing. Now I am in school and realize that I can't be wrong if I don't know. To ask is not a bad thing. Because once you get it, you got it! I will take what they have given us, as far as not being judgmental toward anyone, but accepting people.*

*We're really motivated by coming here. Nobody's judging what you do. It's the effort you put into it that counts. It's relaxing. It's peaceful, and there's no stress, no control. It's freedom. Once you finish here you feel so energized, you feel like, "Oh God, I can make it."*

**QUOTES FROM COMPANY MEMBERS**

*It makes me feel really good that I can use my skills as a dancer to affect others, other than just by performing. Dancing is all about working with other people and collaborating. These workshops have given me the opportunity to use those skills. There aren't enough opportunities like that for dancers.*

*The clients came in with a frown and left with a smile. A few didn't want to participate at first, but they ended up joining in when they saw how much fun the others were having. One woman wants me to come there every day!*

*As a company, we have found that our work in the shelters has provided us with the rare opportunity to enlist our skills as movers and teachers in our own neighborhoods. We have the chance to explore how our chosen method of expression, movement, can be fully utilized to touch people and provide a healing environment for those who have encountered trauma. As trained and educated artists, it is a wonderful feeling to be able to use our hard-earned skills and talents to generate income. We have worked long hours at other jobs in order to sustain our passion for dance and this program has enabled us to focus more on our creativity and our work in the field.*

**QUOTES FROM BETH SILVERMAN-YAM, CLINICAL DIRECTOR OF SANCTUARY FOR FAMILIES**

*Traumatized women have lost a sense of how to make choices in their lives. This artistic endeavor is about choice, autonomy, self-expression, trust and sharing. All of that is embedded in the Women at Work movement classes and is part of a healing process. The energy is palpable.*

