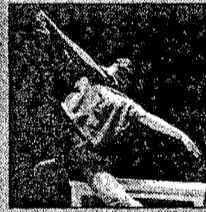


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## Performing Arts

CLASSICAL MUSIC · DANCE · OPERA



Contemporary choreographer Ilan Egeland presents her company, (le)dance, in her full-evening work "... In one day" at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica on Friday, Saturday, June 30 and July 1.

### Suspenseful Moves à la Hitchcock

By JENNIFER FISHER

When dancer-choreographer Neil Greenberg came to prominence in the downtown New York dance scene in the mid-1990s, it was not just because of his subject matter—although that certainly had a lot to do with it at first.

Greenberg had been making dances for his own small company, Dance by Neil Greenberg, for seven years, but he didn't attract significant attention until 1994, when he became one of the first choreographers to address the subject of AIDS explicitly in his work. Greenberg's "Not-About-AIDS-Dance," made in the wake of the death of his brother, Jon, and that of many other friends, straightforwardly revealed Greenberg's own HIV-positive status. It won a Bessie (New York's major concert dance award) and was named by the New York Times' Jennifer Dunning as one of 1994's three dance highlights. The next year, it was followed by a related piece, "The Disco Project" (which came to Highways in Santa Monica for a brief run in 1996) and in 1997 by "Part 3," concluding the trilogy.

Major critics were soon spilling major ink trying to explain why the "Not-About-AIDS" dances worked so beautifully. There was much praise of Greenberg's style—he was often called a formalist, likely the result of his background: training in ballet and Graham technique, and dancing with Merce Cunningham. But unlike his formalist predecessors, Greenberg was unabashedly autobiographical. And rather than finding his personal revelations self-indulgent, one critic dubbed him an "endearing diarist."

His pieces were also sprinkled with popular music—disco, songs from "My Fair Lady"—and with humor, often arising from his use of trenchant bits of typed, projected text that mixed tragedy with everyday observations and self-conscious announcements about the process of putting one foot in front of the other.

"At this point in the making of the dance, my friend Michael Mitchell died," one would say. Another said about one of his dancers, "Ellen was a big pothead in high school." And yet another, "Time for

Neil's big solo." The critics wrote that Greenberg masterfully juggled elements of honesty, irony, self-mockery and hope. Those are perhaps the qualities that persuaded puckish and protean Mikhail Baryshnikov to commission two works from him—"Tchaikovsky Dance" in 1998 and "Macguffin, How Meanings Get Lost (Revisited)," in 1999 (the latter makes references to Alfred Hitchcock movies, which Greenberg also does in his current pieces).

With his combination of innovative movement, structural deftness and personal appeal, Greenberg was on a roll in the 1990s. Dance scholar and critic Ann Daly, writing in Dance Theatre Journal, called him "the real thing: a thoughtful, playful, imaginative choreographer who loves to move, and who has followed his own path."

Perhaps inevitably, that path has recently taken another turn. In two new works, which come to the Skirball Cultural Center on Thursday, Greenberg, 41, looks to the movies for inspiration—or at least to a few cinematic devices he translates into choreography, accompanied by slices of the florid, violin-noir scores that Bernard Herrmann wrote for Hitchcock films.

"I was ready to move on," Greenberg said on the phone from his Manhattan apartment. "Creatively, the 'Not-About-AIDS' dances were the necessary next step for me at the time—there was no doubt that's what I had to do; it helped me live my life. And then I felt I was through with the nonfiction aspect. In a way, I look at reentering the world of Hitchcock as going into my fiction choreographing period."

In "This Is What Happened," which was called "a plotless mystery" when it premiered in New York

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A more romantic Neil Greenberg, now living optimistically with HIV, integrates techniques borrowed from the movies in his latest dance pieces.

"I'm using some of the techniques of suspense films in order to get people involved.... Hitchcock is an inspiration," Greenberg says.

DANCE BY NEIL GREENBERG, "THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED" AND "SEQUEL," Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd. Date: Thursday, 8 p.m. Prices: \$10-\$18. Phone: (323) 655-8587.

JOHAN ELBERS

**Performing Arts; Suspenseful Moves a la Hitchcock; A more romantic Neil Greenberg, now living optimistically with HIV, integrates techniques borrowed from movies in his latest dance pieces; [Home Edition]**

*JENNIFER FISHER. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Jun 18, 2000. pg. 49-50*

(continued from front)

last year, and in the aptly named "Sequel," made this year, relationships are enigmatic, characters linger, and costumes are changed for no reason, while lights (by Michael Stiller) and music fade and swell unexpectedly. Greenberg's trademark projected lines of text are used in the first piece only, sparingly--"He guesses his future," they announce at one point, and "Something is happening to her," at another. They are no longer direct references to events in his life, but the words have a familiar narrative appeal. Greenberg likes using viewer-friendly clues and music "to help the audience relax" and fall into the same involved state that he experiences at a good movie or a good dance.

"When I watch a Cunningham dance, for example, I get really involved in the watching of the work," he says. "I become as involved as if I'm seeing a suspense film--and don't try to talk to me when I'm watching 'Notorious,' I won't hear you. I'm using some of the techniques of suspense films in order to get people involved in a similar way. Hitchcock is an inspiration, because the suspense plot in his movies is a hook for something deeper that engages me almost on a subliminal level--something dealing with human interaction, with trust, with an almost existential fear."

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Justine Lynch, who has worked with Greenberg since 1992, says that she got "reinterested" in the films "Psycho" and "Vertigo" because of the dances. "It isn't that we're retelling Hitchcock movies in any way," she says, also from New York. "But the pieces are extracting the intuited feelings of the movies and how crisply they're arranged and how different elements are woven in. The music itself has an emotional content for Neil, but he works with such an intelligent structural, conceptual bent, it doesn't get sticky, using this extra-lush music. I think he has a good take on paring it down."

Greenberg's method of choreographing is one that makes his personal movement idiosyncrasies a primary element of his dances. He videotapes his own improvisations, then, with some dancer input-- more subtle than explicit, Lynch says--various phrases are shaped and altered in terms of timing, repetition and spatial pathways. The result, says Lynch, is "clearly movement that's unique to him, but in the process of doing it, our own personal ways of moving overlap." (Lynch, Greenberg and Paige Martin perform "This Is What Happened" and are joined by Antonio Ramos for "Sequel.")

Although Greenberg's use of text, fragmentation, everyday movement and irony mark him as a Postmodernist, Lynch tends to think of his work as Neoclassical. "I think he really uses movement vocabulary that's been around for ages in a very different way," she says. "His body has been trained classically, and so that's what comes out of him a lot of the time."

For dance scholar David Gere, who writes about AIDS and dance and teaches at UCLA, Greenberg "is at the forefront of that brand of Postmodernism that brings back the expressive possibilities of modern dance, but from a wary distance." (Gere and USC professor David Roman are among other scholars considering Greenberg--both have upcoming books on the subject of art and AIDS.)

Like many choreographers who develop their own styles from an amalgam of influences, Greenberg trained in several established kinds of dance before striking out on his own. In a suburb of St. Paul, Minn., he started tap at age 4, and ballet and Graham-based modern with the Minnesota Dance Theatre at 11. By the time he was 17 and had been promoted from Little Boy Cousin to Adult Cousin in the local "Nutcracker," he was ready to move to New York and study at Juilliard. But he left Juilliard after less than a year to join the Eliot Feld Ballet (now Ballet Tech) when it needed men for a summer production of "A Soldier's Tale."

He was fired at the end of that run ("I wasn't really appropriate material for his company," Greenberg says with a laugh), and he spent a few years in the late 1970s freelancing for what he calls "all the small modern dance companies in New York at the time." His ballet training helped him earn a spot in the Cunningham company when he was just 20.

Greenberg stayed with the Cunningham company for 6 1/2 years, but he began to feel that he was just "making shapes" (he once said he'd been "faking Graham"). Then he discovered the Klein technique, one of a number of therapies that focus on beneficial ways for bodies to work and that have become increasingly prevalent in the dance world. Klein technique--which involves individualized exercises as well as a philosophy of movement--figures greatly in the modern dance classes he teaches at State University of New York, Purchase, and several of his dancers have found it useful over the years as well.

"For me, it created huge changes," he says. "That phrase 'drop your weight' became something real. Instead of holding it and making shapes, I started releasing the places I was holding. The weight would drop to the floor, and then I could use it to push away from the floor."

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The idea of releasing a great weight and finding new energy and freedom to move can easily be seen as metaphorical for Greenberg. Since his 1987 diagnosis, new drugs for AIDS treatment have improved his outlook. It's not for nothing that the last section of his "Not- About-AIDS" trilogy is called "Luck," since it announced, in typed projections, that his health was good and that he had suddenly started thinking he was not going to die.

He's particularly happy about the new pieces, the new phase of his work. "I guess everyone says the last thing they did is the best," he says in a rush of enthusiasm that sounds both boyish and considered. "But I love these dances. For me, it's a breakthrough because there's a willingness to look at the romantic side of life, that it's not all bleak. That even with a kind of existential, why- are-we-here kind of universe, there's still a lushness.

"It's not an arid desert for me. I don't have any answers, but it feels more lush than that--often."

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