

Otis Stuart talks to dancer-choreographer Neil Greenberg

Neil Greenberg is a best-of-many-worlds choreographer. He has been making dances since 1979, the year he began performing with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Seven years later Merce saw Greenberg emerge as a singular presence even in that ensemble of stand-outs—a sharp, bright, slightly seditious virtuoso with an appetite for the energy of each step and its antic possibility. The dances he's created since forming Neil Greenberg Dance in 1986 have kept to the first fact of the best Cunningham—its brimming, unbridled physicality—but layered it with other worlds as well. Greenberg's work is not only a full-throated physical experience but an exercise in a deadpan, downtown sort of way.

Greenberg's concert at La Mama this weekend aims to continue that tradition and then some. He and his five dancers will perform two works. *Destiny Dance* was made last year and is an essay in form that ends a head-on confrontation with the meaning of the word "dance." The premiere is a collaboration with composer Zeena Parkins and visual artists Cary S. Leibowitz. "GANDY ASS, and the name says it all. *I Am a Miserable and Selfish Person* (Kick Me Dance).

The title may be vintage Greenberg, but the piece also marks several firsts, beginning with a commissioned score. "*Destiny Dance* was the first time I'd ever used music at all," Greenberg says, "and this is the first time there's music the whole time—well, nearly the whole time. We're trying to use the music in filmic ways, almost like a film score so that the dance itself remains primary. Zeena will be mixing the music live almost in the same way that lighting cues are brought in."

The new piece is also a first association with Leibowitz, who works under an alter ego, GANDY ASS, once described in *Art in America* as a "young, gay, depressed, petulant, weak-willed, self-indulgent, self-hated, manipulative neurotic who charms us with his disarming, confessional wit." Leibowitz,



Greenberg says, struck a chord.

"The first time I saw Cary's work was at the Stux Gallery. He had wallpaper across one wall with 'I am a miserable and selfish person' written all over it and then, at the very bottom, a border that read, over and over, 'I really am very lucky,' all in bright candy colors. It really spoke to me. Having these negative voices brought out into the open gave them less power. Cary took all those voices that went around in your head telling you nasty things about yourself and got them out into the light so that they aren't secrets anymore. We're using polyester pants he did that say 'Kick Me' on the seat. He'd also done a pee chair with three emotions—happy, sad and guilty—where sad is 70 percent, guilt is 25 percent, and happy is 5 percent. We've translated that into dance as marks in three different sizes. The dancers have specific instructions on how the happy dance is all cross."

Although Greenberg describes his work these days as "self-referential," it raises the question: indulgence through larger concerns? "*I Am a Miserable and Selfish Person* is obviously a dance about self-loathing, among other things, but, because there's brightness in Cary's colors and in the choreography, I don't think of it as gloomy. The piece is not about Neil making a dance but about examining what is going on. I've seen how so many of the supposed answers that I've had in the past and that my mentors had before me haven't solved anything. Like everyone else, I'm looking for more answers, but first I have to look at what is right here, right now. That's the only way to move on. Is there a narrative in the new dance, other than questioning, questioning, questioning? Another question: Will they ever get through that happy door?"