

Dance Matters: Upward Momentum

By Kina Poon, photo by Roy Volkmann

An exporter of highly physical modern dance with a sleek look, Elisa Monte Dance has been making pieces for three



decades. While the company has maintained its presence at home with a New York season every spring, EMD is less visible in the rest of the U.S., where its tours have declined. In 2009, Monte appointed Tiffany Rea-Fisher as the company's associate artistic director, breathing new life into the single-choreographer company. This month, EMD puts its best foot forward during a week-long run at the Joyce Theater and continues to tackle how to move onward.

The company has many elements stacked in its favor—its longevity, a warm reception of the work both in Europe and New York, and Monte's links to many New York dance institutions, including the Graham and Ailey companies. Monte has decided to incorporate these relationships into a special opening night performance on March 1.

"We put together a program that would sum up what the 30 years has meant to Elisa," says Rea-Fisher about the opening night gala. "We really wanted to establish Elisa's place in modern dance."

The program reunites former Ailey stars Elizabeth Roxas-Dobrish and Matthew Rushing in the nearly acrobatic *Treading* (1979), Monte's signature duet, which has since become a crowd pleaser in the Ailey repertoire. The cast for the lyrical *Tears Rolling* (1997) will include Francesca Harper, the choreographer and former Forsythe dancer, and former Ailey principal Sarita Allen. Rea-Fisher, a 2007 "On the Rise" who spent six years as a standout in the company, will perform the aggressive *White Dragon* with her husband, Matthew Fisher, a former Monte dancer.

Monte's premiere *Dialogue with Vanishing Languages* honors indigenous peoples; she commissioned an original score from composer Kevin James that incorporates dialects on the brink of extinction. Revivals include *Light Lies* (2002), an homage to visionary artist Josef Albers, and the dramatic ensemble piece *Shattered* (2000). Monte's earlier works are nearly all fluid and abstract. She has pushed herself to use commissioned music and draw inspiration from contemporary figures, including photographer Roy Volkmann. "I'm proud to show a span of my work and how it's changed over time," says Monte.

As the company takes baby steps away from the single-choreographer model towards becoming a repertory company, Monte has encouraged Rea-Fisher and company member Joe Celej to develop their choreographic voices. "My work began out of my mentors Martha Graham and Mr. Ailey giving me a chance," says Monte. "It's important for me to do that for the next generation."

Nearly all of the faces are new—a few dancers were asked to leave, one had to return to Europe, and one opted not to renew her contract. Rea-Fisher, who teaches at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, has recruited dancers from the program, from her alma mater SUNY Purchase, and other places. "To have a whole new company, it doesn't seem very retrospective-like," admits Rea-Fisher. "But physically, they're giving us exactly what we need for this concert."

Both Monte and Rea-Fisher invoke the word "institutionalize" when talking about their plans for the company's future. Monte, who will collaborate on a piece with Meredith Monk for next year's season, looks to building more weeks for creating in New York and possibly finding a space of their own. "We'd like to familiarize the next generation with Elisa Monte," says Rea-Fisher. "We'd like to reintroduce the company to the dance community."