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## Bigger Choreographic Reputations Don't Always Need Bigger Stages

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

Sept. 17 was a good day for Luciana Achugar, a choreographer known for smart, sensual dances that explore the nature of shared experience between audience and performer.

First she made her debut at the Joyce Theater, performing an excerpt from her 2004 work “A Super Natural Return to Love” at the New York Dance and Performance Awards, better known as the Bessies. Then she won a Bessie for creator/choreographer, for last year’s seductive ensemble piece “Exhausting Love at [Danspace Project](#).”

Ms. Achugar, who has shown her work at small, progressive theaters like Danspace Project and [Dance Theater Workshop](#) during her eight-year choreographic career, could leverage this recognition to move onto bigger stages. But only if she wants to.

“I’m not interested in going larger and larger,” Ms. Achugar said. Nor are many of today’s most interesting choreographers, who are thoughtfully engaged in navigating, and subverting, viewer expectations. Among them are Tere O’Connor, whose new project, “Rammed Earth,” is at the Chocolate Factory in Long Island City, Queens, and John Jasperse, who will bring a new work to the Next Wave Festival at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) next month.

For reasons both artistic and economic, many contemporary choreographers have abandoned the idea of a hierarchical presentational model, one that begins in “emerging choreographer” samplers, extends through midsize theaters like the Joyce and then ascends to spaces like the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Next season Ms. Achugar is planning to perform in one of the Workshop’s small upstairs studios. Beyond aesthetics, she said, her position has philosophical and political dimensions.

“It’s against the supersizing mindset,” she explained. “Dance has this thing that is anti-consumerist or anti-capitalist. It’s about the body, these relationships and these experiences” between viewers and dancers.

Of course, even dance behemoths like [American Ballet Theater](#) and [Mark Morris Dance Group](#) see the benefits of intimate stages. Mr. Morris regularly shows smaller repertory pieces in his Brooklyn center, and next month Ballet Theater will celebrate its 10th anniversary performing at City Center — a small stage compared with the cavernous [Metropolitan Opera](#) House, where the

company has its spring seasons, but still a very traditional theatrical space, and one that many choreographers find frustratingly outmoded.

“I think, unfortunately, most dance on big stages looks exactly the same,” Mr. O’Connor said. “I often say it looks like a bunch of No. 2 pencils in an earthquake. Mostly what you see is the human form against the enormity of the space. That is the major message in most of those works; it’s the major excitement in most of those works.”

Viewers, he said, see this standardized message and not the choreographer’s “individual ideas.”

Mr. O’Connor has worked on big proscenium stages, choreographing dances for companies like the Lyon Opera Ballet. But for the New York premiere of “Rammed Earth” he approached the Chocolate Factory, an alternative, artist-run space.

The piece, which is ripe with architectural metaphors, opened this month in a warehouse at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival. At a studio showing in August, Mr. O’Connor discussed the idea of “liquid space,” which allows the piece to maintain its architectural integrity in widely varying places — even, he said, a proscenium stage.

But it is difficult to imagine the work being as bewitching — or as spatially smart — in a traditional proscenium setting, particularly in the opening section, where the four performers dance around the viewers’ chairs, unless Mr. O’Connor were to move the audience onto the stage as well, as Miguel Gutierrez did in his last work, “Everyone.”

The Chocolate Factory’s artistic director, Brian Rogers, who was one of its founders in 2003, has been aggressively seeking to work with established theaters like Danspace Project, a co-presenter of “Rammed Earth.” He said choreographers’ growing interest in alternative spaces corresponded to the rising cachet of series outside Manhattan, like Chez Bushwick in Brooklyn, and many younger people’s lack of interest in traditional theatergoing.

“Sitting in a chair for a fixed period of time, and being quiet and then applauding” feels wrong to them, he explained. “It does to me, too, which is why I have the kind of space that I have. It can be anything you want it to be. You can throw away, if you want to, or try to throw away, all of the preassociations that people have about what it means to go and see a show.”

Mr. Jasperse, who ricochets between big and small stages, has been playing with these pre-associations for years. His 2003 work “Just Two Dancers,” in which viewers were instructed to hold mirrors to see dance happening throughout the theater, offered a critique of the new Dance Theater Workshop stage, whose traditional design, with wings and tiered seating, has struck many — including the Workshop’s current artistic director, Carla Peterson — as limited and making too many assumptions about what kind of dance will be shown on it.

Mr. Jasperse’s “Misuse liable to prosecution,” which opens at the Brooklyn Academy in October,

will juxtapose his beautifully precise movement language with a mess of found — or stolen — junk. But the greater juxtaposition will be of institution and art.

The academy’s traditional “physical architecture of two enormous proscenium theaters with really expensive union crews” is at odds with the Next Wave mission of presenting experimental work, Mr. Jasperse said. But, he continued, this “crazy tension” can work to an artist’s advantage.

To present “Misuse” in an “alternative, grungy environment” would miss the point, he said. “What’s going to happen when we put that show in that theater?” he asked. “How do you manipulate the machine? It’s there and it’s designed to do a certain thing, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you have to do that.”

*John Jasperse’s “Misuse liable to prosecution” runs Oct. 31 to Nov. 3 at the BAM Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene; (718) 636-4100. Luciana Achugar will next present work in New York on Feb. 15 and 16 at the Abrons Art Center, 466 Grand Street, at Pitt Street, Lower East Side; (212) 598-0400.*

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