

Inside and out

What's Written Within's Sally Cohn adds fashion designer to her list of talents.

By Wendy Taucher -

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Corinne de Langavant, front, is chased by Sally Cohn and the dancers during the dance. — Gabrielle Mannino



Lucinda Childs iconic work *Dance*

photo Sally Cohn, c. 2009, NYT

The improvisational dance group What's Written Within is presenting a unique event on Sunday, May 5, called "What's Written Within & Wearable ART & More," a dance performance and art exhibit by Sally Cohn. The evening event includes choreography performed by company members and Cohn's new dance photography-inspired fashions.

Sandy Broyard, artistic director, and Sally Cohn, co-artistic director, founded the group 10 years ago, and the company has met regularly ever since. They meet in Cohn's bucolic studio, constructed with blonde wood panelling, a vaulted ceiling, an expertly

designed lighting grid, with plenty of windows overlooking a small clearing with a wooded backdrop. They concentrate on improvisation, doing a public-invited showing every year, but consider their weekly sessions more of an on-going “practice” than rehearsals geared toward performance.

Cohn, an excellent choreographer and dance photographer, has combined these two talents into a third, as a fashion designer. Her new Wearable ART & More handmade silk pieces of pillows, bags, and tunics are making their debut exhibit at the May 5 event, and will be available online. Wearable art is not a new thing, and Coco Chanel’s comment about Elsa Schiaparelli, who collaborated with many artists, including Salvador Dalí, applies to Cohn’s new venture: She’s an “artist who makes clothes.” Cohn has designed a line in black and white and sepia images, printed on pure silk. “Years ago I imagined my photos projected into the woods, and said to myself, I have to do more with my dance photography,” Cohn says. “Some time later, while visiting New York City, I attended an exhibit of Carrie Mae Weems. Her photos were printed on translucent silk, hung in front of a photograph of the same image. While Weems’ images were not of dancers, I was inspired to print on silk. I always try to capture movement in my photography, and silk, with its own inherent movement quality, compounds the action.”

Cohn is the Yard’s staff photographer. Her dance photography is brilliant, and is certainly related to her life in dance and her abilities as a choreographer. The New York Times published her image of Lucinda Childs’ iconic work “Dance,” and another of Cohn’s Childs photos has been included in the collection of Berlin’s Akademie der Künste (“The Century of Dance”).

“Cohn has a knowledge of dance technique, but more specifically, because she’s a choreographer herself, understands memorable moments in movement,” Broyard says. “Her work is instinctive, not cerebral, coming right from the gut.”

Jesse Keller Jason, director of island programs and education and co-producer for the Yard, and a guest artist for the upcoming What’s Written Within evening, says, “Cohn’s choreography always has a sort of drama and theatricality to it, not unlike her personality. There’s structure and architecture too, and actually I could be talking about her photography as well as her choreography. Plus, in her photography, probably because she choreographs, she’s got this split-second anticipation of where the momentum is going, making for exciting photos.” Cohn’s wearable art contains movement implied in the printed image, the motion compounded by the movement of the silk, making for elegant yet fun clothing.

For the dance portion of the combined event, What’s Written Within presents a series of structured choreographic improvs. The cast includes Genevieve Abbot, Harriet Bernstein, Ted Box, Sandy Broyard, George Cohn, Sally Cohn, Scott Crawford, Wayne Elliot, Corinne de Langavant, Jesse Keller Jason, Margaret Knight, Carol Loud, Susan Tirabassi, and Billy White, with musicians Bruce MacNelly, Judith Merion, and David Stanwood. One of the compelling aspects of the mixed-gender group is its wide age range from the 20s to the 90s, from current and former professional dancers and some

members new to dance to lifelong community dancers. The contrasting techniques, styles, and abilities make for interesting choreographic juxtapositions.

Cohn has devised the structure for a piece for seven dancers, who create much of the actual movement vocabulary. The work has original music by David Stanwood, playing “prepared piano,” using “monofilament” (otherwise known as fishing wire) winding and pulling between the strings of the piano. When the pedal is added, it emits tones and sympathetic harmonics, creating an ethereal atmosphere. Cohn’s architecture and spatial complexities are used to good effect here. Harriet Bernstein acts as the center point, balancing the space with her distinctive movement style, infused with meaning and energy, whether in motion or not. The dance brings to mind sublime images of a Henry Moore sculpture garden, not surprisingly, as Cohn says, “I think of my photographs as sculpture.”

Broyard has devised a rhythmically organized sextet to Bach that uses an alternation of stillness and movement as its underpinning. The work uses rhythm and timing as the glue, again with each dancer creating their own moves, based on direction by Broyard. The freedom of the individualistic movement vocabulary creates an interesting duality with Broyard’s spatial and rhythmic design.

Susan Tirabassi and Billy White have created a dance that brings to mind the 1945 film “Brief Encounter,” which starred Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard. The semi-improvised moves capitalize on the performer’s dance and nonverbal acting skills. The duet has a series of striking moments, subtly hinting at the narrative, and deftly creating a world where no one but these two individuals can — or ever could — exist.

A unique Island event, combining great design in movement and imagery, “What’s Written Within & Wearable ART & More” by Sally Cohn will take place at the studio, 43 Pennywise Path, Edgartown, Sunday, May 5, at 7 pm. Suggested donation \$5, reservations required by phone at 508-274-2487.