

A Sense of Place and Mocean



Susanne Chui and Sara Coffin in Nova Scotia

by Don Rieder



In Halifax, Nova Scotia, on the harsh and beautiful north Atlantic coast, Mocean Dance — whose name speaks to the dominant element in their environment, the Atlantic Ocean — has built a striking repertoire of commissioned and original work. This hardy dance company, now in its 15th year, has nourished a diverse, lively and intimately connected arts community held together by a strong sense of place.

Nova Scotia is the easternmost province of maritime Canada. It is tenuously linked to the mainland by a narrow stretch of red clay and marshland. This just above sea-level bridge looks as if a strong storm and tidal surge will wash it away. For Susanne Chui and Sara Coffin, co-artistic directors of Mocean Dance since 2012, a sense of place and a sense of self are inseparable.

Chui is one of the central figures in Halifax's contemporary dance community. She trained and danced in Toronto for several years, touring in works by many of Canada's independent choreographers. Returning to Halifax in 2007, she focused her considerable energy on collaborative creation with local dancers and musicians.

Coffin spent 11 years in Vancouver, where she completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts in dance at Simon Fraser University, and received the Iris Garland Emerging Choreographer Award from Vancouver's Dance Centre. She recently completed her Master of Fine Arts in choreography and performance at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

I asked Chui and Coffin, both born in Halifax and friends from childhood, about the rewards and challenges of making art in a small place. "Why move away? Why do we have to leave home to be artists?" was their response.

For both, what really matters is family, friends, community and dance. They speak of dance as the form into which they pour their lives, how artistic and domestic choices are inseparable, and how those choices inspire each other in deeply significant ways. Yet both readily acknowledge that in a small community one has to honour what is shared and known, and also acknowledge what is missing.



For Mocean's co-artistic directors, dance is a way of knowing, a way of finding answers to questions of belonging, of the essence of place and of the value of the people in that place. Mocean's 2013 production of *Burnwater* was a memorable example of this vision brought to life.

Conceived and directed by sound artist Erin Donovan, the multidisciplinary site-specific performance was choreographed by Chui in collaboration with company dancers Jacinte Armstrong and Rhonda Baker, and held at blacksmith and sculptor John Little's working forge and seaside property in East Dover, Nova Scotia. Dance, drama, music and audience interaction with large, complex sound sculptures created by Little were used to tell the story of his creative and community life.

The sculptures were placed along a path that wound through deep woods and opened out on the shoreline or in small clearings, with huge rocks serving as focal points. At one point along the path, a dancer performed on an erratic (a large boulder left after the retreat of a glacier) that was still attached to the shore like a small island. The dancer, with bending, arching and rolling undulations of her spine and limbs, echoed the movement of water and wind, of tall grasses, of the shifting branches of spruce trees and of the fluttering leaves on the branches of the hardwoods.

Later, in a grassy clearing, we came across a large totemic sculpture of wire and hammered iron on top of a huge granite boulder. As we watched from below, two dancers appeared above us. Backlit by the setting sun, they moved up the slope of the boulder to its summit. Dressed in ragged black fabric caught by the wind, they moved like ancient ritual figures of ravens and seemed larger than normal human beings, like petroglyphs come to life. The sculpture

then became a stringed and percussive instrument played by the dark and angular dancing figures.

Two other recent works, *Canvas 5x5* and *Sable Island*, highlight Mocean Dance's gift for collaborative work that celebrates the power of place and elevates a landscape and its people to almost mythic status.

Canvas 5x5 is an act of love and renewal from Ottawa-based choreographer Tedd Robinson, four of Mocean's dancers (including Chui) and one bagpiper, who together created a lively post-modern interrogation of Celtic music and dance, which has historically been a strong influence on Nova Scotian culture.

The piece gets its title from the five large squares of white canvas and five white squares that resemble pizza boxes used as costumes and sculptural elements. The use of the canvas as kimonos first catches the eye, and a floating walk and gestural patterns that reminded me of buyo, a Japanese court dance. Timeless archetypal beings and relationships are suggested as the dancers take the risk of still sculptural moments with grace, strength and presence.



In contrast to the stillness, there is driving music and leaping and stomping as the dancers pull energy up from the earth. Celtic music has a quick tempo and an irregular beat, and in one section the dancers play a challenging game of "can you keep up with the music?" In this high-stakes game, one dancer comes downstage, and the others count out the beat. If the dancer succeeds, she is applauded. If she fails, she returns upstage and becomes a counter, and another dancer takes her place. The audience is on the edge of their seats, and it's also a window into what it takes to be a dancer — that ever-alert sensitivity to changes in the rhythm and the beat.

Sable Island by Vancouver-based, French-born Serge Bennathan premiered in Halifax in 2015, set to music by Quebec composer Bertrand Chénier. With a population of five, plus 500 feral horses and 50,000 seals, Sable Island is a 40-kilometre ribbon of sand off the coast of Nova Scotia that's only 1.5 kilometres wide and 28 metres high at its highest point. The island is fragile and held together by marram grass and low growing shrubs. Buffeted by ferocious winds and waves, it never stops changing shape.

Left: Rhonda Baker with the sculpture *Mobile* by John Little in Mocean Dance's *Burnwater*
Photo: Holly Crooks

Right: D'arcy Gray and Jacinte Armstrong in Mocean Dance's *Burnwater*
Photo: Holly Crooks

In this work, five dancers embody the fabled island's mystery and isolation, creating wind, stormy waves, shifting dunes and the wild grace of Sable Island's horses. One section of the work brings Haitian rhythms and imagery as an imagined current that moves north from the Caribbean and washes over the island like a shape-shifting fog. There is a subtle acknowledgement of Nova Scotia's old commercial ties to Caribbean sugar plantations: merchants and bankers grown wealthy selling salt cod to feed slaves, and bringing salt and rum north to Canada and New England.

The intensive creation period with Bennathan was transformative for both Coffin and Chui. Coffin explains that, "After a challenging two years of work on my master's degree, *Sable Island* required me to use myself in ways that were more primal, more intuitive and more fully embodied." On a personal level, Coffin adds, "In the studio, my role as co-artistic director was less important than my role as a dancer in a tight ensemble. Serge's metaphor of surviving a shipwreck brought us closer together as artists and as women deeply connected to our sense of place. During the creation process, I came back to Mocean Dance as a dancer."

For Chui, "In *Sable Island*, Serge gave us so many layers of imagery to work with and we always went as far and as deep with the movement as we could. At one point, I asked him if we had gone too far and he said there is no such thing. Over the course of the performance, I felt transformed from domesticated to wild, just like the horses of Sable Island!"



Left: Sara Coffin
Photo: Joshua Sugiyama

Below: Suzanne Chui
Photo: Michelle Doucette



We are always in motion; our blood flows, our lungs expand and contract, and our hearts beat like a drum keeping time. All around us the world is in motion; leaves flutter, waves roll and crash, cars zip by. Inside of this wonderful life-song, our minds and spirits swirl, connecting us to our inner and outer worlds and to each other. Dance is inside and all around us; all we have to do is open to it.

— Suzanne Chui

Excerpt from Chui's International Dance Day Message 2016, commissioned by the Canadian Dance Assembly

Finally, *Body Abandoned*, choreographed by Coffin and developed at Smith College's department of dance as part of her thesis requirements, illustrates Mocean Dance's ability to tackle large social issues. A striking multimedia performance for three dancers, *Body Abandoned* examines the painful disconnect between body and mind in the digital era. Coffin brought her company dancers to Northampton as artists-in-residence to create and perform the piece; this partnership between a professional touring company and Smith College was a first for both, a collaboration across disciplines and across theatrical and academic boundaries.

While performing locally and touring nationally (*Sable Island* was in Ottawa at the Canada Dance Festival in June) are two main concerns of any professional dance company, Mocean Dance also has a strong mandate to serve the needs of regional artists, a commitment expressed in a series of creation labs and teaching initiatives. The first is the CLEaR Forum (Choreographic Lab, Exploration and Research Forum), a weeklong intensive residency for mid-career choreographers developed by Coffin in partnership with the Ross Creek Centre for the Arts in Canning, Nova Scotia.

CLEaR matches choreographers with dancers and mentors in an open environment without the pressure of presentation. Mocean also created a mentoring program for emerging artists, EMERGE, which offers paid apprenticeship and understudy roles.

The energy and vision of its co-artistic directors keep Mocean Dance rooted in the essence of place as well as decisively moving it off this dance island and out into deep water. Thinking about the number and diversity of the company's projects and the dancers' admirable commitment to art-centered experience, the extended metaphor of marram grass comes to mind.

Marram grass is that spiky grass that catches at your legs as you walk over the dunes and down to the beach. In a strong wind, the grasses trace wild arcs and giddy abstract forms in the loose sand. As tough and resilient as marram grass, Mocean Dance has deep roots that have woven a thick web that connects across disciplines with other local artists. At the head of its current incarnation, Chui and Coffin continue to build and support a tenacious arts community in Halifax. ^{or}