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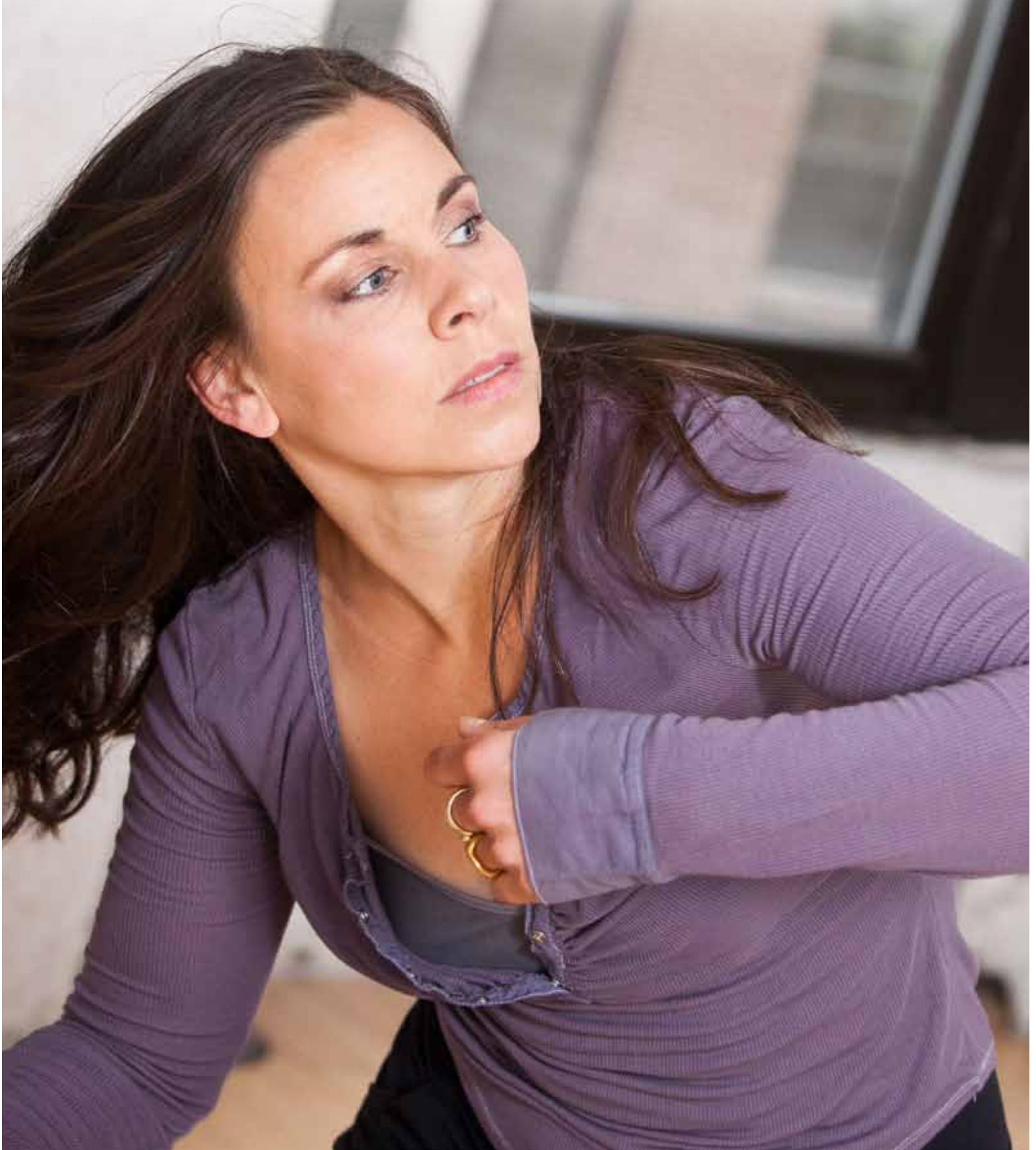
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A GLANCE



KT NIEHOFF

Making Space for Dance in Seattle

RELUCTANT



VISIONARY

KT NIEHOFF WANTED TO DANCE IN SEATTLE, BUT FIRST SHE HAD TO MAKE A DANCE SPACE.

BY MARCIE SILLMAN

IT'S 7:45 ON A MONDAY EVENING at Seattle's Velocity Dance Center. Beginning ballet class is over, and as the students swap dance slippers for street shoes, the doors to the studio swing open. The next class—intermediate modern—is eager to warm up. The ballet students head out into the foyer, lingering to chat or leaf through the handbills strewn on a wooden table. The flyers advertise everything from upcoming shows to used bicycles for sale.

This kind of dance hub is relatively new in Seattle. In the early 1990s, grunge drew aspiring musicians to the city, but dance? Not so much. Pacific Northwest Ballet had a respected school, but there were few resources for contemporary dancers. When KT Niehoff and her friend Michele Miller arrived from New York in 1992 to join the Pat Graney Company, they discovered if they wanted a dance scene, they'd have to help grow it.

The result, Velocity Dance Center, now serves as a de facto clubhouse for Seattle's contemporary dance

community. Fresh graduates from Cornish College of the Arts (Merce Cunningham's alma mater) and other schools across the country mop floors and work administratively in exchange for class fees. They rub shoulders with new arrivals to Seattle, who've come to audition for the many choreographers who call this studio home. And hundreds of people with no professional dance aspirations come to Velocity every month, simply to experience the joy of movement.

Not only did Niehoff and Miller not plan to run a dance studio, Niehoff—now an accomplished choreographer, teacher and artistic director of Lingo Productions—didn't set out to be a dancer. Her degree from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts is in theater. One day she dropped in at Dance Space (now Dance New Amsterdam) in New York's NoHo district, and, on a whim, decided to take a class. "I couldn't even touch my shins," she says, but she threw herself into dance, studying for hours each day.

Photo by Matthew Murphy



Michele Miller (pictured above) and Nierhoff started Velocity (current location shown at right) with a daily class for professionals.

Dance touched her emotionally in a way that acting did not. And the more she studied, the more confident she felt. It was only two years after that first dance class that she moved to Seattle. She remembers sitting in a parking lot, after touring the city's few dance spaces, wondering if she and Miller had made a huge mistake leaving New York.

The two decided to offer a daily professional class, based on what Nierhoff had learned from her mentor, Joy Kellman. Kellman, now on the NYU faculty, had danced with Bella Lewitzky, Daniel Nagrin and Arthur Aviles, among others. But teaching Kellman's technique, Nierhoff admits, was crazy. "I was barely a dancer, let alone a dance teacher." Nevertheless, the class attracted a loyal following.

By 1996, they were ready for the next step: opening a dance center. The early Velocity Dance Center was strictly a DIY operation, with no major donors, no board of directors. The women approached the owners of Seattle's Oddfellows Hall. A theater company

had set up shop there, and the owners were interested in bringing in other arts groups. Nierhoff and Miller asked to rent the building's West Hall, a huge room with high ceilings and a worn linoleum floor. They scraped together \$3,600 for first and last month's rent and signed a lease.

They invited a cadre of colleagues to teach at their new center. Before they could offer the first class, though, the women marshalled Seattle's dance community to rip up the linoleum that was firmly stapled to the maple floor. They finished the project just hours before Velocity Dance Center opened for business.

They decided that each teacher would pay a set fee to rent the room. The teacher would keep the money he or she charged the students. If, at the end of every month, Nierhoff and Miller brought in more than the rent, the two split the profits. If they took in less, they'd pay the difference from their own pockets. "It's a good model," Nierhoff says, because it's entrepreneurial for the

Velocity Dance Center by the Numbers

- Founded in 1996
- Annual budget: \$458,000, three full-time staff plus one grant-funded position
- 25 percent of income is from classes and workshops. The balance comes from studio rentals and public events, grant money and private philanthropy.
- 38 classes/week, 2,000 per year, serving 5,300 individuals. Faculty roster of 29 professional artists. Classes are offered seven days a week, morning through evening.
- Three dance studios, one of which can be transformed into an intimate theater. Two renovated restrooms with mirrors serve as changing rooms. The building lease is shared with a sushi restaurant. The two businesses split utilities.

Photos by (clockwise from left) Tim Summers, Britt Karhoff and Joseph Lambert, courtesy of Velocity Dance Center



Niehoff's striking performance art allows audiences to step into new worlds.



KT's Creations

KT Niehoff feels uncomfortable calling herself exclusively a choreographer—and rightly so. The term doesn't even begin to describe work she creates under Lingo Productions, where her diverse training has informed raw dance theater. "I'm an event

maker, party planner, mess maker. I make immersive experiences," she says.

Lingo's dancers don't just move. They study, sing, improvise and act. It's Niehoff's fascination with the audience-performer relationship that makes her multidisciplinary approach effective. Sometimes, accessibility and experiment drive a project. In *The Lift* (2007), company members pushed passersby up one of Seattle's steepest hills to test the concept of anonymous trust. Often, she's focused on creating a new world. Her fictional short film, *Parts Don't Work* (2011), which was shown at American Dance Festival in July, follows a go-go-booted gang of caricature-like women through Seattle's eerie Fun Forest Amusement Park.

Niehoff's newest project, *Collision Theory*, is funded by the MAP Fund, which is supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellow Foundation. She'll release portions over 16 months, with a full premier in October 2013. The mix of film, fashion, music, visual art and dance at Seattle's ACT Theatre will allow audiences to venture through hallways and back rooms for a truly site-specific experience. "I got so tired of doing work on the stage," she explains. "You perform and then it's over and you go out to dinner. I wanted a connection." —Kristin Schwab

teachers. "Sometimes you have to pay to teach, but it's great if you develop a following because the majority of income comes back to you."

But by 2000, it was clear the Dance Center wasn't making money for the founders. Niehoff and Miller recruited a small board of directors, and Velocity reincorporated as a 501(c)(3), with an expanded annual budget. Between 1997 and 2002, the organization grew to offer classes ranging from beginning ballet to hip hop, a summer intensive workshop, a guest artist series and a touring collaboration with like-minded organizations in San Francisco and Minneapolis to co-produce emerging choreographers. In 2001, Velocity got a \$150,000 grant to buy the equipment needed to convert the big hall into a theater space. Niehoff hung the lights herself. Velocity didn't have much money, but it did have a national identity.

From the beginning, Niehoff and Miller co-directed the center. But in 2005, Miller moved to Asia. Though Niehoff was committed to Velocity, she

was torn between being an administrator and pursuing her choreographic career. She left in 2006. "Velocity needed a full-time leader," she says with a sigh. "It was painful for all of us."

Despite the lingering recession, Velocity Dance Center has thrived. The building was sold and the new owner raised the rent. So Velocity launched an emergency capital campaign and in 2010 set up shop in a renovated garage. Executive director Tonya Lockyer took over the organization a year after the move. Her first order of business was to finish the \$520,000 capital campaign. She sees her job to be creating a "dance portal," with an expanded range of classes for beginners as well as dance professionals. "This isn't KT and Michele's Velocity anymore," she says. "We believe everybody with a desire to dance should have the opportunity." She's also partnered with nearby arts groups to present dance films, panels and roundtable discussions, to expand the organization's community visibility.

Meanwhile, after six years of touring



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10 degrees is Niehoff's personal artistic home.



and teaching, Niehoff has opened another Seattle studio, 10 degrees, tucked into the corner of an old commercial bakery that she and her husband, Kirby Kallas-Lewis, recently leased. Niehoff's studio is adjacent to Kallas-Lewis' craft distillery. They sublease out the other half of the building to two restaurants, covering most of the \$9,000/month rent. The relationship is more than landlord-tenant, though. One of the restaurants would only move into the building if it could lease Niehoff's studio for private dinner parties. Initially, the idea scared her. "I'm chopping off my arm here, giving up a piece of my space," she says.

But the arrangement makes sense. Niehoff's dance company received \$50,000 in grants this year. Potentially it will earn at least that much from restaurant rentals, which will not only fund her choreography but also subsidize dancers

who want to rent 10 degrees for temporary projects. With a steady stream of restaurant rental income, Niehoff can charge dancers very low rates. "I say to people, 'What can you afford? Give the space half of that.' I leave it up to the artist," she says.

Niehoff isn't looking to re-create Velocity at 10 degrees. She wants a personal artistic home, something she says Velocity could never be for her. But she still has a foothold at Velocity Dance Center. Once a week, you'll find her leading the same class she and Miller started teaching almost 20 years ago. She says with a laugh, "It's my Wednesday morning church." **DT**

Marcie Sillman is an award-winning arts reporter based in Seattle. Her radio stories have been featured on NPR, Voice of America and other networks.

Photos by Matthew Murphy (top); by Annie McGhee, courtesy of KT Niehoff (bottom)