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## Hope Comes Home

By Michael Wade Simpson

In an election year, everything begins to sound like a political slogan. Take the name, "Hope Mohr." Is that catchy or what? Of course, that's not fair—except nothing's fair, it's an election year. Hope Mohr the choreographer, however, usually speaks in dance phrases, not sound bites, a different story altogether. Or is it? This is a choreographer with a law degree from Columbia and a history of working on social issues. She has published articles about dance, but also about domestic violence. Her dance career took her to New York, and the companies of Lucinda Childs and Tricia Brown. Two artist-in-residence choreographic commissions at Stanford, more recently, had to do with cancer and traumatic memory. Mohr is clearly not opposed to politics. Her politics just get abstracted.

"I was determined not to make a 'Holocaust piece,'" she said in a recent interview, referring to "Elision," her 2006 piece as Guest Artist at Stanford, inspired by a news clipping she came across, a story about WWII survivors of the Lodz ghetto in Poland, who were brought back decades later to see photographs of themselves which had been unearthed and given to a museum. Many could not look. For Mohr, it was the idea of a physical act of remembering which served as a catalyst for choreography. "I was reading Susan Sontag's 'On the Pain of Others', as well as ethics and psychology books. It's a dancey, dance piece, the most abstract piece on the program," she said. "Still, there is some sense of traumatic memory. Form explodes into movement degeneration over time."

A similar challenge came during the process of making "Under the Skin," (07) another Stanford commission in which she started looking at medical history and imagery, and ended up focusing on woman and cancer. "The compelling nature of someone's story does not make a work of art," she said. "I didn't want to ride on women's stories." Still, movement imagery came from cancer support poetry groups and interviews with health care providers. The dancers even included volunteers from a class Mohr was teaching on movement for breast cancer survivors. "Under the Skin" was also a collaboration with video artist Douglas Rosenberg, whose visual mix included X-Rays and MRIs. "It is not a victim piece, I didn't

make up much movement at all. We let the body speak."

After a childhood at the San Francisco Ballet School, and undergraduate studies at Stanford, New York seemed like home, certainly a place she wasn't expecting to leave very soon. "New York has an ambient energy that is supportive of a rigorous physical pursuit like dance," she said. However, it was a solitary life, living out of a suitcase, constantly touring, and she lasted for eight years. Then, a combination of events, including 9-11 and a 30th birthday, caused Mohr to re-evaluate her priorities and return to San Francisco, where she has since married, and given birth to her first child. "I'm ready to excavate my own voice," said Mohr. "I had a good run as a dancer and but I'm just beginning, starting on a path as a choreographer."

In her San Francisco choreographic debut, Mohr will also present a new piece, "Moments of being," about the act of listening. Exploration began when she was an artist in residence at Jennifer Monson's interdisciplinary laboratory, and improvised around the question "how can you make the act of listening legible?" Sounds that ended up in the latest version of the piece offer Bach's glorious Partita No. 2 in C minor in juxtaposition to environmental sounds. A fascination with Virginia Woolf's novel, "The Waves" played a part in the inspiration for the piece, but over the course of the choreographic process, text was abandoned and narrative reduced to the pure movement that had been discovered around Bach and the sounds of waves, bees, birds and footsteps. "more awake when dreaming," (2006), the oldest piece on the program, was choreographed when Mohr was still living in New York. The trio is performed in silence to a spoken word text. "I was looking at the idea of the personality as a mask," Mohr said. "Pema Chodron (the Buddhist leader and author) said that when you get all worked up, stressed out, crazy in your life, you just drop the story and stick with the energy in your body."

"That's what I was exploring. The dancers never go into the center, they move along the periphery of space. I was using spatial limitation to explore the idea of what was missing. What is center?"

Hope Mohr's concert, "Moments of Being," performs March 14-16 at Dance Mission Theater. (See calendar for details)

*Michael Wade Simpson is editor of cultureculture.net & has written for the San Francisco Chronicle and other publications. He holds an MFA in dance from Smith College, & founded "Small City Dance Project" in Massachusetts.*

*Pictured: Greta Schöenberg & Kyle Marinslaw, photo by Arne Folkedal*