

## The American Dance Guild Honors Murray Louis

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### American Dance Guild Performance Festival

Dance New Amsterdam

September 11 through 14



Peter Kyle in Murray Louis's *Frail Demons*  
Photo: Kanji Takeno

In his heyday as a performer in Alwin Nikolais' company and later with his own group, Murray Louis truly sang the "body electric," but not in Walt Whitman's sense of himself as charging with his soul those he loved and pressed close to. Louis danced as a man electrified by small currents that rippled through one joint and out another. He could seem like a scamp—delighted by the impulses that caused a wrist to flick, a leg to fly up, a shoulder to roll—but also like an explorer in shaky terrain and, even at times, as a person besieged, betrayed, by his body and the magical environments of light created by Nikolais.

Louis was honored at the opening night of the American Dance Guild's Performance Festival 2008. Hale and energetic, with a bit less hair and a bit more bulk than he had 40 years ago, he stood up in his first-row seat to express his delight. He also compared Dance New Amsterdam's unpretentious studio-turned-black-box theater to the Henry Street Playhouse (now the Abrons Art Center), where Nikolais' magical experiments with light, space, and human bodies were spawned. Both spaces, he said, were similar hotbeds for invention.

The Guild was founded in 1956, primarily as a dance teachers' organization, but soon expanded to attract and benefit dancers and choreographers. Its budget may be small, but its current fundraising projects are notable: If you purchase the major-brand products

available through its website ([americandanceguild.org](http://americandanceguild.org)), the association gets a kickback. As it does when you sign up for an American Dance Guild Custom Visa Card (!), and on your every purchase with it.

The 44 choreographers presented over five festival performances ranged from just-starting-out through accomplished mid-career artists to modern-dance luminaries like Louis and Anna Sokolow. (I unfortunately had to miss the evening that honored her, but Jim May, director of the Sokolow Theatre Dance Ensemble, is staging her great 1955 *Rooms* for the José Limón Dance Company, and it'll be on view during the company's Joyce session in December )

The first program featured excerpts from two solos choreographed by Louis. I remember seeing his *Figura* when the wonderful Limón dancer Nina Watt performed it at its 1978 premiere. At DNA, Betsy Fisher, a member of Louis's company in the 1980s, also renders it with wisdom and charm, picking up on the Spanish nuances dictated by the Ernesto Lecuona music. Striking a movement and then melting into it, she regards her own swaying hips with surprise and pleasure. When a man strolls through, she scampers offstage in pursuit. Peter Kyle, also a former Louis dancer, and, like Fisher, director of his own group, has learned Louis's four-part solo, *Frail Demons* (1984). It's an arresting piece, with subtly varying moods underscored by Nikolais' electronic soundscape. Kyle is taller and more stalwart than Louis, but he captures both the softer dynamics and the flippy little impulses excellently. The piece is full of trademark Louis movements: the tiny, tiptoe steps with which he glides as if on ball bearings; the leg that swings like a pendulum; the occasional illusion that an unseen puppeteer is pulling his limbs up by strings. These "demons" aren't vengeful stalkers; they're adventurous creatures who sneak into your house by night to toy with your possessions and pretend to be you.

An absurd fragment of a solo—an excerpt from Yung-li Chen's *The Pursuit of Balloons*—offered the evening's most lightweight moment, with the very engaging performer Christopher Ralph being pulled on atop a teetery little metal cart and then bounding about twisting a balloon into naughty shapes to what sounds like an old Heidelberg drinking song. *Dirge*, by relative newcomer Danielle Russo, takes a darker view of life. The emotions are elusive, and made more so by the presence of two chairs (Alexander Schwartz begins standing on one of them slowly putting on a belt and ends on a differently situated chair removing it). To two of Bach's suites for unaccompanied cello, Schwartz and Joshua Palmer perform with dramatically eloquent athleticism, although I find myself wondering why they are together and what they mean to each other. I don't, however, wonder about the pair in Bill Evans's *Alternating Current*. Here electricity seems to be administering almost constant small shocks, making Don Halquist's head and limbs quiver and jolting Heather Roffe out of the wings and into a sitting position in his arms. Sometimes they're alone, sometimes together, and their white unitards with patches of color tell us they're two of a kind. They don't seem to be agents of their own activities. Evans, who ran his own company (primarily in Seattle) for 30 years, is now a visiting professor-artist at SUNY-Brockport.

Design principles govern *Impromptu* by Claudia Gitelman (a dance writer and, for 24 years, a teacher at the Nikolais/Louis Dance Theatre Lab) and *Traces, Marks*, a New York premiere by Gloria McLean (once a leading dancer in Erick Hawkins's company, now a director of her own group). Both choreographers create several striking images. In *Impromptu*, to Schubert's Piano Impromptu No. 3, Lynn Lesniak Needle, former Nikolais dancer, sits on a small metal drum wearing a long, blood-red gown, and rotating slowly. From time to time, she molds herself into a pose, the final one collapsed, but there's nothing spontaneous or impromptu about what she does. She seems to be a woman recreating familiar positions, now drained of significance. From several rows back, I can't see what McLean is doing on the floor, scrabbling around on a white sheet of paper, while four others—a brusque chorus—jolt around in disunion and semi-harmony. When a video of her working on a similar paper is projected on the back wall, we discover that she's been drawing around her body parts but in a scattershot way, changing positions, guessing at what she's left out. The video is the best part, although I suspect a connection that I can't quite make between the choreographer and her colleagues.

The final piece, *The Way of Five—Fire* (an excerpt from a longer piece by Nai-Ni Chen) draws on Chen's background in Chinese traditional dance and martial arts, although she formed her company in the U.S. in 1988 and modern dance is also part of her heritage. Three women wield large fans, but not always with delicacy. A certain fierceness creeps in via Tan Dun's music and a fiery, slashing combat between one of the women and Noibid Licea excites the crowd.

Some of the pieces on the program reveal the kind of craftsmanship that informs Louis's work but seldom match his powers of invention. Pooh Kaye's 1983 *The River Sticks*, however, began the evening on a very smart note. In making it, Kaye employed considerable skill to shake up the idea of predictable craft. She has been a maverick imp in dance and film dance since the 1970s, and maturity hasn't dimmed her adventurousness. Catherine Kernan's set is a nlayground of slender boards gathered into totterv tunnels and tenees. Kave sets

herself tasks that often misfire. Order and disorder go to war. She adjusts. What? A bunch of short painted sticks that she's manipulated into a fan shape won't conform? She takes one of them and whips it around. Boards falling on her head don't faze her. Intrigued by one, she rubs it against her face (leaving smudges), and gives it a lick. The tunnel she's attempting to crawl through collapses on her. Never mind, two boards make skis. One of the tepees topples when she's nowhere near it, and she's still—with an occasional squeal—trying to gather up all the fallen wood when the lights dim and a hoop rolls across the stage. Lucky she doesn't see it.