

BULLETIN

HSA activists celebrate their "strength, size and attitude" as part of Big Dance

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A dance troupe in Victoria that "celebrates large women's strength, size and attitude" is proving that you don't need to be young and waiflike to participate in the dance world.

"Big Dance," founded by performer and choreographer Lynda Raino, is a group of eight large-sized women. The troupe performs modern dance pieces around the province, and two of the dancers ... Jude Marleau and Susan Richings ... are HSA members.

Marleau is the volunteer program coordinator and a relief counsellor at Victoria Transition House, and Richings is a social worker at Ladysmith Hospital. The two dancers say their repertoire ranges from "outrageous comedy with all of us wearing tutus, to much more serious pieces that really show our abilities as dancers." Their collection of about twelve pieces incorporates dance theatre, ballet and modern dance.

This fall, four television stations ... the Women's Television Network, Vision TV, the Knowledge Network and Saskatchewan Television ... will air a one-hour documentary about Big Dance. Jointly produced by filmmakers Sherry Antonishen of Lost Dog Productions (who also directed) and Hilary Jones-Farrow of May Street Productions, the documentary will feature interviews with the dancers and footage from some of their performances. Exact dates and times have yet to be announced.

Members of Big Dance range in age from 24 to 49. "Most of the dancers in our group are a bit older," explains Marleau. "I think it takes a while for large women to accept their body shape and feel comfortable enough to dance and perform."

In fact, both Marleau and Richings agree that what makes Big Dance extraordinary is that it celebrates the abilities of large women in a medium that traditionally places significant emphasis on thinness. For most women who do not have the typical body shape of a ballerina, the dance world seems like an unwelcoming place. "As a group of women normally shut out of this world, the opportunity we have is just incredible," Marleau says.

Growing up in Prince George, Marleau always wanted to take dance classes but never had the opportunity. As an adult, she didn't feel comfortable joining a regular dance class but her apprehension disappeared when she discovered the members of Big Dance were all shapes and sizes.

Marleau says Big Dance has increased both her confidence and fitness level. -We challenge people's stereotypes ... both in terms of what large people can do and what the dance world looks like."

Richings agrees. She says she didn't feel intimidated when she joined Big Dance because she was in a room full of her peers. -We all appreciate and admire women with full figures," she explains.

-It's a wonderful feeling of cohesion and belonging. When we're together, it's a very special time. We're one unit with a common goal." Richings says the combination of flexibility, strength and art is what makes dancing such a -mood elevator."

-When you think about what we've shared over the past three or four years, it's incredible," she says. -The hard work, the scary stuff • they come from our experiences together."

While she now enjoys the thrill of performing, Richings didn't always feel this way. In fact, during her first year with Big Dance, she didn't perform on stage, fearing she wouldn't know what to do. When she finally took the plunge, Richings says it was -like a duck taking to water."

-There is something magical about being on stage and being recognized," she says. -We've always had very appreciative audiences."

The highlight was their performance at the World Dance Alliance in Vancouver one year ago. Big Dance was the only non-professional dance group to perform at the conference. This year, the troupe has been invited to dance at a conference in Portugal but unfortunately cannot attend due to the cost. In their place, Raino will attend with a video of their performances.

In addition to their involvement in Big Dance, both Marleau and Richings are active members of HSA. Marleau played a key role when HSA organized Victoria Transition House in December 1997 and is currently a member of their bargaining committee. Richings is both chief steward at Ladysmith Hospital and the district representative for the Central Vancouver Island Health Region.

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