

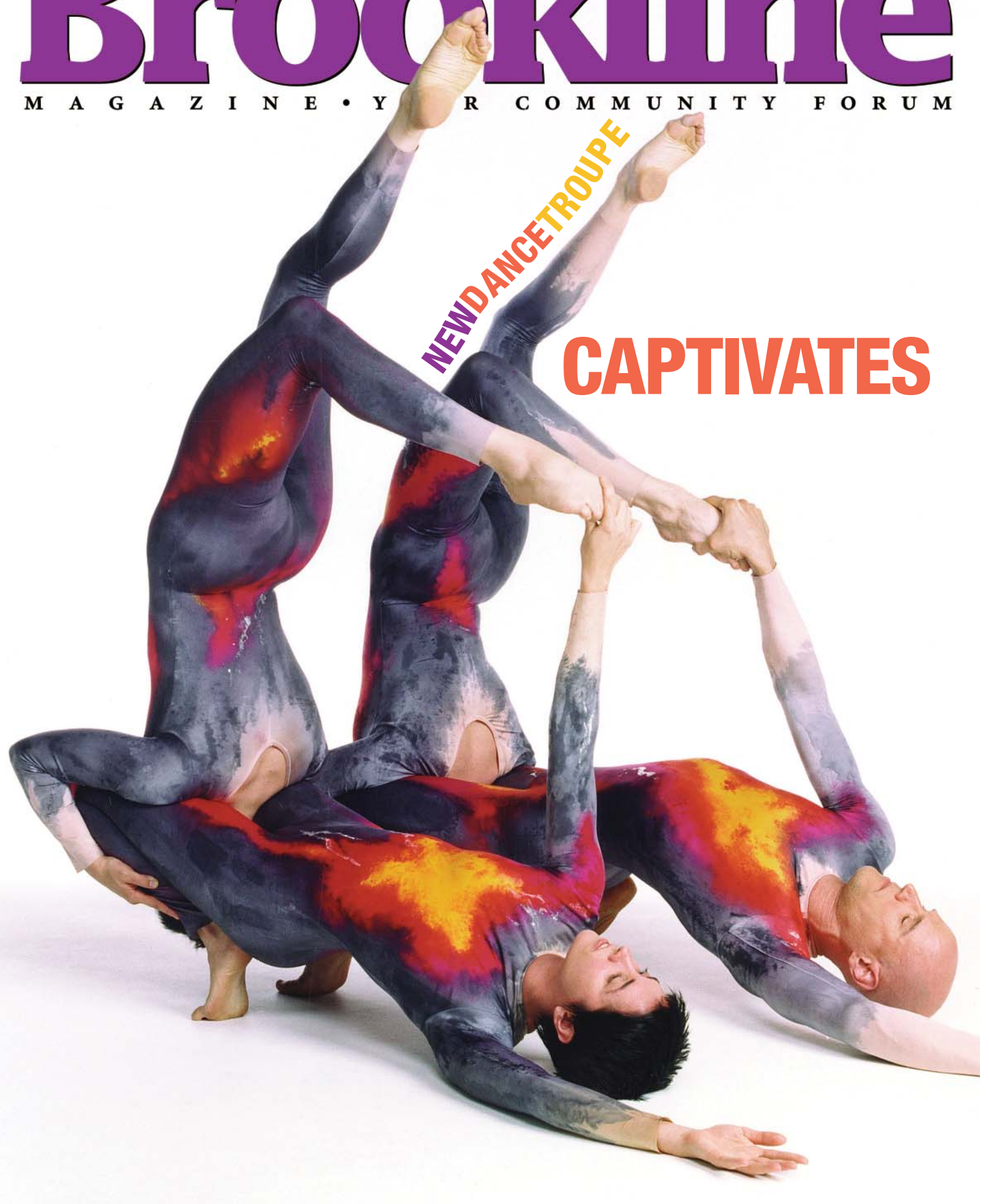
# Brookline

JUNE 2005

M A G A Z I N E • Y O U R C O M M U N I T Y F O R U M

NEW DANCE TROUPE

CAPTIVATES



# IRREVERERE THEA COMPPA

BY REGIS AHERN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER IDE

*Putting the 'fun' back in dance ...*



FALL COLLECTION AND TANGO TANGLE  
[COMBINED] (2002)

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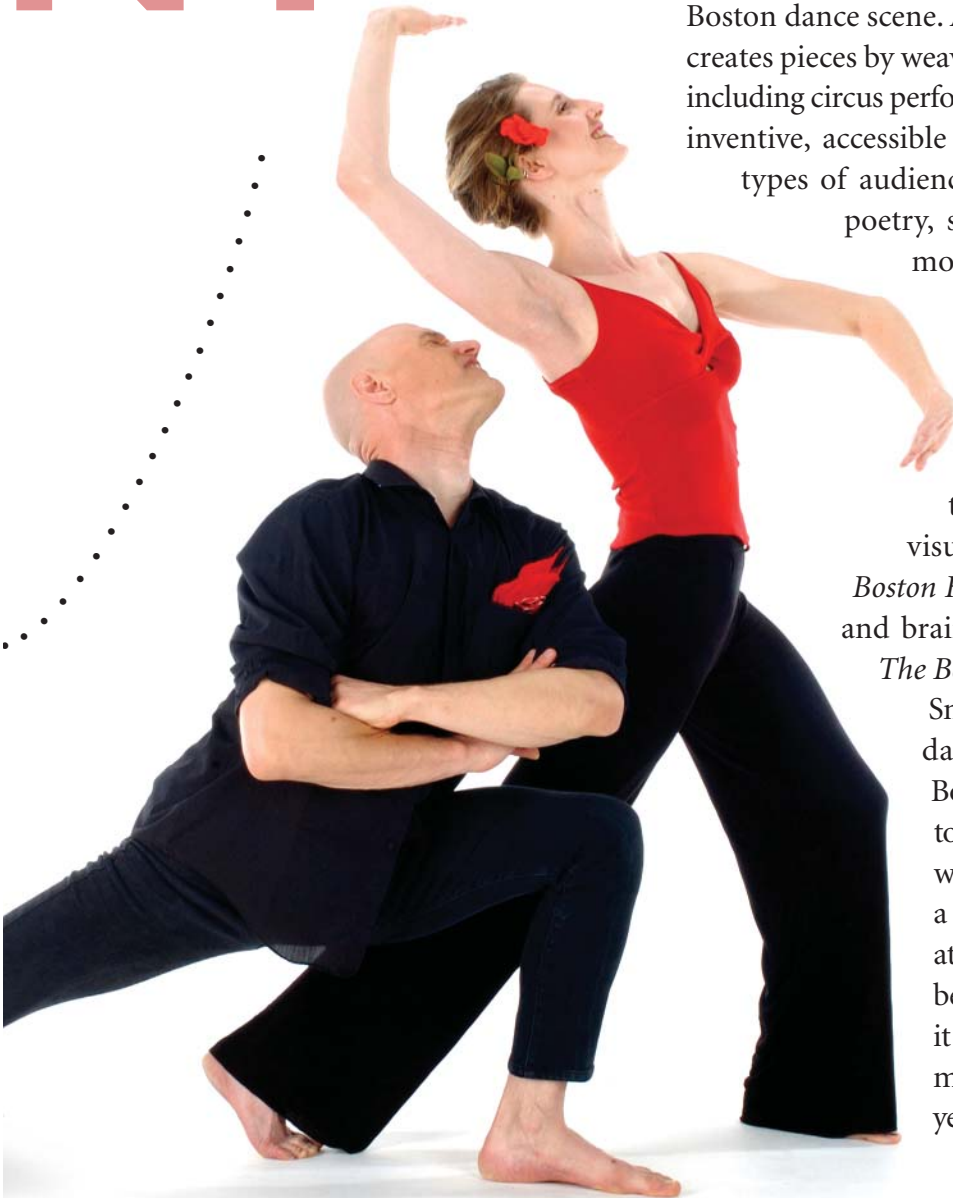
## IRREVERENT MODERN DANCE COMPANY

*Snappy Dance Theatre* is looking for a few good board members. While Snappy needs individuals who bring experience and energy to their board, they are looking for one quality that most other boards are not. "They have to be fun," said Martha Mason, the company's Co-founder and Artistic Director.

That simple sentiment embodies the ideology behind Snappy. Founded in 1996 by Mason and her former dance partner, George Whiteside, and today with key support from Brookline patrons, Snappy infuses fresh air into the Boston dance scene. Along with six other dancers, Mason creates pieces by weaving the backgrounds of the dancers, including circus performing, gymnastics and puppetry, into inventive, accessible performances that appeal to many types of audiences. Mason's combination of dance, poetry, sculpture and comedy is refreshing modern dance.

In spite of Boston's conservative performing arts scene, Snappy is a success. "...thought-provoking, compelling and as masterful as they come...utterly absorbing...some of the most powerful and yes, chillingly visual poetry I have seen," said *The Boston Herald* in a recent review. "Eye candy and brainpower make Snappy dance," raved *The Boston Globe*.

Snappy Dance recently became the first dance company-in-residence at the Boston Center for the Arts (BCA). It has toured nationally and internationally and will soon tour in Russia. Snappy sponsors a community outreach program aimed at grooming today's schoolchildren to become culturally aware audiences. And it plans to become the first full-time modern dance company in over 20 years to operate in Boston.



## COLLABORATIVE MOVEMENT

SNAPPY IS AN ARTISTIC collaboration in every sense of the word. Said Mason, "I had done a lot of dancing for choreographers who were not interested in the ideas that I had... I wanted to create a company where all members have an interest in the artistic outcome and all participate in generating movement and conceptual ideas." The company's dancers, who hail from various movement backgrounds, consequently have a lot to learn from one another. The collaborative process teaches the dancers how to express their artistic ideas to the group. When they dream up something that they truly believe in, they must convince the group of its merit.

As much as she loves the collaborative process, Mason recognizes that it has complications. "It takes people a while to figure it [the col-

laborative process] out, up to a few years, to understand the process, and respect it and appreciate it without a strong ego." Employing the collaborative process is a delicate balancing act for Mason because even as she encourages collaboration, as the Artistic Director, she must make the final aesthetic decisions. Conflicts can arise from having many artistic personalities all trying to express their ideas in one performance.

## A BOARD WITH BACKBONE

THREE VISIBLE MEMBERS OF THE Brookline community have been instrumental in helping Snappy to achieve their goals. Ellen and Rick Grossman, longtime Brookline residents, are on Snappy's board. Joe Zina, the Executive Director of the Coolidge Corner Theatre, who lives in Allston, is also a board member.

Through their combined experience

and expertise, the trio is shaping Snappy's next incarnation. Mason's husband, Jurgen Weiss, is the board's Executive Director.

Ellen Grossman has been the President of the board since 2003. She became involved with the company in 2002 after she and her husband Rick, who is the Chairman of the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University, were approached by a friend who was working on a photography project with Snappy. Intrigued by the work that Mason was doing with her company, Rick Grossman offered to host a fundraiser for Snappy at his furniture store, Adesso, in Boston. After that evening, the Grossmans began contributing to Snappy.

"We fell in love immediately with the company as a whole and with Martha and Jurgen as a couple," said Ellen Grossman. A few months after being introduced to Mason, the Grossmans were invited to join the board. Shortly thereafter, the President stepped down and

..... "It takes people a while to figure it [the collaborative process] out, up to a few years, to understand the process, and respect it and appreciate it without a strong ego." .....



RESURRECTION (2000)

Grossman, who has significant experience in the non-profit world, was asked to take over the position.

Ellen Grossman's interest in dance dates back to her school years. She majored in dance in college. In addition, she is active with small arts organizations. She serves on the board of trustees for the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre, a small theatre on Cape Cod that was founded more than 20 years ago by a local group of playwrights and actors. She is also a trustee of The Society of Arts and Crafts; and served as President for ten years. For six years Grossman was an officer of the American Craft Council in New York.

"When you are involved in a not-for-profit board, it means that you wear a lot of hats. You must build an audience, and raise the profile of the organization in the home market. You get help from personal networks and advocate for the organization when you run into people. We are involved in how to market, grow and support them," said Grossman.

Zina brings a different kind of experience to the board—he danced for the Nilkolais Dance Theatre in New York City in the 1970's. He joined the company at 25, despite not having had much formal training, and later tried to found a dance company. After dancing in New York, he and his partner, Bernard Toale, founded Rugg Road Paper and Prints, a paper-making business which they ran for 18 years. Zina became the Executive Director of the Coolidge Corner Theatre in 1999.

He has contributed to Snappy as someone who empathizes with the struggles that Mason faces. "I identify with the wit and choreography that the company produces. I know how hard it is for a dance company to succeed; I tried to start one myself 25 years ago. I felt that there might be something that I could do," said Zina. With his ability to understand both the artistic and the business side of dance, Zina adds a balanced perspective to the board.

### COMMANDING RESPECT-AND DOLLARS

WITH THE HELP OF HER multifaceted board members, Mason is turning Snappy into art that commands an audience. Their latest accomplishment, the BCA partnership, is one illustration. Although the partnership was just created and is still in development, it promises great opportunities for Snappy. The company will perform its 2005 season, beginning in September, at the Wimberley Theatre, the

BCA's new theatre at the Calderwood Pavilion in Boston's South End. Snappy will assist the BCA with community outreach, most likely through creativity workshops.

The company is planning an eight-city, two-week tour of Russia this summer, provided funding is adequate. Their final stop will be St. Petersburg, where they will perform at the Open Look Festival. It is Mason's first trip there since 1993, when she spent three months working as a choreographer.

Although they will be paid for their performances in Russia, the company must pay for their transportation. To alleviate the financial burden, they have launched a campaign asking people to donate their frequent flier miles. The members of the company are also researching other opportunities to defray the cost, such as participating in dance festivals. "It is more expensive to tour than to do a show in Boston. So we have to make that decision about whether Russia is a reasonable thing to do. It could be a great destination tour, but we have to figure out ways to make money along the way," said Zina.

While their success has been confirmed, the company must still overcome obstacles. In 2002 they launched the campaign *Snappy Go Pro*, which aimed to raise \$500,000 to pay dancers a full-time salary by spring 2004; they have yet to meet that goal. The dancers currently work part-time and earn approximately \$8,000-\$10,000 per year. Jurgen Weiss works for free, often putting in 40-hour weeks. Once the \$500,000 goal is met, the company wants to hire a full-time executive director.

For the dancers, staying with Snappy is partly a labor of love. Because they are only paid an hourly wage and a performance stipend, they must often work two or three additional jobs to make ends meet. Said Mason of the financial strain, "It gets more intense as the pressure rises and we are not able to pay people a full-time salary. The problem is that this has caused people to leave dance entirely to get a full-time job. We lost one dancer last fall, he left for a desk job." Mason initially supported the company herself by working as a Pilates instructor and paying dancers from her own pocket.

Another funding mechanism is The Founders' Circle, for which a minimum \$25,000 pledge is required. Mason is looking for five more people to join the Circle.

"In this day and age, much less in this commonwealth, it is astounding that any small arts organization exists. The very tiny

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 42]



VAGINA (THE DANCE!)  
COMMISSIONED FOR THE  
VAGINA MONOLOGUES (1999)  
PHOTO BY ROGER IDE

[IRREVERENT THEATRE COMPANY  
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21]

budget to support art in the state was slashed by 62 percent a year ago. The only way that anything survives in this town is through private support and generosity," said Ellen Goodman. Added Mason, "It's a hard city to survive in as an artist. In terms of public funding, we rank pretty low and in terms of private funding, we rank almost last in the entire country. When people do give to the arts, they give to the Big Three-The Boston Ballet, The Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Fine Arts. They don't give to emerging companies."

### PUTTING THE FUN IN FUNDRAISING

Despite the paucity of arts funding in the state, Mason is committed to staying here, so she is finding creative ways to fund her company. One strategy she employs is encouraging feedback from the audience so that they feel interested and invested.

For example, Snappy held two performances of work in progress in May, with performances of the completed work scheduled for September. Mason is doing this so that the audience can experience the evolution of a dance-the audience will have the opportunity to comment on the May performances and see the finished product in September.

Mason also put together a group of donors who acted as co-commissioners for

the piece. They witnessed the evolution of the dance from by attending the rehearsals, asking questions and giving input. They also got to choose the dance's name. At the end of the process, the co-commissioners were invited to attend the public performance. Through this hands-on support, Mason is gradually building a relationship between Snappy and the public. "I am really trying to cultivate a deeper interest from the audience, so that they feel

like they can partly own Snappy, like the Red Sox," she said.

Snappy also offers a variety of options for schools that are interested in introducing their students to modern dance. The programs, focusing on creativity, trust, and critical responses to performances, range from daylong activities to dancers-in-residence visiting the school. "The feedback that we get from teachers is that we are the best thing that has ever come to their school," said Mason. While she focuses on introducing the students to modern dance, she also aims to change their idea of the typical female dancer. "We expose them to an atypical form of dance, so we change the idea of dance. Our women are strong, we are comedians. The [traditional] idea of female dancers is frail and beautiful."

Snappy is led by people who have global, local, long-term and short-term visions. From their local performances of works in progress to dance festivals in Russia, Snappy is carefully building a fan base around the world. Through the combined visions of the seasoned performers, directors and trustees, Boston should finally get to experience its first full-time modern dance company in 20 years.

While it may seem that the inspiration for such a creative dance company came from a lifelong vision, the origins are much simpler. "I got bored with only seeing serious modern dance. There is a danger of taking yourself too seriously," said Mason. ▲