



Niagara Falling: An Aerial Look at Urban Decline

By Emmaly Wiederholt

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WHAT DO SAN FRANCISCO AND THE TOWN of Niagara Falls have in common? Not much. Located on opposite sides of the country with contrasting population sizes, climates, cultures, and demographics, there are more obvious differences than similarities. However this coming September 26-29 San Francisco may realize it has more in common with Niagara Falls than it thinks, as Flyaway Productions presents *Niagara Falling* in conjunction with video artists David and Hi-Jin Hodge. Presented as part of Dancers' Group's ONSITE series, a program designed to bring dance to the general public through free, highly accessible site-specific dance, Flyaway Productions' dancers will be soaring up the west side of the Renoir Hotel on 7th Street and Market in *Niagara Falling*.

David and Hi-Jin Hodge hail from Niagara Falls, the noted tourist destination that has in recent decades experienced extreme urban decay. With abandoned homes, shuttered storefronts, vacant lots, rampant unemployment, and chemical seepage, the township of Niagara Falls has received much attention in the past few years for its increasingly dire state. The parallels between San Francisco and Niagara Falls become more obvious to anyone who has ever had the luxury of strolling through the 7th Street and Market intersection: both could use a pick me up.

"My inspiration is the economic collapse we are currently living through. I want to find a way to touch my own fear and frustration at how our cities are failing, who is at fault in the macro political economy, and also how people are fighting for repair and for justice in urban areas," says Jo Kreiter, artistic director of Flyaway Productions.

Niagara Falling is an artistic response to the economic degradation of our current recession. I am furious about tax cuts to millionaires, inaccessible healthcare, and houses lost to bank greed. With *Niagara Falling* I am choosing the artistic tools I've cultivated over the last 25 years to harness my outrage into something useful. I want to bring an artistic lens to the growing gaps between American wealth and deprivation and to cultivate an artistic response to economic degradation via a national story. Niagara Falls started its decline with the Love Canal tragedy in the mid 1970's, while San Francisco is tumbling slowly away from its own grandeur. By focusing on these two cities, I hope to make the strongest case possible for the need to act now to reverse a national underinvestment in public infrastructure and community health."

The piece comes at a time when economics is at the forefront of many people's minds. But *Niagara Falling* goes deeper than money or the lack thereof. *Niagara Falling* tackles the idea of dignity; the right of a people and a place to exist with dignity, a theme often lacking in the traditional poverty narrative. Kreiter and her team of artists have sought to keep the integrity of the victims of urban decline alive



through extensive interviews from residents of San Francisco's central Market area. This includes the Tenderloin neighborhood north of Market and the 6th Street corridor to its south. From Big Face, a homeless resident of 6th Street, who detailed the dour "dominion of 6th Street", to Civil Rights Attorney Bryan Stevenson's assertion that "the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice," the piece becomes a collection of viewpoints and perspectives, exalting the personal histories in what is happening to our cities and towns in this era of financial crisis.

The artistic scope of *Niagara Falling* is impressive. The Hodge's video components will be projected from the balcony of the Art Institute, 80 feet from the Renoir building performance wall. Rigging designer Karl Gillick has designed a site-specific rigging plan for the Renoir Hotel's roof that will facilitate the use of chain hoists for the dancers. These industrial chain hoists haul the dancers up the side of the Renoir Hotel to simulate swimming against the force of the Falls and the Pacific Ocean's massive swells. Dancers include Jennifer Chien, Caity Beard, Sandia Langlois, SAM Lucky, and Michelle Wong as well as Marina Fukushima in the film projections. Award-winning composers Carla Kihlstedt and Matthias Bossi have created an original composition to create a complimentary soundscape to the visual scenery. Kreiter spoke of her artistic goals: "The oral history process has been central to my choreography, but so far has been confined to sound. Having worked on four projects with tape-recorded and digitally

recorded voice, I wanted to expand my visual and documentary palette to include film so that my choreographic language could expand as well. I look forward to the confluence of filmed images with the dancers'



physicality as their bodies are launched up a building via hoists and pulleys. The suspended apparatus I chose for this piece (steel framed life jackets and the shell of a life boat) will provide me with provocative challenges for movement invention, timing, and spacing as I fully integrate the choreography with the visual content of the film on a concrete 'screen' that is about 30 feet high by 50 feet wide. The piece integrates documentary style oral history interviews, suspended dancing with props/sets designed to invoke images of rescue, collaged film

images, and some experimental film angles. The dance elements are designed to bring real time humanity to the project, as well as a sense of risk. We are trying to include both documentary and abstracted artistic elements, so that fantasy and reality create the narrative for the whole."

This inspiring coming-together of artists and mediums does more than wow with its awing visual effects; it educates, inspires, and informs the route we must take if we want to solve urban decline. Gentrification has become an increasingly heated topic in recent years as it often displaces the very people most in need of aid. By highlighting the voices of the homeless and poor and by presenting the piece in the heart of the very district of decay, *Niagara Falling* doesn't advise opening more chic shops and restaurants as the answer to urban degradation. It speaks to something much deeper than throwing money at the lack of money, because what is really missing is not lack of money but lack of care and foresight from the leaders we entrusted. This repeatedly plays out on the local, state, and national level. "Niagara Falling" is not only a social piece but a political piece as well. By spotlighting two communities that are the victims of ongoing greed and corruption, *Niagara Falling* demonstrates the outward consequences of social injustice, avarice, apathy, and pure carelessness. It depicts a broken political and social system in need of evaluation and renewal.

Niagara Falling is performed September 26-29 at 8:30pm and then again at 9:30pm. It is not to be missed, as it serves to remind us of what's often swept under the rug and hidden in the closet. It's free, and it provides the opportunity to take in the grandeur of a historic landmark amongst a community that needs our solidarity more than ever. May you take the message and compassion of *Niagara Falling* home with you and into your daily life. Perhaps if our leaders can't make a positive difference we can begin to ourselves. It can begin with *Niagara Falling*.

Emmaly Wiederholt moved to the Bay Area in 2008 to study under Summer Lee Rhatigan at the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance. She currently dances with Malinda LaVelle's Project Thrust and writes about dance for the San Francisco Examiner and for stanceandance.com

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