Biography

As artistic director of advanced beginner group, David Neumann’s work has been presented in New York at PS 122, Dance Theater Workshop, Central Park SummerStage (where he collaborated with John Giorno), Celebrate Brooklyn, Symphony Space (where he collaborated with Laurie Anderson), The Whitney Museum and The Kitchen. Advanced Beginner Group has also been presented nationally at the Walker Art Center and MASS MoCA, among others.

David Neumann has been a featured dancer in the works of Susan Marshall, Jane Comfort, Sally Silvers, Big Dance Theater, and the late club legend Willi Ninja, among others. He was a member of Doug Varone and Dancers, and an eight-year original member and collaborator with the Doug Elkins Dance Company, with whom he toured nationally and internationally.

He continues to perform and choreograph for theater, opera and film working with such directors as: Hal Hartley, Laurie Anderson, Robert Woodruff, Lee Breuer, Peter Sellars, JoAnn Akalaitis, Chris Bayes, Mark Wing-Davey, Daniel Sullivan, Les Waters and Molly Smith. He’s created creature movement for the film ‘I Am Legend’ with Will Smith, performed in ‘Beckett Shorts’ with Mikhail Baryshnikov at New York Theater Workshop, and choreographed Le Nozze di Figaro for the St. Polten Opera in Austria. He has also been commissioned twice to create duets for he and Baryshnikov to perform.

Neumann’s currently a professor of Theater at Sarah Lawrence College and a guest lecturer at the Yale School of Drama.

Mission Statement

David Neumann/ advanced beginner group believes in making multi-disciplinary dances from scratch bringing to gesture, word and proximity a delighted embrace of our contradictory lives. Neumann utilizes experimental dance-making approaches with a humorous outlook and an inclusive layering of disciplines to create complex, thought-provoking dance works that push the form. Neumann’s explorations challenge his assumptions on ‘how to make a dance’ giving each work a distinct geography with which the viewers can examine their own assumptions. These approaches are born of the belief that there is always something more to think and feel, always another mind to engage in surprising ways, always a valuable effort in trying to bend the habitual gestures around new shapes.
PRESS QUOTES

feedforward (2008)
(Photo: Richard Termine)

“By now the line on Mr. Neumann is well established: He is the smart joker of dance. What’s not said as often is how deeply felt and deeply moving his work can be.”
NY TIMES

“feedforward is no sneering gloss on dumb jocks; it’s an elegant, spatially adept meditation from someone who knows well the power and the absurdities of sport, as well as the primal nature of its connection to an unmistakably American sense of the world. And yes, relax, it’s wildly funny…” NY TIMES

“While many choreographers have approached the athleticism these disparate physical activities share, David Neumann and his advanced beginner group have created an ingenious fragmented amalgam, a mash up of dance and stadium games…” THE VILLAGER

“Who knows why some movements are heartbreaking, others hilarious? Who knows how Mr. Neumann manages to pinpoint each? And how on earth did he realize that having four onstage trombonists augment a score by Eve Beglarian was the only possible way to go? Mysteries, all — miraculous ones.” NY TIMES

“And that’s just for starters in David Neumann’s feedforward, which blends the tropes of tennis, basketball, baseball and ballet to come up with the wildest performance to grace a New York stage this year. It’s funny and sad, gross and lyrical…Neumann’s been warming up for this one his entire working life…and he’s got a winner.” NY METRO

“If there is an argument in the dance world that pits those who believe dance need only to be aesthetically beautiful in a simple, if contemporary manner against those who desire a more intelligent investigation of movement as art, David Neumann’s feedforward, a deeply felt meditation on athletics and the human condition now in its second of a two week run at Dance Theater Workshop, will provide the latter group with solid evidence that theirs is not only the high road, but it is a road no less beautiful, and rife with meaning.” COUNTER CRITIC
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Dancers balance both order, chaos
By TOM STRINI
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel dance critic
April 15, 2007

David Neumann's way of framing human movement - glorious or mundane, graceful or clunky - reveals its beauty and fascination. For example: Two dancers in Neumann's Advanced Beginner Group, at Alverno College on Saturday night, burst ahead as if from starting blocks. Still in unison and tilted forward from their momentum, they took their second step in slow motion, then landed awkwardly, in a noisy thumping of feet. In one phrase, they put three things in sharp relief and gave us the pleasure of comparing them. They engaged the body as much as the eye. You could feel the changing weight and thrust. That was but one moment in "tough, the tough," the intellectually ambitious and often very funny piece that filled the second half. It opened wry and self-referential, with Neumann responding to a Godlike voice-over: "Steve moves to the right, then takes a step ahead. Oh, Steve's lost something, he's looking for it. Maybe he just thinks he's lost something. He's not sure." Neumann mimed even the subtleties of uncertainty legibly and naturally. Sometimes he was a little ahead or behind the voice-over; you had to be awake to spot the relations.

As the other five dancers got into the act, the narrative faded in favor of bits of music and electronic noises. The ensemble's traffic patterns and behavior seemed chaotic at first. (Is he pouring coffee? Is she washing her face?) But the dancers' Zen-like clarity of action made the material arresting. Repetition led to pattern and rhythm, and expanded scale made it easier to see everyday moves as dance. But "tough, the tough" does not so much make order from chaos as establish a tantalizing balance between order and chaos. Just when you think you have it figured out, something absurd makes you laugh - the stage manager blows a whistle, say, and stops the show. The confetti and balloons failed to fall! Just when you think all this is nuts, confetti turns out to have structural significance.

"Hit the Deck," another ensemble piece, showed the same thinking as "tough, the tough," but with more physical comedy, to funny tangos, waltzes and fox-trots by Stravinsky (of all people).

Neumann is an extraordinary presence - lithe and athletic, clear and forceful, utterly unpretentious. His opening, in-place solo, to Steve Reich's "It's Gonna Rain," was a tour de force of stamina and clarity of gesture, from the manic shaking of the head through the electric waves that rippled from head to toe.

Neumann's dances amaze occasionally, amuse often, and constantly lead us to perceive more attentively and thoroughly. That is, they do the most important thing that dances can do. Neumann and his Advanced Beginners will return to Alverno next season with a new piece. Do pay attention.
by Deborah Jowitt
April 26th, 2005

If David Neumann is everyman, then everyman is one smart dude of a choreographer. Alone onstage near the beginning of his tough, the tough, he responds with subtle comedic timing to such words as "It will come down to this: Mankind is standing around." Will Eno's text, recited by DJ Mendel's disembodied voice, dogs Neumann a/k/a Steve as he drops something and peers down ("See Steven looking everywhere").

This guy is not alone in his humdrum life. Did I say humdrum? Outfitted in black jumpsuits with touches of red, Kimiye Corwin, Taryn Griggs, Karinne Keithley, Erin Wilson, Chris Yon, and Neumann deconstruct what might be each one's any old day with terrific flair, while Hal Hartley's score peppers them with suitably ironic sounds and music. Their activities include dancing casually but elegantly performed; small, precise pantomimes; and wacky "jobs." Corwin whistles while throwing her stiff arms vigorously around; pushing her bangs up becomes a compulsive act. Meetings aren't always cordial. Griggs lays Yon out and sits on him; they fight like tots, wincing and slapping at the air between them. Corwin touches Wilson's shoulder and is rebuffed; their struggle morphs into a rapid pattern that ends the dance as a small amount of sparkling glitter falls.

Yon is the patsy, Buster Keaton-droll as he toddles on and off, peeking at the women from behind pillars. In a routine worthy of the Marx Brothers, he and Neumann march fiercely toward each other and—oops!—pass on by, as they try to figure out which territory is whose to claim. Their duet also includes goofy maneuvers and silly runs. At one point unseen people up on the balcony race about heavy-footed and rain marbles onto the dance floor; Yon can't keep up with what are supposed to be his sound effects. Neumann has arranged the not-so-mundane material with a skilled eye for surprising contrasts and rhythmic kick. As the beguiling dancers gallop and stumble through their activities, individuality beats routine to a standstill.
Neumann Hits His Target at the Whitney

By Maura Nguyen Donohue
Copyright 2002 Maura Nguyen Donohue

NEW YORK -- Last Wednesday, Boo Froebel, producer for Performance on 42nd St. at the Whitney Museum, concluded her hip, sharp "Loose Lips" series by presenting a favorite modern day sharp shooter, David Neumann. It seems entirely appropriate to view Neumann at the Whitney, as I often think of his work as deeply American. "Loose Lips" was a series of four events featuring artists who play with the idea and form of narrative.

Neumann presented "Sentence," a work-in-progress to premiere at PS 122 next February, and "Oyinbo," a work that premiered at PS 122. "Sentence" is loosely based on Donald Barthelme's Joycean prose/poem (an eight-page sentence.) In and around the Whitney's atrium, "Sentence" became in moments a wild and wily romp through interactive pedestrian performance and at other times clever, well executed site-specific choreography. Andrew Dinwiddie's security guard is calmly surrounded by track suit clad dancers. We gaze beyond the subtle shifts of Erin Wilson and Neumann to see a pink, velour clad Orlando Pabatoy riding his bicycle. Adrienne Truscott leads a group of tourists outside, a few other people stop to look through the glass at us and we begin to see narratives in every passerby.

Neumann weaves together fleeting dances, momentary encounters and brief passages of spoken word written by Will Eno to unravel his ephemeral world. Here nothing fits together quite naturally and nothing ends finite. Truscott leads her group into the atrium, discovering the dance already in progress. Her performance is fully successful as she bridges the outer and inner worlds with poetic commentary on the action of the dancers. She is both cliched cruise director and thoughtful connoisseur as she scolds her uninterested, exiting wards. Here we witness a beautiful moment of performance supported wittily with a self-conscious commentary on itself.

The second half of the program included the engrossing "Oyinbo." Previously, Neumann's work was most engaging when he was dancing in it. With "Oyinbo" he achieved an ensemble work full of characters rich beyond just his singular charm. I missed it when it premiered so I can't say comparatively whether this work has deepened with age but it felt settled, familiar and powerfully refined. It wasn't entirely the original cast performing last week so I can't chalk it up to just good casting, though both Charlotte Griffin and Karinne Keithley were exquisite in their brief featured moments. The work maintains a kind of integrity throughout that I wasn't that familiar with in most of Neumann's other group work. Stacey Dawson provided her special brand of lip-synched performance and Steven Rishard provided a solid dose of red-blooded maleness much like his terrific performance as the tour bus driver in Dawson's "Best Western." Ruthie Epstein, Tom O'Connor, Lisa Walter and Erin Wilson rounded out the solid assembly.
Go go go! Right now!

Go to the P.S.122 web site and get tickets to see David Neumann's Sentence. I saw an earlier version of it last summer at the Whitney at Philip Morris (aka Altria) and thought it was one of the best dance/theater works I had seen in a long time. It's fabulous -- definitely a favorite of the season so far. It's also your last chance to see his regular collaborator Stacy Dawson for a while: she's moving to Hollywood. Another reason to go: Adrienne Truscott of Wau Wau Sisters fame. Andy is right - she's stalk-worthy she's so brilliant.

I'm sure James will write about this too, but I wanted to make sure people heard me say, "Go! Buy tickets right now!"
NEW YORK -- Somewhere in David Neumann's journey through the mythically mundane a voice tells us to "get what can be gotten." Fair enough. This is a departure from much of what I have come to expect from this choreographer, who has impeccable comedic timing, proper hip-hop chops and an intimidating list of theatrical collaborators. "Tough, the tough," seen Thursday at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, isn't a stunning display of virtuosic dancing or a hilarious romp (or even a vague, unrealized group work, like some past Neumann efforts). Playwright Will Eno's text encourages us to appreciate the magnificence of mankind just standing around. Neumann's choreography essentially does the same. But "tough, the tough" is hardly the minimalist borefest this premise implies. Instead Neumann has woven a meditation on commonplace routine into a poem rife with subtle shifts, witty inflections and haunting beauty.

Dancers Kimiye Corwin, Taryn Griggs, Karinne Keithley, Erin Wilson, Chris Yon and Neumann enter the space dressed in maintenance coveralls given just a slight couture ribboning by designer Miho Nikaido. Appropriate attire for the pedestrian, overlooked, daily chores that the group meanders through. There is an eloquence hidden within the repeated act of making oneself a cup of coffee. Where I had expected my decreasing mobility to have been at odds with viewing a dance I thought was going to be about inertia, I find instead that the OCD that has been rising with my gestational hormone level is overwhelmingly satisfied by the highly task-oriented movement. Amidst the jumble of gestures and mumbling, an occasional arabesque stands out in striking contrast while the dancers perform their duties and travel their routes with a truly urban myopic zeal. As the work progresses the gestures accumulate with a dynamic vigor, though Neumann easily manages the most compelling performance of the evening while barely shrugging.

Yon stalks and skulks behind the church's pillars before an awkwardly overeager burst in the stage proper. He follows with a humorous attempt at casual recovery. He plays his moments with perfect deadpan, suffering at the hands of Taryn Griggs during a Marx Brothers-inspired slap routine, and serves as a fantastic foil to Neumann during an animated duet that has me wondering what a true changing of the guard at the India-Pakistan border really looks like.

The score plays off the sleepy bounce of the church's echoes to greater success than most. (The program includes credits for composer, to Hal Hartley; music, from the Pickpockets; live sound, Daniel Barnidge; and sound design, by Justin Kawashima, Keithley and Jane Shaw.) Rather than fight the difficult acoustics of the church, Neumann
installs a chorus of performers in the balcony to deliver several sound effects. Distant chatter and echoing footsteps help create a delirious hallucinatory ambience. Sound becomes an equal collaborator, allowing me to zone out with an easy gaze on the dance while I imagine a cocktail party in the desert that I'm falling asleep at. For a few moments I train a conscious ear to the sound of the stage manager calling cues mixed with filmmaker Hartley's ethereal contributions to the score. I'm taken out to orbit and just as quickly returned to an appreciation of the choreographic craft at work. The components all work perfectly in tandem, with nothing incidental or overpowered.

Corwin and Wilson end the journey with a duet that wanders its way into struggle and conflict with an engaging bout of grappling. The final poetic image of the women standing static while confetti drops elsewhere strikes first as a clever reference to an earlier voiceover demanding "balloons and then confetti" but leaves us with the bittersweet of an elegy, perhaps for a lost sibling mentioned in the dedication.
Who Plays? Pedestrian Movement, Neumann Style
by M.J. Thompson
March, 2008

Lily Baldwin and Taryn Griggs in Neumann’s feedforward. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

“Pedestrian” movement first flared on the radar in the 1960s in the dances of Judson Dance Theater. Whether walking or getting dressed, hauling mattresses or throwing pitches, Judson artists found in the familiar gesture a neat alternative to the theatricality of dance. But their desire for change was driven as much by the radical political change unfolding around them as by aesthetics. Enter the ordinary, whose tremendous power to serve as expressive shorthand—made possible by the visual familiarity of concrete lived experience—gives it tremendous political wallop.

Of course, the matter of how choreographers have quoted everyday movement—those moves we make habitually, without much consideration, often thought of as purely functional—begins long before the 1960s and continues long after with varying intents. Never, though, is the everyday in dance more important or more visible than in times of political turmoil—or those times when, as Steve Paxton has said, our senses are put on alert by means of some pending threat. Think of Quebecois choreographer Marie Chouinard’s short solo Petite danse sans nom (1980), wherein she walks on stage, drinks a glass of water, pisses into a bucket, and exits. Made during the height of Quebecois nationalism, the dance is a sly wink at control of and over bodies. Think of the gestural universe contained in Bill T. Jones’ Still/Here (1994), which blends modern, ballet, contact and the hand-made moves of the everyday people who attended his Survival Workshops. Made during another reign of fear—the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars—his work remains an elegant meditation on grief, mortality and love in times of crisis.

These days, nowhere is the everyday more in motion than in the work of downtown dance theater artist David Neumann. In feedforward, which ran at Dance Theater Workshop in November, Neumann offered a sharply observed study of play, performed by his superfine company, advanced beginner group. Then, in December, he danced alongside Mikhail Baryshnikov in director Joanne Akalaitis’s evening of short works by Beckett at New York Theatre Workshop. Both events were telling for what they reveal about ordinary movement circa 2008, reminding us that whereas culture is ordinary, as Raymond Williams so persuasively argued in the 1950s, the seeing of culture—not to mention the experience—is more often extraordinary.

In feedforward, Neumann offers up a sustained vision of play, animating the discipline and drive of an athlete’s world, alongside the absolute and arbitrary logic of the sporting event. Structured as a large-scale sporting event, complete with half-time show, the
random and the formal collide as jocks, announcers, cheerleaders and a marching band comprising four trombones offer up invocations both of the solitude of training and the spectacle of play. Here, the everyday lives in the acutely observed movement sequences that lyrically mime the pitcher’s wind-up or the tennis-player’s shuffling ready stance, among other iconic moments in sport. But the pedestrian lives, too, in the rich heterogeneity on view, both in the range of actions performed, and occasionally in their simultaneous or overlapping sequencing. And then there is the company itself, a fearless collection of individuals whose shapes, performance styles, and identities shatter the same old, same old of the dancing body as it is typically marketed today. These folks are like us, they seem to say. But in their expressions—at times realistic, at times coolly post-modern, at times simply hilarious—they are always virtuoso.

Fun is, perhaps, most immediately apparent in Neumann’s work. With its shrewd physical comedy, Neumann has a gift for the gag, and a sparkling levity generally, as when the tension of a serious moment in competition is broken as one player gropes another. Or the when one play-by-play announcer says, “I’ve forgotten what game we’re playing.” But the laughter is only the starting line, a fast track into the work. Sometimes, for instance, it’s awful to be surrounded by laughter, when a sudden shift in mood suggests something way more serious is at stake. As feedforward ends, time slows. In the final scene, Neal Medlyn, playing a pitcher caught in an agonizing bit of performance anxiety, paces the mound. A recorded inner monologue, rendered exquisitely by writer Karinne Keithley, accompanies his action. As a video screen behind Medlyn offers up images of a full moon, the confrontation with the ball stands in for so many other confrontations. If the question all along has been, “What are we playing at and why?” the final moments suggest, rather bleakly, we play for keeps, we play alone.

To say that Neumann foregrounds the everyday is to situate him within a long performance history that includes early Dada experiments in simultaneity and contrast as well as Surrealist appropriations of the accident and the dream. Likewise, he follows the postmodern choreographers of the 1960s, with their interest in various tasks and everyday actions as a remedy to the limits of theatricality and psychology on stage. But whereas the Judson work has often been seen as a kind of readymade, Neumann emphasizes the frame and context of performance—through the theatricality of his dance, with its emphasis on text and image, as well as through the affect of his performers and the effects of humor. When it comes to the pedestrian, he seems to say, who and where you are in the game is everything.

Neumann once explained his love of the everyday as a lesser form of choreography; something to the effect that, were he a better mind, he wouldn’t need to borrow the tropes of everyday life. But I think his attitude is more rolling stone than real: a way to duck the deadening weight of over-explication. Still, there is something telling here about the debased stature of the quotidian; in its messiness and familiarity; and its inevitable link to politics and realism, it tends to be as suspect to vanguards as it is beloved for crowds. Neumann’s roots bridge this divide. He grew up in the avant-garde theater world—his parents are members of revered theater troupe Mabou Mines—and in the urban vernacular, as a part of the hip-hop, trance and club scenes of the 1980s. Born in and of
the mix that is New York City, small wonder his work so consistently takes up the question of the everyday.

Later, in December, I saw Neumann dance for JoAnne Akalaitis’s evening of Beckett shorts set on Baryshnikov. Most thrilling for me were the Act Without Words I and II, wherein Beckett raises the question of how movement makes meaning in ways discrete from language. Baryshnikov was riveting, as much for taking on the material and refusing to dance, as in his handling of the challenges posed by the work for any actor. Whereas Baryshnikov attempted realism—in Act I, for instance, the conveyance of his falls, his turns and his frustration as props appear and disappear from reach—Neumann upstaged him using a style that can only be described as the pedestrian burlesque—familiar actions that are fragmented, as if broken apart and reattached in the way a mime might, but to a lesser extreme. Upstaging, of course, requires a useful dynamic and taken together, their performances offer a witty exposition of the everyday movement on stage, as if to say “It’s ordinary, see?” Whereas the avant-garde has a long history of making the familiar strange, Neumann makes the strangeness of our daily preoccupations familiar. And it is always a performance convention, a choice made by artist, choreographer or director and anchored in questions of mimesis, acting and the magical technique of making the thing recognizable as opposed to strange.

The place of the pedestrian in theater and dance theater reminds us, finally, of the felt intimacy between everyday movement in dance and language. Whether in the miming of stories or in the presentation of familiar body movements as if hieroglyphs; whether in the pantomime of the 19th century story ballet; or in the rejection of narrative announced by Cunningham in his own use of the pedestrian in 1952’s Collage. In all, ordinary movement seems readily legible, counting almost for the words assigned to the actions themselves. But, for Neumann, the everyday is less about precise translations and more the means through which he engages the popular, or what Stuart Hall describes as the closing of distance between artist and audience by means of a “pressure” to be understood. That collectively held and felt “pressure,” is nothing less than the immediacy of everyday life, and the urgency, especially now, of our attempts to make sense of it.
So this was supposed to be a collaborative review with Peggy Cheng examining real performative kung fu, Shaolin-style in comparison with postmodernist kung fu film spoofing. But thanks to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's inept publicity person Peggy and I endured an unfortunate afternoon journey yesterday out to our foreign neighbors so that we could not get in to see the Shaolin Warriors. At least after six years in NYC, I now know where the Path train is. Thankfully, last night's performance at P.S. 122 of Stacy Dawson and David Neumann's revved-up and reworked "Pearl River" proved to be, yet again, a madcap romp through '70s-style kung fu mania. I'd seen their earlier version at Context last winter and found the reworking to be a worthwhile effort that managed to allow the rough and raw energy to triumph still. And yeah, I still laughed at the scatological humor.

Neumann's solo work is phenomenal. His juicy "Dose" and raw "It's Gonna Rain" rank high among my favorite viewed dance moments. He is a truly American choreographer and a pop culture junkie. Whether he's tackling Jackie Chan or Westerns he's a showman, a cartoon, a magician. And it's that magic that let's me check any political sensitivities about the potential issue of a 'yellow-face.' He and Dawson have combined humor and movement to create a joyful theatrical homage to a staple in many of our youths: the kung fu movie.

The campy blend of postmodern dance and fight choreography is exquisite and definitely a style that lends itself to a kind of 'try this at home' inspiration for the audience, or at least those of us who already like to believe we too are kung fu masters. The costumes and props, including red lanterns, a couple horses, interchangeable undies and flying chopsticks enhance the visual storytelling while also providing some funny moments. The off-synch mouthing of words with a bare minimum of physical inflection by the performers works to great comedic effect.

Katie Workum and Tymberly Canale were delightfully mischievous red-headed ghosts most often tormenting a martial arts master and his two dorky assistants. Drag performer Filloyd blessed the stage as a Chinese goddess complete with flying birds and "The Sound of Silence" for soundtrack. The additional cast members get more to do this time around and some of the movement sequences could be enjoyed as stand-alone dances but the brightest moments still occur when Neumann and Dawson are on stage: Sometimes appearing as two guys in
sunglasses, wigs and track suits and other times for hilarious boy-girl duets with Neumann in a black kung fu outfit and NY hat and Dawson in pink Chinese pajamas and metallic blue eyelashes. New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) - award winning Dawson is a well-suited match for two-time Bessie winner Neumann. She is an animated and engaging performer with a great tongue. Their duets are lightening quick exchanges full of razor-sharp wit and skilled performances.

I'm looking forward to seeing these two later this month in Big Dance Theater's "Another Telepathic Thing" at the Performing Garage in NYC. Meanwhile, "Pearl River" continues at P.S. 122 through November 26, with performances Friday and Saturday at 10:30 and Sunday at 8 p.m.
SEE ME, HEAR ME!
David Neumann’s symbioses of sound and body

MJ Thompson

A rock ‘n’ roll production manager with serious ‘tude once told me she’d give up tickets for The Who to see a David Neumann show. That trade speaks volumes about the love generated among those-in-the-know for a dancer/choreographer who, since the early 1990’s, has been making relentlessly smart dance on the New York Downtown scene. And if sound counts when Pete Townsend winds up a guitar, it is equally important at a Neumann concert, in radically different ways. Describing himself as a “closet sound designer,” Neumann’s aesthetic matches a curiosity about vernacular movement with a sustained investigation of sound and the body. “I like to have a choreographic context to start with,” he says. “And usually I go to outside sources, from different kinds of dance movement to instruction books for karate to a recording of a hockey game.” The hockey broadcast turned into ‘Adirondack,’ a piece from the early 90’s that explored the gesture and physicality of this fast-paced contact sport. The karate, meanwhile, took root in this year’s ‘Pearl River,’ a dance-theater odyssey that riffs on Hong Kong action films. Working from martial arts and the extreme physical vocabulary of these films, ‘Pearl River’ rejects cinematic dubbing techniques, even as it questions notions of easy inter-cultural assimilations. For instance, as voices on the soundscape grow increasingly animated, the B-film action heroes on-stage lip-sync clumsily, their mouths unable to tongue the sound of another culture. But when the words stop and the real fight begins, movement becomes virtuosic. Here, dubbing works, but with a difference: the taped sounds of the fight scene elicit precise, high-speed chops and kicks from the dancers who feign body impact, where little to none is actually had. Body as universal language? This is not the same song-and-dance essentialism. Instead, the move Neumann tries to make is towards and understanding of gesture as a way of being as opposed to knowing.

Did I mention this is fun? Part of the trick he’s mastered is to fuse hardcore theory with pure dance joy. In ‘Pearl River,’ it doesn’t always work, at times slipping into parody in the midst of too little dance and under-developed narrative. Last year’s astonishing ‘Oyinbo’ is perhaps a more fully-realized example. Taking the fragile Appalachian culture of the American Southeast as his inspiration, Neumann melts two discrete oral practices (Appalachian hollering and western square dance calling) to create a soundscape out of sampled recordings and spoken worked for the dancers. Here, sonic possibilities morph into high-test choreography. As the show begins, a recorded voice calls out, “How long has it been since you labored in the fields of the Lord? How long has it been since God broke your heart?” When the lights come up, we see dancers...
moving frenetically on the spot, their labored breath work the sole accompaniment. Throughout the dance, sound and gesture overlap and diverge strategically: there are head turns that echo the moves of standing fans which hum white noise on stage; there are botched square dances, when the calling intensifies and leaves dancers unable to keep pace. There is a story about how hollering may be used to find your bearings when lost, only the tape loops, and the accompanying live performance does likewise, and “pretty soon, you find yourself right back where you started.” Attempts at oral communication remain circular, off-target and always terribly witty.

In Neumann’s world, language and the words we speak are rendered suspect. If his postmodern predecessors liberated dance from music, Neumann’s face-off between the two underscores not only how gesture produces sound, but also how gesture might illuminate meaning when words continue to fail. His sustained attention to the gap between lived experience and told experience points to the limits of spoken language and reiterates dance’s potential as a parallel lexicon.
If there is an argument in the dance world that pits those who believe dance need only to be aesthetically beautiful in a simple, if contemporary manner against those who desire a more intelligent investigation of movement as art, David Neumann’s feedward, a deeply felt meditation on athletics and the human condition now in its second of a two week run at Dance Theater Workshop, will provide the latter group with solid evidence that theirs is not only the high road, but it is a road no less beautiful, and rife with meaning.

In David Neumann’s comic approach to dance as theater, he allows vernacular movement–here, physical activity derived from the many incarnations of sport in our culture; movement from players, coaches, referees and commentators—to narrate the passions and dramas of the human experience in a way that, while not being traditionally beautiful like, say, ballet presents the body as a beautiful object, inspires an idiosyncratic beauty that is not tied to any preconceived notions about physical beauty, and, instead, shows us beauty in unexpected ways, and through a lens that is intelligently angled to capture the beauty of human achievement.

All of this transpires on an abstract court of sorts. The stage at DTW is fully exposed, and white tape marks out lines and rectangles that intimate field of play aesthetics. A table lies off to the side with three time bells on it. Upstage is a series of round mirrors that have painted on them prime numbers up to eleven.

His dancers, who comprise the “advanced beginner group,” vary in size and shape. From the tall, nerdy lankiness of Neal Medlyn, to the short, gymnastic compactness of Taryn Griggs, to the averageness of Chris Yon and Andrew Dinwiddie, to the stereotypical slimness of Lily Baldwin, the ensemble provides a panorama of physical textures that are used in marvelous ways, and not only to humorous affect. Although Neumann’s work is generally known for its humor, this work is infused with a passionate dichotomy of the glory and tragedy that sports inspire. (It is of this counter critic’s opinion that a few too many in the audience dealt with some of the physical diversity by falling into a rut of laughing any time Yon or Dinwiddie had a solo moment.)

It might not be entirely the audience’s fault, as the piece begins on such humorous turf. Taryn Griggs opens the work with what appears to be a solo inspired by gymnastics. Around her, Matt Citron and Neal Medlyn provide oral commentary.
that has little to do with what she’s actually accomplishing on stage. This provides a wonderful introduction to the oblique constructions of Neumann’s work, all of which, through juxtaposition and reorganization, allow something new and meaningful to emerge out of physicalities we find so familiar, although dislocated and sometimes abandoned.

The music, composed Eve Beglarian, is a wonderfully layered score for electronic music (sometimes the chirping of crickets or the baas of grazing sheep, other times the squeeking of sneakers on a basketball court, and just as often, synthesized and remixed music for trombones) and a live quartet of trombones. It should be understood that the musical element here is the unnamable source of pathos that Claudia La Rocco cited in her New York Times review. At moments, it does make you want to cry. Maybe not only on its own, but some of the bittersweet harmonies and clusters written by Beglarian cast a reverent light upon certain wondrous moments in the dance, capturing the heightened sense of importance, of mission and accomplishment, that we take sport to inhabit.

But the humor is just as satisfying. A trio of cheerleaders, dressed in hot pink jumpers, is molested by Kyle Pleasant in a chipmunk mascot costume–although this chipmunk has an erection. (Awesome costumes by Kara Feely.)

Yon and Dinwiddie were often hilarious. Yon as a dance anti-hero, and Dinwiddie as a referee clad in black spandex shorts and a puffy gold pleather jacket opened at the top to reveal a very 70s patch of chest hair; he has the penultimate solo in the work, and with just a few simple movements—a swish of the hip, a raised hand, a side look with the eyes—he commands the stage.

Citron and Medlyn were attractive as commentators and as dancers, each offering their own standard of lankiness. Their often deadpan commentary, written freshly by Karinne Kiethly, traversed the panorama of flat and bizarrely artificial sports dialogue to comic genius.

Medlyn’s role in the work, the biggest role, culminates in a ten or so minute meditation on a single pitch in a baseball game. The stage is washed in green (mood lighting by David Moodey) as his inner monologue is amplified around him, and behind, we see the visualization of a single blade of grass (selected out of several thousand that go whizzing by) emerge on a television screen. Then a still shot of the moon appears. And as the pitch finally comes through—when Medlyn’s body performs the complete motion after several aborted attempts—the moon transforms into a ping pong ball that bounces against the sides of the monitor. And you understand that in a world where the moon can become a ball, a single pitch can mean the whole world. And that, at least to some of us humans, is beautiful.
For choreographer, dance blends with sport
Neumann's troupe on stage tonight at Alverno

TOM STRINI; Journal Sentinel dance critic

As a teenager, David Neumann was a break dancer, student of the martial arts and a soccer and basketball player. Then he took a tap class. "The teacher took me aside and said, 'You're pretty good. You should take the advanced beginner class,' " Neumann said over lunch at Alverno College.

Years later, he named his company Advanced Beginner Group. Neumann and ABG will perform tonight at Alverno and will be back next year with a new piece commissioned by the south side women's college and the National Performance Network.

Neumann, 41, still thinks of himself as a lowercase advanced beginner. He came to dance late, after completing a bachelor of fine arts degree in acting at the State University of New York at Purchase in 1988 and working in theater around New York for a few years. He even showed up on TV as a clumsy dentist on "Starting from Scratch," a short-lived syndicated comedy.

Neumann is the son of actors — his parents were members of the avant-garde Mabou Mines Company in New York — and might have been on the way up. Without really trying to, he fell into dance.

In addition to the tap classes, he had taken some African dance as a kid and was an avid breaker, freestylist and house dancer in clubs. He also "sneaked into" all the dance classes he could at SUNY. In New York, he found that the dance scene always has room for a few good men, no matter how spotty the training. In 1989, he joined the Doug Elkins Company and stayed for eight years. "I could fake a lot of the material, but I did my damned best," Neumann said.

Working alongside highly trained dancers prompted him to take a lot of classes and work hard to build technique.

He created his first dances for low-budget theater productions and seized every choreographic opportunity. He broke out with a series of works at PS 122, a new-arts venue in New York, in 1995, '96 and '97. He's been on his own as a company director and choreographer since 1998.

Neumann's work and ensemble reflect his background. He often uses text, and his performers can be actors who can move or dancers who can speak.

To create "tough the tough" on tonight's program, he taped the floor plans of his dancers' tiny New York apartments onto the rehearsal floor and had them walk through their morning routines — rising, dressing, breakfast, even bathroom stops — to generate traffic patterns, gestures and steps. He expanded on this basic material to make the dance.
In past work, he’s drawn on Marx Brothers physical comedy routines and a radio account of a hockey game. He’s gathering material for next year’s dance by observing Alverno’s varsity soccer, volleyball and softball practices. He thinks that looking at sport, properly and deeply, isn’t that different from looking at dance. He stood up to demonstrate how tennis star Pete Sampras ritualized the wiping of sweat from his brow: Step forward, rock suddenly back on one heel, wipe and turn the head, back up behind the baseline, settle into ready position. Neumann repeated the sequence and added some rhythmic edge. "Yeah, it’s a piece about sports," Neumann said. "But I’m dancing."
David Neumann

David Neumann is the artistic director of advanced beginner group, a multi-disciplinary dance-based collective based in New York City. Drawing on his extensive experience in both dance and theater, Neumann believes in making dances from scratch bringing to full-body, gesture, word and proximity a delighted embrace of our contradictory lives. He utilizes experimental dance-making approaches with a humorous outlook and an inclusive layering of disciplines to create complex, thought provoking dance works that push the form.

Neumann’s original work with advanced beginner group has been presented in New York at: PS 122, Dance Theater Workshop, Central Park SummerStage (where he collaborated with John Giorno), Celebrate Brooklyn, Symphony Space (where he collaborated with Laurie Anderson), Context Theater, La Mama ETC, the Downtown Art Co., and Toro Nada Theater. His most recent work, feedforward made its premiere during a two-week run at DTW. advanced beginner group has also been invited to participate in several residencies and performance tours including: The Walker Arts Center, Alverno College, DancePlace in Washington, DC, and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art among others.

Neumann was a featured dancer in the works of Susan Marshall, Jane Comfort, Sally Silvers, Irene Hultman, Cathy Weiss, Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar’s Big Dance Theater, and club legend Willi Ninja. He was a three-year member of Doug Varone and Dancers, and an eight-year original member and collaborator with the Doug Elkins Dance Company, with whom he toured nationally and internationally.

He has choreographed for the theater for such groups as GAle GAtes et al, Mabou Mines, En Garde Arts, the Builders Association, and the Archa Theater in Prague; working with such artists as: Hal Hartley, Laurie Anderson, Daniel Aukin, Robert Woodruff, Lee Breuer, Peter Sellars, JoAnn Akalaitis, Chris Bayes, Mark Wing-Davey, Wally Shawn, and Les Waters in venues including Mabou Mines, the Public Theater, Signature Theatre, Soho Rep, La Mama ETC, Hartford Stage, Sundance, St. Ann’s Warehouse, Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Kennedy Center, and the Salzburg Festival in Austria.

He has taught workshops at The Drama Division of The Juilliard School, Bucknell University, University of Montana at Missoula, University of Texas at Austin, Bard College, and Duke University. He’s also lead workshops at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, the New School for Dance Development in Amsterdam, the Glenwood Springs Dance Festival, Summerdance Santa Barbara, Harvard Summerdance, and Le Festival du Dance in Montpellier, France. In addition to years of modern dance training, ballet and West African dance, he has also many years experience exploring various club styles, from old-school hip-hop to freestyle house.

Neumann is on faculty at the theater department of Sarah Lawrence College as well as an Associate Professor at Barnard College, and the Experimental Theater Wing at New York University and is a guest lecturer in acting at the Yale School of Drama.

Neumann is the recipient of two New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Awards, as a performer in 1991 and for his choreography in 1998. He’s been nominated several times for the Cal Arts/Herb Alpert Award and was awarded a 1993 Princess Grace Foundation Fellowship in the theater, a Joyce Theater Foundation Residency in 1999, two NYFA Build Grants (’03 and ’05), the Rockefeller MAP Grant in 2004, and a Colbert Foundation Award for Excellence in Choreography in 2001. Most recently, he was awarded a Meet the Composer co-commission with Eve Beglarian for their collaboration on feedforward. In 2009 he was awarded a Creative Capital Foundation grant for his piece, BIG EATER, which premiered at the Kitchen in 2010. Last year he was awarded a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grant in Dance and a Princess Grace Foundation Residency for his next work, Restless Eye which will premiere at New York Live Arts in March of 2012.
DAVID NEUMANN AND NICHOLAS LEICHTER DAANCE

David Neumann, appropriation artist extraordinaire ("A friend," he says, "explains it this way: the David Neumann drawer is where the stuff that doesn't go anywhere else goes"), was getting ready to make "Deep Six," a piece about telegraphers, when he had a dream. "I was drowning, descending into great expanses of water, and I discovered I could still breathe. I remember thinking, How interesting, that I'm accepting my death." Later, in his waking life, he found a pile of Artur Rubinstein 7"s in the trash and brought them home to play at the wrong speed. "Slowed down like that and scratchy, the music made me think of memories drifting in and out." Which is why, in the resulting enigmatic and casually melancholic dance, the dancers occasionally stop mid-motion and look up, as if arrested by a thought.

Neumann's savvy riff on club culture, "Appropriate Behavior," and works by Nicholas Leichter complete the program. Prospect Park Bandshell, Prospect Park W. at 9th St., Brooklyn. 718-855-7882, ext. 45. Aug. 2 at 7:30 I
an excerpt from a 1991 review by Burt Supree

“...In every instance, Neumann is a riveting performer, a potent danger ticking. He’s a few of my favorite things, especially in his long, dangerously courteous monologue from Pirandello’s ‘The Man With the Flower in His Mouth’. Neumann’s manner is so unwaveringly simple that you wonder if his honesty masks a psychopath. You never know which way he’s going to jump.”
Symposia of the Absurd

David Neumann and the Advanced Beginner Group meet the dark side of Hasselhoffness

By QUINN BATSON
Offoffoff.com

Big Eaters takes a while to digest, and a while to develop, but the meal is a good one. Dark. Sad. Funny. Absurd. Sometimes dense and sometimes spare, by the end it feels like plenty.

There is such a mishmash of serious and farcical philosophizing and dialog that it is easy to discount or miss things as they pass. Tidbits that stick out early are the questions "is a fixed position in the universe even possible?" and "do our dreams exceed our grasp?" As Andrew Dinwiddie expounds that our dreams must exceed our grasp or we have no future, everything seems slightly absurd, though in retrospect, it is all a bit deep. Much of the piece is presented as fake/real interviews or symposia, with a stage right TV set also flickering to life occasionally to share the mixed opinions and philosophies of Neumann's father, perhaps the first big eater of the piece in the chunks of thought he bites off and chews on.

DAVID NEUMANN: BIG EATER

Dancers: Natalie Agee, Andrew Dinwiddie, Kennis Hawkins, Neal Medlyn, Weena Pauly, Will Rawls and Frederick Neumann as 'the man in the woods'

hamburger servers: Tom Tancredi, Dom Tancredi.

Sound design by: Katie Down, Kim Fuhr, David Neumann.

Costumes by: Kaye Voyce

Lighting design by: Dave Moodey.

Production stage manager: Amelia Freeman-Lynde.

Video design: Richard Sylvanes.

Projections: Bryna Lieberman.

Visual design: Dave Moodey and David Neumann.

SCHEDULE

The Kitchen
March 4-13, 2010
Each performer has a more or less fixed role that shifts continually, much like the overall piece. One moment a character is relating an apparently genuine bit of self-revelation and the next is acting out mock movie dialog or relating a mostly incomprehensible story. The end section keeps regurgitating an episode viewed well over two million times on YouTube of a drunk and hungry David Hasselhoff eating and messing with a hamburger while his teenage daughter explains that he will be fired from his current show tomorrow morning if his blood alcohol is too high. Slowly, this big eater episode becomes more and more the focus of the piece, until by the end, as Neal Medlyn plays the part of drunk David Hasselhoff and Weena Pauly plays the part of his pleading teenage daughter in the last face-to-face "interview", everyone in the cast has reenacted the notorious recording that aired some seriously dirty laundry and exposed a very sad side of real and hollywood life in someone who almost epitomizes the hollower side of the American dream.

There are so many tiny moments that glow, in the staging, the dialog, the sound design, the video backdrop, the dancing. What starts out as a bit wacky and slapstick gradually becomes deeper and deeper. By the end, the initial introduction of the subject "10 ways to know the world is ending", whose points get listed at apparently random places in the piece but never quite add up to 10, makes a sad sort of sense and gives the piece even more comic gravity. And the Medlyn/Pauly end is tragically perfect.

MARCH 8, 2010
David Neumann's Big Eater
Mar. 10 through 13, The Kitchen, 519 W. 19th St. (betw. 9th & 10th Aves.), 212-255-5793; 8, $15.
Sometimes there is a work whose very premise proves irresistible. Such is the case with David Neumann's Big Eater, an evening-length dance based on a video—the video—of David Hasselhoff drunk in a hotel hallway attempting the ingestion of a cheeseburger. But, premise aside, Neumann's work is as touching as it is strange and you never feel, no matter how absurd the material seems, that he's taking the piss. That he holds it in is testament to his creative discipline. Bottom Line: With The National Enquirer up for a Pulitzer, could a dance about a TMZ video win a Bessie? This one could.
The big eater in “Big Eater” is Neumann himself, who has purposely bitten off more than he can comfortably chew. There may be allusions to bears and the drunken behavior of David Hasselhoff, but the unruly and omnivorous creature represented by the work as a whole is its creator’s brain. The piece is a kind of mind map, staged with handheld microphones and tables and lots of text, of connections made in the rehearsal process between such disparate sources as Neumann’s childhood in an alcoholic household, genetics, and “Giselle.” A cast stacked with deadpan ironists (including the unfailingly hilarious Neal Medlyn) insures that comic potential isn’t neglected. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. March 4-6 at 8 and March 7 at 5. Through March 13.)
By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

It’s possible you know the infamous David Hasselhoff video that hit YouTube a while back, the one with him on a floor, too drunk to eat a hamburger effectively, while watching an earnest lecture from one of his teenage daughters.

But you’ve probably never imagined it as it materialized on a recent snowy night in TriBeCa at the Battery Dance Studio, during a David Neumann/advanced beginner group company rehearsal for “Big Eater.” The show, which opens Thursday at the Kitchen (let the pans begin!), offers a dark and darkly funny, meditation on the human condition in 21st-century America, threaded through with more tender autobiographical elements.

On this night six clothing-swaddled performers (the studio heat wasn’t working) ran through the portion of the work inspired by Mr. Hasselhoff’s inebriated condition. They switched characters or operated as doppelgängers. Simple, rhythmically paced phrases (“Don’t get alcohol. Do you see what it’s doing to you?”) were juxtaposed with eignanetic bursts of movement. Mr. Neumann’s trademark humor was in full, subversive effect, balanced by an almost elegiac mood.

“You see it all the time, these stars who get wasted, who don’t know what to do with their lives,” Mr. Neumann said. “There’s something about this pain, or emptiness, we conceal but we don’t really talk about.”

“I grew up in an alcoholic family, and I understand that impulse,” he added of the daughter’s reasoning with her father, calling the video heartbreaking. “And it’s roughly analogous to where we are. This American culture is like a fat, drunk movie star; heedless of its effects on others.”

This point would be easy to hammer home, but Mr. Neumann, 44, is not prone to didacticism or linearity. As is the case with many works that he has created with his company, “Big Eater” incorporates diverse source materials, including snippets of television dialogue, inscrutable panel discussions, repurposed sections of “Giselle” and varied styles of movement.

“Part of the reason for so many sources — movement and otherwise — stems from my strong belief that dance is a dense and complicated art form, if allowed,” he said. “I like the idea that the languages of the piece flare up and transform, like an abstract dance that devolves into talking, or vice versa.”

The dancer Andrew Binwirde, who has worked with Mr. Neumann for more than a decade, described the more than yearlong making of “Big Eater” as a “free-associative” and “freewheeling” process in which meaning accrued slowly and subtly. “Even within a small phrase this thing feels like some kind of martial-art thing, and this thing feels like hula, and this thing feels...”
like salsa,” he said of the movement.

Many of the company’s works, he added, evolve in similar fashion. “David creates so many of the moments based on some inspiration he seems to find in some unintended happenstance of blocking or in some funny thing we’ve been talking about in rehearsal.”

Mr. Neumann’s path to choreography was similarly winding. The son of Fred Neumann and Honora Fergusson, both actors of Mabou Mines fame, he was born in Paris and grew up in New Jersey. Though as a young man he set out to follow the family trade, he was also always moving.

“There are famous stories of me, even before I could walk, bouncing up and down to break things,” he said with one of his frequent wry laughs. His parents even devised a system to keep him safe. “They rigged up this weird bungee cord kind of

Top, a dress rehearsal for David Neumann’s “Big Eater,” which opens on Thursday at the Kitchen. Above, Mr. Neumann, in back, with the dancer Will Rawls.
harness thing, so whenever I got a good burst of speed, I would always return to where I started. I was very, very active as a kid.”

That energy was eventually channeled into more productive avenues. Mr. Neumann, the only boy in his high school dance company, also taught himself popping and locking, which he performed on the streets of New York and in clubs.

“I like the bravery and the freedom of dance as an art form in this country,” he said. “But in terms of actually categorizing what the thing is itself, I have to admit it’s difficult for me. It really does reside somewhere between dance and theater.”

While studying acting at Purchase College, he started working with the choreographer Doug Elkins and later joined Doug Varone’s company.

“When you watch him dance, you literally feel you are dancing too,” said Annie-B Parson, who has cast him in several pieces for her Big Dance Theater. “He’s just the most alive, kinetic, earthy performer.”

Since 1998 Mr. Neumann has focused on work with his own troupe while finding time for projects like creating a duet for himself and Mikhail Baryshnikov, devising creature movement for the movie “I Am Legend” and appearing in pieces by Adrienne Truscott and other peers.

“He’s testing you with his humor, but then he opens something in you when he choreographs,” Mr. Baryshnikov said of their duet. “He’s really digging into the complexity of the human condition, and that’s where humor is the most important. And the absurdity of the everyday in our lives — he uses pedestrian situations in very disturbing or revealing ways.”

Mr. Baryshnikov asked Mr. Neumann to create the piece after the two hit it off while performing in “Beckett Shorts,” which opened at New York Theater Workshop in 2007. It was an intense experience for Mr. Neumann, whose father both interpreted Beckett’s prose for the stage and visited him annually.

Now Mr. Neumann’s father has a moody cameo in “Big Eater,” philosophizing in a film that periodically seems like a “Discovery” special gone astray.

“The text is a very dim view of nature,” Mr. Neumann said. But movement passages offer a more optimistic take on the species. “If my dad is in the woods, yelling at us, warning us about the natural world, the antidote to that is a consciousness and a careful attention to what one’s doing.”

Cue the Hasselhoff video.
DAVID NEUMANN/ADVANCED BEGINNER GROUP (Friday and Saturday) Working with six talented performers, all choreographers in their own right, Mr. Neumann has created “Big Eater,” a deeply moving, deeply funny portrait of the human species in 21st-century America. At 8 p.m., the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea, (212) 255-5793, thekitchen.org; $15; $12 for students and 65+. (Claudia La Rocco)