

The Villager

West Village, East Village, Soho, Tribeca and Lower East Side

'Big pictures' inspire a dancer

By Doris Diether

Maher Benham, of Thompson St., founder of Coyote Dancers, will offer her third dance program this weekend at the Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College. Benham, born in New York but raised in Connecticut, has been dancing since she was four, commuting to New York to the Martha Graham School. Her first teacher was Ernestine Stodelle.

When she attended Reed College in Portland, Ore., she was required to take an academic major, but she managed to combine this with her interest in dance.

"As an anthropologist," she said, "I looked at dance in many other cultures — Native American, Balinese, any culture where dance was a big part of spiritual life." But even while studying and dancing at Reed, she knew she wanted to do more. Of the West Coast, Benham said, "there was not much out there. Having spent time as a child and teenager coming to New York to study, I got the feeling I really had to get back to New York, where the heart and soul of dance is."

When she returned to New York, she resumed classes at the Graham School, and also began dancing, with Pearl Lang, Daniel Maloney, Kenneth King and others, even, in 1992, in a reconstruction of Graham's 1935 "Panorama." Nine years ago, when the Graham School started a trainee program, Benham joined. "That was a great program," she said, "and out of that I became a teacher at the Graham School." Benham also teaches at



Villager photo by Donald Greenhaus

Maher Benham

Marymount College and the Neighborhood Playhouse on 54th St.

About three years ago Benham got a call asking her to choreograph something for the St. Bart's Music and Dance Festival in the French West Indies the following year.

"Do you have anything to show?" she was asked, and, although she had never choreographed before, she said, "Sure." "I had a year to become a choreographer, but I could feel it coming. I thought, this must be it, the call to make me do it."

She went to St. Bart's with Carlos Fittante, her dance partner from the Balinese American

Fusion Dance Company, and on the plane coming back she told him, "I'm going to start my own dance company." Coyote Dancers came to mind as the name for her company because "I liked the sound and energy of it, and also the fact that it didn't have my name on it. I like the non-ego part of it, and, besides, my name is unusual and hard to pronounce." In Native American culture, one has an ally, and she has always considered coyotes her ally, the animal she identifies with. "Coyotes are revered as creative forces and very strong, ingenious, scrappy survivors who can get through anything and can outsmart a wolf," she says.

Benham's first concert was at Marymount Theater. The second was a small studio showing. But, "this is my first big, real theater, high profile, legitimate performance," she related. "I'm new, as a choreographer, really just a baby. I started choreographing, not knowing anything about how to run a dance company."

The concerts on Sept. 16 and 17 are ambitious. There will be 33 dancers including guest artists Stuart Hodes and Daniel Maloney, five musicians, a singer, a bagpiper, and eight works, three with original scores.

"I had big visions, big pictures in my head," she recalled. "I just saw these images, and thought, 'I'd like to make a dance about that.' When I started to realize, logistically, what was involved...if I had known, I might

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never have gotten involved. I didn't think about money. I'm so naive in that way."

The largest work on the program is "Sipapu," for 17 men.

"I was lying on the floor, eyes closed, and I saw this picture of a whole group of men of all ages, standing looking up into the sun like trees, like ancient virgin forest trees," Benham remembered. "I called everyone I knew and other people I didn't know but had heard about. I called Dainy [Maloney] and Stuart [Hodes]. I got students of mine from the Graham School and some younger kids. I got them all together in a room and then I started to think, 'Oh, dear, what am I doing.'"

"The piece is about intergenerational exchange, about the passing on of wisdom. My inspiration was the Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Hindu scripture about the battle between Krishna, the saint, and Arjuna, the warrior."

"Mahe. It's Donald," another work, was inspired by her friendship with the photographer Donald Greenhaus, "the first artist I ever met."

Benham takes her art very seriously.

"An artist has a commitment to a prospective about life and to a point of view that makes one follow a certain path," she says. "I think an artistic life is devotional, it's a calling. To be an artist is a total life commitment. I don't create my dances, I'm just open to receive them."

Benham is constantly envisioning dances.

"Most of the time I spend artistically percolating," she says. "Right now I've got three more dances coming out, that I'm telling to go away until after I finish this concert. There's a lot of material welling up that wants to be realized. When I'm walking down the street, and I love to walk around the streets of New York and especially the Village and SoHo, or even when I'm washing dishes, I'm always getting ideas floating up here and I'm watching them."

This gives her almost no time for anything else. She feels it is her husband who really suffers. A purchasing manager for Columbia University, he is also an artist, a classical pianist and guitarist.

"I consider him my musical Svengali," she said. "He is an artist inside, but he doesn't work as an artist because he felt we would never survive."

Benham isn't sure what will happen after these concerts.

"This has cost me so much, financially, personally, the sacrifices of my husband. Can we go through this again?" She may have to cut back to a smaller group, say six dancers, and keep working more often in a smaller way. But she is sure to keep working.

Coyote Dancers, at Kaye Playhouse, 68th St. off Lexington Ave.; Sat., Sept. 16, 8 P.M., Sun., Sept. 17, 3 P.M.; \$15, \$8 students & seniors. 772-4448.