

From transplant to L.A.'s heart and soul



Curator, editor, grass-roots activist and more, she's presenting her own 'Eleven Missing Dance.'

By Susan Josephs
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MEG WOLFE had good reason to be professionally depressed when she moved to Los Angeles for love in 2003.

Fresh from 12 years as a well-known performer and choreographer on New York's downtown experimental dance scene, she arrived here knowing "no one, and at a complete loss. I went to this performance where the dancers were dressed up as poodles or maybe babies, it wasn't clear, and there was zero sense of irony," she says. "This scared me."

Homesick for the dance community she had left behind, Wolfe decided to take matters into her own hands and, in the interim, has assumed a variety of other roles, including curator, editor, grass-roots activist, mother hen and best friend of all things related to contemporary dance in Los Angeles. She has established a flourishing performance series devoted to works in progress, co-founded a dance journal and spearheaded a weekly dance class program. She also maintains two MySpace pages with comprehensive local dance-related information; serves as the Southern California coordinator of a pilot mentorship program for choreographers, administered by the San Francisco-based Margaret Jenkins Dance Company; and, most recently, started an organization called Show Box to both better support her own projects and provide more presenting opportunities for local and visiting artists.

The recipient in April of a Lester Horton community service award from the local Dance Resource Center, Wolfe "is a one-woman institution," says George Lugg, associate director of REDCAT, the secondary theater at Walt Disney Concert Hall, which has become one of the city's major dance venues. "You might think she just knows how to maximize resources and make a bunch of different things happen, but really, these are multiple programming initiatives that all support the development of dance in Los Angeles and reflect a real understanding of the field."

Lugg, in fact, encouraged Wolfe to consolidate her various endeavors under one organizational entity. Hence Show Box, which will premiere its first official project Thursday at the Unknown Theater. Over the course of two weekends, Wolfe will present her own "Eleven Missing Days," a film-noir-inspired dance and multimedia work, in addition to short pieces by two guest

choreographers from New York and three from Los Angeles. The mixed bill has the same spirit as Anatomy Riot, Wolfe's works-in-progress series, in which multiple artists share a single evening, and it reflects the 40-year-old choreographer's wish to, as she puts it, "open things up further in L.A. There still aren't a lot of presenting opportunities here."

Over coffee at a Santa Monica cafe, Wolfe grapples with the question of why she spends untold, mostly unpaid hours in service to her fellow dance artists when she could be focused on her own choreography and earning more money as a massage therapist. Slender, short-haired and sharp-featured, she's also shy and soft-spoken and observes that her role as community organizer has forced her to be far more extroverted than feels natural to her.

"I guess there's something about connecting with the community you're working in that keeps me going," she says. "Plus, I'm good at encouraging others. If they have an idea, I like to help."

Local dancer and choreographer Taisha Paggett, for example, was frustrated by the lack of "editorial avenues for dance" in Southern California and had the idea of starting a publication for and by dance artists. Together with Wolfe, she co-founded Itch, a now 2-year-old dance journal that has started to generate subscriptions and has so far featured the writings of more than 50 contributors from L.A. and other cities. Recent issues have examined the role of balance in an artist's life and the loss of full-time dance critics at U.S. newspapers.

"While I could have very possibly done this by myself, Meg is very much a mobilizer," says Paggett. "She's very good at responding to what's missing, channeling those ideas and facilitating them into action."

Wolfe did exactly that with the series Dance Bank, which she started last year at the Open Space, a new downtown venue operated by choreographer Hassan Christopher, and which now offers classes every Thursday night by a rotating group of more than 30 teachers. The teachers pay \$50 membership dues to cover rental costs in exchange for six free classes. Non-teachers pay \$10 a class.

"A lot of people were talking about how nice it would be if there were more dance classes in L.A., and Meg just went ahead and pulled it together," says Paggett.

Wolfe concedes that sometimes, "I'm just exhausted and want to toss everything out the window. But I guess I see a bigger picture. I believe in dance as an art form, and I want to see it flourish. And personally, I can't exist in a vacuum."

A learning process

RAISED IN New Jersey, Wolfe began her dance career as a ballerina and performed in a small regional company before enrolling in Purchase College at the State University of New York. There, she performed Merce Cunningham choreography, learned about European dance makers and became inspired by the experimental artists who had formed the Judson Dance Theater in 1960s New York.

"I realized I no longer wanted to be a flower in the background of some ballet," she says, noting that college was also the time of her "feminist awakening."

Upon graduation, Wolfe high-tailed it to New York City and began showing her own choreography in addition to working with a number of well-respected dance makers, including

Vicky Shick, Molissa Fenley and Yoshiko Chuma. "I was fortunate to work with idiosyncratic people," she says. "They all had different approaches, but they all influenced me, whether it was to be rigorous or pay meticulous attention to detail."

Over the years, her choreography has frequently addressed issues of identity and gender and often reveals a sly, subversive sense of humor. "Eleven Missing Days," for example, toys with themes of disappearance and the stylized roles of film noir. The dancers play characters such as the Private Eye and Femme Fatale and perform deliberately over-the-top theatrical choreography, complete with dramatic death crashes to the floor and various faux combat maneuvers. Traditionally, the femme fatale "always meets a bad end. But in my piece, she doesn't have to die," says Wolfe, who adds in a deliberately self-mocking, singsong voice, "Yeah, I have an agenda. I'm a feminist."

In New York, she had plenty of opportunities to show her work in various stages of progress at different venues. But when she moved to L.A., "I didn't see much of that," she says. "I guess some kind of self-preservationist instinct kicked in, and I tried to figure out what I needed so I could keep making work."

Enter Anatomy Riot, which Wolfe founded in the fall of 2005 at Zen Sushi, a Silver Lake restaurant, bar and music venue. Committed to artist development and to showcasing a range of dance and multidisciplinary performance, the works-in-progress series recently moved to the Open Space and has become a regular, almost monthly event that draws from 70 to 100 people.

"Anatomy Riot has become a crucial tool for producing work in this town," says Arianne Hoffmann, a series regular and one of the choreographers who will be sharing the bill with Wolfe at the Unknown Theater. "It's really wonderful to have this space to try out new ideas and collect feedback, and when you see someone's work produced in a bigger venue that you first saw at Anatomy Riot, it's exciting."

Hoffmann admires Wolfe for "sustaining what she's created and that none of her projects are short-lived. She's opened doors for a lot of people, and she's also really modest about it. She's the opposite of someone with center-stage syndrome."

Indeed, Wolfe would rather not be a one-woman institution if at all possible, which explains in part why she's been asking other artists to guest curate Anatomy Riot on a more frequent basis.

"I could really use some assistance right about now," she says with an understated grin.

Still, although not the type to plan too far in the future, she does know for certain that she's not moving back to New York.

"There's a real sense of potential in L.A. now for things to grow," she says. "I'll probably keep trying to find the empty spaces and figuring out what needs to go there."