

Lawrence Adams and The Brick

A simple red brick – such an innocuous artifact and yet the story that it represents is key to both Canada's dance history and the history of Dance Collection Danse. This acrylic brick was constructed by Lawrence Adams in 1974 as part of a media installation at the A Space Gallery in Toronto called *Mr. and Mrs. Adams Present*. Lawrence collaborated with his wife, Miriam, and their show included an audio journey, sculptures of bricks, a slide show, photography and video dance. Bricks were a recurring theme in Lawrence's art work in the 1970s. When the Adamses founded the group 15 Dancers in 1972, Lawrence gave a performance at the debut concert where he angrily kicked a brick wall to a sound track of a Richard Nixon speech. In another show, he built a brick wall accompanied by Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*. In 1975, Lawrence built a 10x30-foot Styrofoam brick that he floated down Ottawa's Rideau Canal. And in the work *Another One*, he recited the virtues of the brick with images showing tiny people walking and riding bicycles on gigantic bricks.

I'm Amy Bowring, Director of Collections and Research at Dance Collection Danse. Twenty years ago, I came to Dance Collection to do research and had my first encounter with Lawrence Adams. An imposing figure with substantial greying sideburns, he invited me in and brought me the box of materials I had requested. While I was focussing on the details of a house program, I suddenly heard him say, "Who *are* you?" There was something in the way he posed the question that made me realize that I could not give him a standard answer. So, I told him I was the great-great-great-great granddaughter of Benjamin Bowring who came to St. John's, Newfoundland, in 1811 and set up a shop. He said nothing and walked away. A few minutes later, while I was still looking at programs, he entered the room and began reciting the details of my ancestry from the *Canadian Encyclopedia*. This was the beginning of a mentorship that would last a decade until his death on February 26, 2003. A decade has since passed and the organization he created with Miriam Adams is now the de facto repository for materials on Canadian theatrical dance history – a national archives, research centre and publisher that is focussed on making Canada's dance artists and their stories known to the world.

If you're going to have a mentor, it might as well be an iconoclastic and enigmatic one. Not to mention autodidactic, visionary, inspiring, provocative, fearless, full of good humour and completely devoted to the work. These are all good traits to pass on to your apprentice. We used to get so excited when new artifacts were donated. Lawrence would say, "You've got to see this. You're going to pee your pants it's so great." He always hoped that a pair of silk stockings from the vaudeville period would be donated. A few years after he died, we received five pairs.

Long before I arrived on the scene, Lawrence was a notable figure in the Canadian dance world with a history full of colour, rebellion and achievement. He was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1936, the youngest of four children. His only brother, David, joined the newly formed Winnipeg Ballet Club when he was nine years old and went on to have an illustrious career with the Winnipeg Ballet, The National Ballet of Canada, England's Royal Ballet, and other companies. David Adams and his wife, Lois Smith, were one of Canada's first premier ballet couples – house-hold names in the 1950s, touring across Canada and appearing on television. When Lawrence was fifteen, he moved to Toronto to live with them. Just prior to that he had been living in Vancouver with his family and caught rheumatic fever, almost dying. He took ballet lessons to regain his strength. He had not intended to follow a career in dance but that

path just seemed to naturally unfold before him. By 1954 he was a member of The National Ballet of Canada and eventually became a principal dancer. He was athletic, charismatic and musical – a matinee idol. His interpretation of Mercutio in John Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* was considered by the choreographer to be the best he had ever seen.

Restless, Lawrence left the National Ballet for a few seasons dancing with Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and with Robert Joffrey's company when it toured Europe, the Middle-East and India. And then he met Miriam.

Prior to rejoining the National Ballet for the 1963/64 season, Lawrence took classes at the National Ballet School to maintain his technique. He performed a czardas in the annual School Closing with a graduating student named Miriam Weinstein. She joined the corps de ballet of the National for the 1963 season. The story goes that, while on tour, Lawrence was telling a joke to a group of dancers in an elevator; while the others laughed on cue, Miriam responded, "I don't think that's so funny." Back on the tour bus, Lawrence walked to the backseat where Miriam was sitting, lay his head on her shoulder and fell asleep. They married in 1967.

By 1969, Lawrence and Miriam Adams were ready to spread their iconoclastic wings. In the 1970s, their activities swept the Canadian dance scene with lasting impact. They formed the group 15 Dancers in 1972 encouraging their young followers to take risks onstage. By 1974, 15 Dancers morphed into 15 Dance Lab, Canada's first venue for experimental dance. A forty-one-seat theatre-in-the-round, the space hosted emerging dance artists such as Margie Gillis, Marie Chouinard, Jean-Pierre Perreault, Rina Singha and Christopher House, among many others. Fifteen became a hub where the zeitgeist of the 1970s found an open and uncritical environment. Simultaneously, Lawrence and Miriam, with videographer Terry McGlade, created Visus and travelled the country recording the exploding dance scene archiving an important decade in the development of dance in Canada. Today, these video recordings make up a substantial portion of the moving image collection at Dance Collection Danse.

Lawrence and Miriam were also involved in the politics of the dance scene sitting on boards, participating in the Dance in Canada conferences, and publishing a radical dance newspaper called *Spill*. They were vocal and provocative and didn't shy away from criticising the dance establishment. They pushed boundaries both on and off the stage, questioning the very definition of dance and providing multiple forums for others to join the debate.

In 1980, Lawrence and Miriam closed 15 Dance Lab feeling that the experimentation of the time had cycled through and that the work being presented was becoming repetitious. In the 1980s, they published a newspaper called *Canadian Dance News* and Lawrence, with his friend and fellow artist John Faichney, opened the Arts Television Centre, which provided studio space to both artists and commercial media ventures.

Then they embarked on a major research project that would dictate their future, influence my own future, and permanently impact the possibilities for knowledge within Canada's cultural landscape. In 1983, they hired a well-connected, long-time dance teacher named Sonja Barton to travel throughout Canada recording oral histories with elder dance artists and teachers. During this process, materials began to emerge from the attics and basements of the nation making their way to Lawrence and Miriam – their future custodians. In 1986, Lawrence and Miriam organized ENCORE! ENCORE!, the largest dance reconstruction project in Canadian history. With a team of dancers and rehearsal directors, most of the original choreographers and several of the original dancers, they reconstructed a dozen dance works from the 1940s and 1950s and then recorded these through video and dance notation. The project culminated with the induction of nine notable dance figures into the ENCORE! ENCORE! Hall of Fame. A live show called *There's*

Always Been Dance was also produced and debuted at Expo '86 in Vancouver. And thus began a period of devotion to the preservation, dissemination and popularization of Canada's dancing past.

Thousands of artists, teachers and companies are represented in the Dance Collection Danse archives through documents, costumes, props, photographs, oral histories, and film and video; thirty-nine books on dance and seventy-two issues of the magazine have been published; the web site consists of 3000 megabytes and over 200 pages of content; and now exhibitions with partnering organizations are helping to show the world the richness and depth of Canada's dance heritage. Not a bad legacy.

Dance critic Paula Citron once called Lawrence "a knight errant in defence of dance" – a fitting description.

I was at my own personal and professional cross-roads when I turned up at Dance Collection Danse, taking a break from dancing due to an injury and questioning what the future held if I didn't continue dancing. Through Lawrence I saw my path clearly laid out before me. He opened a door and I ran through with delight and enthusiasm. In ten years, he not only taught me about dance history and archival work but also about so many things that excited and interested him: astronomy, railway history, chaos theory, visual art. He even taught me the best way to swing a hammer. I learned that being politically involved in dance is part of one's dance citizenship; that to make anything truly wonderful happen, you have to think big and then take a leap into the unknown; and I learned that the story of dance in Canada has great depth and value, that our dance ancestors are exactly those people who thought big and literally took a leap into the unknown ... and Lawrence was certainly one of them.

To read more about Lawrence Adams, download Dance Collection Danse Magazine issue #56.
<http://www.dcd.ca/general/dcdmag.html>

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