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Remembering Trisha Brown and the mark she made on Chicago



Trisha Brown's 1979 "Glacial Decoy" is a stunning dance in which five women weave in and out of the wings dressed in wispy, nearly sheer frocks against a backdrop of black and white photographs.

(Julietta Cervantes photo)

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When the Stephen Petronio Company visited from New York in October 2015 to open the season at the Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago, it performed the first episode in a dance series Petronio calls "Bloodlines." The "Bloodlines" project highlights famous dance works that have influenced him, as well as illustrates the tangled family tree connecting the current generation of dancers to the previous one.

Choreographer Trisha Brown's 1979 "Glacial Decoy" was on the menu that night, a stunning dance in which five women weave in and out of the wings dressed in wispy, nearly sheer frocks against a backdrop of black and white photographs (both by Robert Rauschenberg). More recent "Bloodlines" programs have added works by Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer, among others. Many of the "Bloodlines" artists are postmodernists who first gained notice as part of the Judson Dance Theater, best known for highly conceptual work and fearless experimentation, pushing the boundaries of the form to extremes that challenge audiences to this day.

So as the news of Brown's death March 18 trickled through social media channels and across New York news outlets, the impact she and the postmodern movement made on Chicago's dance community cannot be understated.

Shirley Mordine founded the Dance Center of Columbia College in 1969 — the place that would present the "Bloodlines" premiere more than 40 years later — as Chicago's only college-level dance program at the time. Today, the Dance Center is still the only program within city limits that focuses primarily on modern and contemporary dance, and is a driving force of Chicago's storefront dance scene. It's an aesthetic grounded in conventional modern techniques but rife with the experimentation and exploration that comes from the postmodernists. In some ways, Dance Center students share a similar training to that of Mordine and Brown, who both attended Mills College in Oakland, Calif., in the late 1950s. "We were good friends ... mischievous as hell," Mordine said in an interview with the Tribune. "I had a real close companionship."

Mordine noted the solid technical base both women received at Mills — essentially pre-postmodern dance — but Mordine said she spent as much time in the theater department as she did in the dance department. So despite the choreographers' similar educations, they wound up heading in different directions, aesthetically and geographically. Brown took a job at Reed College in Oregon, where she met Yvonne Rainer, and eventually headed to New York, diving deep into the postmodern movement that has been so influential to today's choreographers.

It is the Judson Dance Theater as well as predecessors such as Merce Cunningham and Anna Halprin that inspired Petronio's "Bloodlines" project, and on that 2015 night in Chicago, "Glacial Decoy" was a premiere for the Stephen Petronio Company. But it wasn't the first time Chicago had seen the work. Mordine recalled seeing the Trisha Brown Dance Company perform it at MoMing, a Lakeview studio and performance space formed in 1974 by a collective of artists (Jackie Radis, Jim Self, Susan Kimmelman, Eric Trules, Kasia Mintch, Tem Horowitz and writer Sally Banes). Much of the group had broken off from Mordine's original dance company, establishing MoMing in the spirit of Judson Dance Theater by creating and producing their own work and hosting classes, but also presenting postmodernists from New York, Trisha Brown among them. MoMing closed in 1990, but a similar collaborative founded in 1978 by Bob Eisen, Carol Bobrow and Charlie Vernon laid the groundwork for what is now among the most recognized Chicago venues for avant-garde and experimental performance: Links Hall.

The Trisha Brown Dance Company would return to Chicago on a few more occasions, presenting work at the Harold Washington Library in 1992 (during the infamous flood that filled the bowels of the city) and again in 2002. Brown gave the commencement speech at Columbia College in 2009, two years before an announcement that she no longer would create dances because of progressive [dementia](#).

"Of course everyone in dance knew who Trisha Brown was, but she didn't make a high-profile Chicago appearance until her company performed at the Harold Washington Library theater in 1992, after a three-week residency here," former Chicago Tribune dance critic Laura Molzahn said in a recent email. "Then she seemed to be on everyone's minds, artists and critics. The piece that jumped out at me was the Shakespearean 'Foray Foret,' which fleetingly suggested a forest hunt while, in the distance, an out-of-tune marching band played. Each work was unique, illuminating its own distinct corner of the world, as Brown selected and combined textures — in the music, choreography, design — like a master weaver, reveling in contrasts while hinting at correspondence. Though Brown followed in the footsteps of Merce Cunningham, her art felt much closer to the pulse of actual human life."

Indeed it was Brown's ability to display highly intellectual, would-be emotionless ideas with a bit of quirky humanity that she will be remembered for. "I always think of making dances in terms of what I observe in the world," said Mordine. "'Every dance should be new, strange and beautiful.' I don't remember who told me that, but I like it. Trisha was an extraordinary composer. She is a major figure for her time. Trisha's right up there with those who've made the strongest contributions to the field."