

# ANN LUDWIG



*Choreographing the* **EVER-CHANGING DANCE**

TEXT BY CANDICE ST. JACQUES MILES

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELLIOT LINCIS

In October, Ann Ludwig turned 60.

To celebrate the occasion, the woman who heads Arizona State University's graduate dance program and moonlights as artistic director and choreographer for her own company planned a solo concert she titled *Sixty Minutes At 60*.

"Don't count on a Seventy Minutes At 70!" she exclaims. "Thought, who knows....?"

A lithe figure with close-cropped blonde hair and strong features, usually garbed in an oversized jacket, Ludwig moves with an energy that makes her numerical age a difficult figure to guess. That in turn suggests her as a good advocate against the prevalent (though clearly outmoded) concept that dancers should gracefully withdraw from the performance scene after the age of thirty-five.

In recent years, Ludwig has found herself invited to address this subject more than once. "It began when the National Dance Association's Committee on Research in Dance asked me to be part of a panel on ethical issues in choreography," she says. The eighteen-year ASU instructor – whose fall schedule included a writing course on philosophy and criticism of dance for non-majors – admits that she enjoys gnawing the meat on certain intellectual bones, among them women's issues and art and politics. "Is it ethical for a choreographer to expect someone who's ill or injured to go in stage?" she asks. "And what considerations should be extended to a dancer who isn't comfortable performing in the nude?"

The specific subject matter of choreographed works can add another layer of complexity to the ethical debates within her chosen field. "We've developed several pieces on social issues," offers the founder of A Ludwig Dance Theatre as an example. "One call *Order of Protection* deals with the brutality of domestic violence and the way it cycles through generations. When we bring that to high school residencies, we always provide materials to stimulate discussion on the subject."

Ludwig began dancing at age five. The oldest of four, she has two sisters and a brother – none of whom especially shared her extreme love for baler, tap, and the other forms of training that eventually led to her career in modern dance. "I don't remember any particular influence on my decision

to become a dancer and I don't recall why I became interested in what I'm doing now," she says. "I suppose it hardly matters at this stage."

A former lecturer at San Diego State University who also taught at universities in Kansas and Iowa, Ludwig began her ASU teaching career in 1979, the year after the dance department split from physical education. "Margaret Gisolo was instrumental in developing the dance program here," she recalls. "She's eighty-two and just won another national tennis championship." Beth Lessard succeeded Gisolo as department chair.

The department those women and their compatriots nurtured has grown to one of the country's largest, with about 150 undergraduate students, ten full-time faculty members, and a large pool of faculty associates as well as technical, production, costuming, and administrative staff. "We have professional dancers with international experience among our students," says the department's director of graduate studies. "Our undergraduates have to be exceptional. With all the interest in our graduate program, by no means can we accept everyone who auditions."

Diversity – of cultural backgrounds, dance specialties, and years of experience – results in a fertile sharing of ideas within the department. And. Thanks to her "extracurricular" non-profit troupe, Ludwig enjoys honing ideas beyond the semester-long time constraints of the university structure. "In a particular work at ASU, I might have fifteen students to work with for a limited time," she explains. "But, the six members of A Ludwig Dance Theatre – eight of you include Beth [Lessard] and myself – have been together a long, long time. We can continue to adjust a piece to see what happens when this or that element changes. I have the best of both worlds in some ways."

Now celebrating its twentieth year, A Ludwig Dance theater presents six to eight annual concerts and directs several school residencies, in addition to taking part in conferences and festivals. The upcoming schedule includes an international dance-music conference in Tempe on January 11 and the Arizona Contemporary Dance Festival at the Herberger Theater Center the following week.

With an approach that blends dance and theatre, the company's work often follows a narrative thread,

with titles that engage in ironic word play or reference current events. "Beth usually takes the most theatrical roles," says Ludwig, offering as an example the homeless person in the three-part series, *Life, Livberty, & The Pursuit of Happiness*. In that dance about the differences between "haves" and "have-notes" in contemporary American, the vagabond played by Lessard is eventually given a party by her neighbors, a well-intentioned group who present her with such useless gifts as a bowling ball and a toaster.

Ludwig and her husband, Tom Dezelsky, act as unpaid staff, although A Ludwig Dance Theatre, which is a participant in the Arizona Commission on the Art's Organizational Development Program, has a paid part-time administrator, "For fund-raisers, we usually choose dances that a broader audience can identify with," she explains, citing ones using country music, the tango, or a classic Elvis Presley song as their basis. "But, my tendency as a choreographer is to assemble various musical pieces to create a kind of performance collage." She spliced a tape from a grandchild's holiday recital into one of Brahm's symphony No. 4, for example.

In early April, a twentieth anniversary performance concert titled *O Soul O Mio* will make its premiere at Tempe Performing Arts Center. Ludwig is hunting for an Italian chef to play a cameo role. "I've had good success with getting people from the community to take part," she says, admitting that Former Governor Rose Mofford and a local newscaster are among those who've responded to her inquiries, The new work will consist of a veritable menu of solo works, culminating, she hints, in a group event that somehow symbolically utilizes meatballs.

Recently asked to judge a Sedona-held "grannies on the rock" dance competition for 150 women in the 50 to 80 age range, Ludwig was especially struck by the courage of those coming at so late a date to a demanding discipline that has been her own life's passion. "Why." She wonders, "didn't some of these women who obviously love to dance start at an earlier point in their lives? I was struck that, for so many of these women, dancing means wearing Las Vegas-style costumes on bodies they weren't designed for. On the other hand, why isn't that okay? Why should an individual give Madison Avenue the power to dictate what is or isn't considered beautiful?"

In her own life, beauty continues to take new form: the rustic cabin north of Payson where she and Tom retreat inhale fresh pine-scented air; the treble of a grandchild's lifting voice; the wordless communication and solid dependability of long-associated collaborators; the excitement of each semester's new mix of students; and perhaps most importantly, the daily testing of her own ability to stretch.