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Don't be shy – ask Jessica Runge a question during her work Conversation Piece.

FREE RUNGE FLIGHT JESSICA RUNGE TAKES OFF AS A CHOREOGRAPHER WITH TRIPLE-BILL SHOWCASE

BY GLENN SUMI

FLIGHT choreographed and performed by Jessica Runge. Presented by princess productions' made in canada/fait au canada in association with DanceWorks at the Winchester Street Theatre (80 Winchester). Opens tonight (May 20) and runs to May 22, Thursday-Saturday 8 pm. \$18, stu/srs \$14. 416-204-1082.

Unlike stand-up comedy or even some experimental plays, most dance shows recognize the invisible wall between audience and performer. Sure, someone tells you to turn off your cellphone, but after that you basically can't talk. In Jessica Runge's Conversation Piece, part of her new showcase of solo work



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opening tonight at the Winchester Street Theatre, the dancer/choreographer encourages us to talk. To her. In fact, we get to ask any questions we like, and she, all the time dancing, supplies the answers.

The genesis of this particular piece – which debuted in an earlier form two years ago at fFIDA – goes back to an improvisation workshop Runge took in San Francisco. As a woman danced, the audience handed her cue cards that affected what she was doing.

"I remember loving that we were part of what she was going to make," says Runge after a rehearsal. "We didn't really understand how the cue cards related to what she was doing, but we knew they made a difference. I liked that we could be creative as an audience."

At fFIDA, Runge fielded tons of questions, but the one that sticks out concerned the nature of dance itself.

"Someone asked me whether dance could express something worth watching," laughs Runge. "I'm sure the guy didn't mean to insult me. But I replied that I hoped so, I was devoting my whole life to it. I could only give what I had to offer."

A modest statement for someone who's given us some of the most highly charged dance performances in the past decade. Whether dancing freelance or as part of the Toronto Dance Theatre, her home for the last six seasons, Runge's athletic, controlled movements grab your attention as much as her highly dramatic facial architecture.

Her new program shows off different sides. The first, Flight, is a theatrically conventional piece about water. Conversation Piece breaks down the fourth wall. And the third, The Girl Who Fell From The Sky, is a self-conscious piece about a gender-confused clown-like figure who discovers what he or she is doing onstage.

"I want each piece to communicate with the audience differently," says Runge, who's soft-spoken about her work. "One is emotional and

mysterious, kind of evocative but distant. One is really immediate, so you feel part of it, connected to the performer. And the last piece gives you something that's almost fantastical."

Being with TDT has given her great training, a consistent paycheque and challenging new work to do. This past season she was one of four choreographers in the annual Four At The Winch program, and also took on prominent roles in Retro Vista, a retrospective of artistic director Christopher House's work.

"It's great to have a group of people you spend a lot of time with and get close to," she says about her TDT pals.

"Maybe it's just a question of getting older. In the freelance community, I've noticed lately that all my friends I studied with are getting to be really exciting artists. That's so cool to see."
@

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