

Celebrating Lar

By Jenny Dalzell, October 2013

Dance educators talk about Lubovitch's profound influence.



*Nancy Colahan, left, and Christine Wright in Lubovitch's A Brahms Symphony.
Photo by Lois Greenfield.*

When listening to dancers talk about Lar Lubovitch's work, one often hears that it just feels good. Take this sentiment, from Marcus Schulkind, who performed with Lubovitch in the mid-1970s: "Of all the choreographers that I worked with, his movement felt the best on my body. There was an inherent lyricism to what he did; an ecstatic-ness that felt wonderful to perform." Christine Wright, a Lubovitch dancer from 1976–87, had a similar thought. "Lar's movement is the most satisfying," she says. "It's so lush."

Lubovitch, a graduate of Juilliard in the years of Tudor, Graham, and Limón, has created more than 100 dances since establishing his company in 1968. His sweeping, full-bodied approach to movement has spanned both the classics, like *Othello* (1997) and *Les Noces* (1976), and more modern pieces, most famously *North Star* (1978), *Concerto Six Twenty-Two* (1986), and *Elemental Brubeck* (2005). And though his work has been performed by companies including the Joffrey, American Ballet Theatre, and San Francisco Ballet, Lubovitch has also worked with his own core group of dancers, often augmenting the troupe for specific projects.

With 45 years and counting, the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company boasts a long list of former dancers and dancemakers, many of whom have founded their own companies (including Mark Morris, Doug Varone, Rasta Thomas, and Elisa Monte). But perhaps more unique is the record number of Lubovitch alum who have transitioned into teaching (like Wright and Schulkind), despite the fact that Lubovitch rarely, if ever, taught company class. Here, *Dance Magazine* associate editor Jenny Dalzell interviews five dance educators about their time with Lubovitch, and how his approach informs their work today.



Peggy Baker with Canada's National Ballet School Students. Photo by Cylla Von Tiedemann, Courtesy NBS.

Peggy Baker danced with Lubovitch from 1981–88. She is an artist-in-residence on faculty of Canada's National Ballet School and the director of Peggy Baker Dance Projects.

Lar is extremely articulate in giving verbal directions and describing what he wants. The dancers who worked for him also became very fluent in speaking about movement. He creates an environment in which you're ready to experiment, but he doesn't coddle you in his responses. You need to be open to hearing "no," or "yes and now." That's had a big impact on my own teaching. Though I don't necessarily say the "no" out loud, I'm able to identify and know what to do instead. That's the thing. He wouldn't just say, "No, that's not right." He'd always jump to what he needed.

In the studio, Lar rarely used counts. He likes people who push and pull with the music. He wants you alive in a more spontaneous time frame so that the choreography doesn't look so settled. It certainly has enhanced my teaching—not getting stuck in little grids of time as if the downbeat was the most important. His musicality also gives room for people to have slightly different responses, which makes for a better teacher—someone who doesn't expect everyone to hear and feel the music in the same way, someone who can appreciate the intuitive actions of dancers.

Christine Wright performed with the Lubovitch company from 1976–87. She gives a daily ballet class for contemporary dancers at the Gibney Dance Center in New York City.

Although I teach a ballet class, I'm not trying to turn the students into ballet dancers. The emphasis is on movement, phrasing, and musicality—not on perfecting a position. I want to teach them skill to control a movement and shape it into language. This is directly influenced by dancing with Lar, when I learned that movement is a language.

The company had lots of diverse dancers with varied backgrounds. Lar just let us be who we were—he picked us for that reason. He wasn't interested in making a technique. He was interested in

interesting dancers and using them in interesting ways. The whole point of teaching is to enable students to find their own strengths and help them develop their own movement language so that they're able to be free. I felt that freedom with Lar. I could be who I was and express what I wanted in the way that I wanted to. I didn't feel restrained.

A former Juilliard classmate, Gerri Houlihan performed as a soloist in Lubovitch's company for five years in the 1970s. Houlihan is codean of American Dance Festival and a professor at Florida State University.



Houlihan teaching class at ADF. Photo by Sara D. Davis, Courtesy ADF.

When I started dancing with Lar, it felt like coming home to all the things that I really loved. Everything I loved about ballet, and all the qualities and concerns that intrigued me about modern dance were combined in his style. I came from a classical ballet background, but I loved the breath, weight, and freedom that I discovered in Lar's movement. I've continued to weave those things together in my own teaching, bridging those two worlds.

Because Lar's work uses a lot of ballet vocabulary and has a classical sensibility, it can be an entry way into contemporary dance for students who might think it's strange or that it's not something they'd want to do. They don't have to throw out the ballet stuff. You just have to find out where in the work it's appropriate, and where you have to let it go.

Michael Leon Thomas first danced in Lubovitch's work as part of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and has performed Men's Stories with the Lubovitch company since 2000. Thomas is a freelance dancer/choreographer and teaches at The Ailey Extension.

Lar created a magical, seamless studio environment that has inspired me to do the same when I'm teaching. He has a wonderful capacity for empathy; you feel that he really understands his dancers. He never wasted our time. If he finished what he needed for the day, we were able to leave.



Michael Leon Thomas (lef), Scott Rink and Jason McDole (right) in Men's Stories. Photo by Carol Rosegg, DM Archives.

And like his ballets that flow from section to section, that's what it was like working with him. He used to do this walking thing around the studio. He just walked and walked, getting zoned up and ready to go. He has an amazing amount of energy and dove so deeply into his work. Lar made sure that you got the kind of help that would let you go more deeply into your character, even if he wasn't able to provide it himself. For instance, with *Men's Stories*, he brought in a fight coach.

Jason McDole, who performed with Lubovitch in 2000 and 2010–12, is a visiting artist at Point Park University.

I loved watching Lar watch his own process. He's so focused and quiet, taking every moment seriously. But he's also human enough to know that he may not know what's going on in the moment. He allows himself to be vulnerable. I've seen the movement just flying out of him, and he's very enthusiastic. But I've also seen him just be, waiting to get to the next place. It's sacred.

- See more at: <http://www.dancemagazine.com/issues/October-2013/Celebrating-Lar#sthash.d8BIbpXp.dpuf>