

Arts & Entertainment

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Courtesy photo

Dancers with "The Emergent Improvisation Project" bust a move. The performance, which debuted last month in California, is the brainchild of Bennington College dance faculty member Susan Sgorbati. "The Emergent Improvisation Project" will perform Friday and Saturday at the college at 8 p.m.

Mad science, dance style

Dance at Bennington College looks at the neurological side of movement

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BENNINGTON — Consider these categories: dance and hard science; improvisation and strict neurological principles. Are these opposites? Susan Sgorbati, a member of the dance faculty at Bennington College, would argue not.

The exact merging of dance and science will be on view Friday and Saturday with "The Emergent Improvisation Project," a dance performance at Bennington College. The performances are free.

When Sgorbati, who has been teaching at the college for more than 20 years, read "A Universe of Consciousness," she did not expect to understand as much of the book as she did. This rigorously scientific book by Nobel

laureate Dr. Gerald Edelman, founder of the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, Calif., shed light on what's known as "complex systems."

"I really understand this because I've been observing this in the dance studio," said Sgorbati.

While Sgorbati started out as a modern dancer and choreographer, she quickly became interested in dance improvisation as an instructor at the college.

"Dancers develop their own movement vocabulary," she said.

Witnessing dance improvisation, Sgorbati said she became more of an observer than an active choreographer. As an observer, she was able to analyze movements, and Sgorbati realized about 10 years ago that such

movements were not disconnected from one to the other, and dancers were not out of touch with each other even though they were improvising.

"For me, I began to name the patterns and forms I saw emerging from the group," she said.

Naming movement

These improvisational patterns, such as Sgorbati's so-named "path," "wave," "initiation-responder-frame," "repetition," "unison" and "main event-chorus" were reinforced when Sgorbati began having conversations with her colleague Bruce Webber, an evolutionary biologist at the college. Around this time, about five years, ago, the college also began a relationship with the Neurosciences Institute.

Webber and Sgorbati talked about the scientific paradigm of complexity, and that's when he suggested "A Universe of Consciousness" to Sgorbati. "What really was so amazing about it was that I understood so much of it," said Sgorbati in her office on campus last week.

Complex systems are natural systems that are "on the edge of chaos," according to Sgorbati. They are highly restrictive but there is also an element of flexibility. For instance, the human body falls into this category. While our bodies may be happiest at an internal temperature of

98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, a little bit of fluctuation is accepted before our organs can't take the heat.

In "The Emergent Improvisation Project," the complex systems are manifested through rules that are recognizable with each performance, but the way they appear each night is different. To explain her point, Sgorbati compared dance improvisation to a perennial garden, saying that while a gardener may expect lupen, lilies and black-eyed Susans to bloom each summer, since those were the flower the gardener previously planted, he doesn't know exactly how the garden will turn out.

Similarly, the "Memory Form" dance starts with a cemented series of movements, different with each performance, that the dancers then take in improvised directions. In the "Complex Unison Form," the dancers participate in more of a sequential development of rules, moving from the simple to the complex.

The performance, by seven dancers and three musicians, lasts for about an hour. "The Emergent Improvisation Project" debuted in San Diego, Calif., last month. The Friday and Saturday performances are scheduled for 8 p.m. at the Visual and Performing Arts building. For more information, call 440-4572.



Courtesy photo

Dancers with "The Emergent Improvisation Project" rehearse.