

Imagination & Irony in Motion

MARTHA MASON '88
BRINGS A SNAPPY
VISION TO DANCE

By Mindy Koyanis

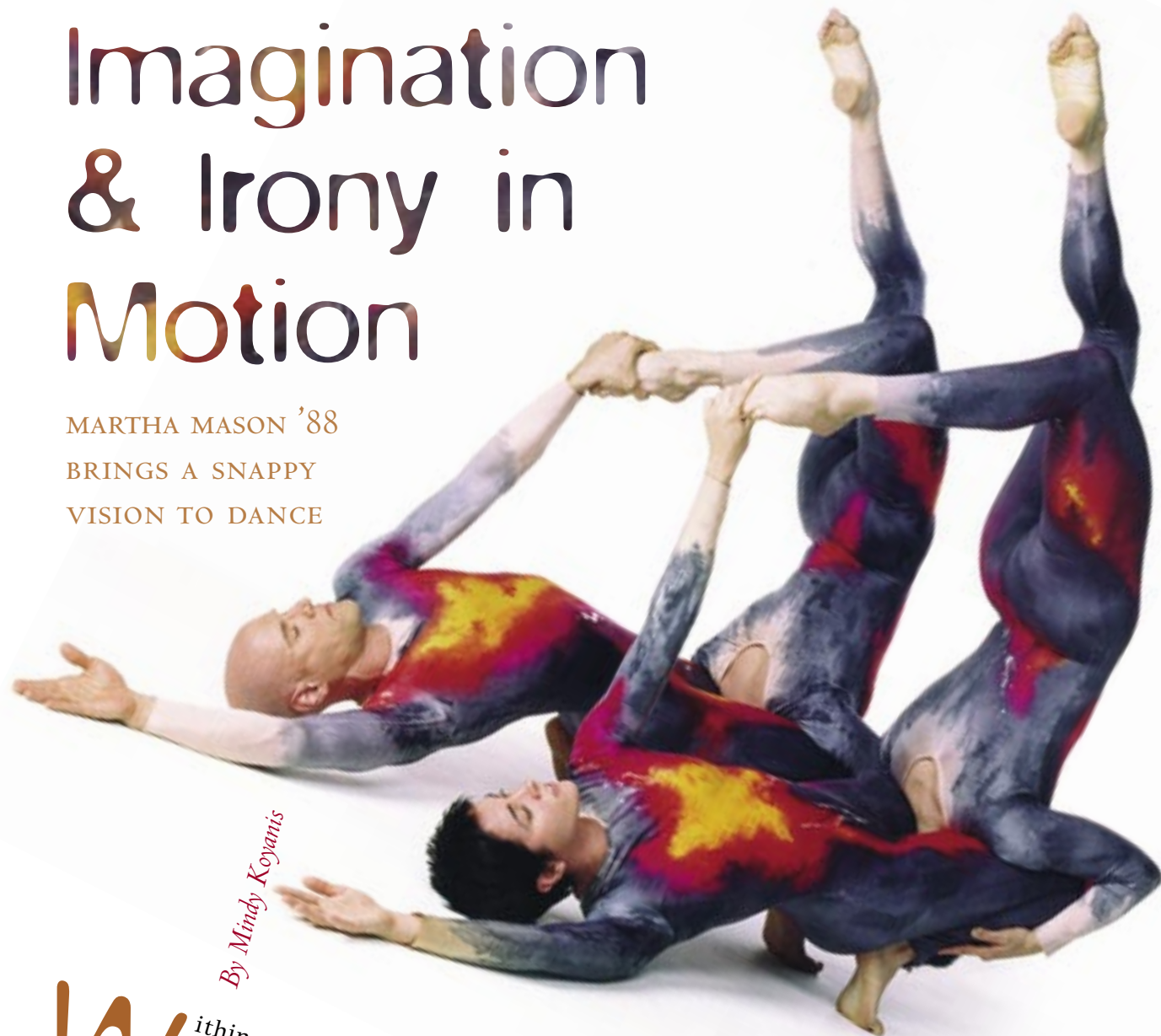
Within an old brick industrial building in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in a studio as warm as an incubator, Martha M. Mason '88 cultivates movement into dance.

Her back to a mirrored wall, Mason coaches two dancers interpreting an illustration from Edward Gorey's *The Lavender Leotard*. The dancers shape-shift in response to their own inclinations and Mason's directions: "What happens if you alternate the rhythm of the flicker?" she asks. "I'm looking for the negative space."

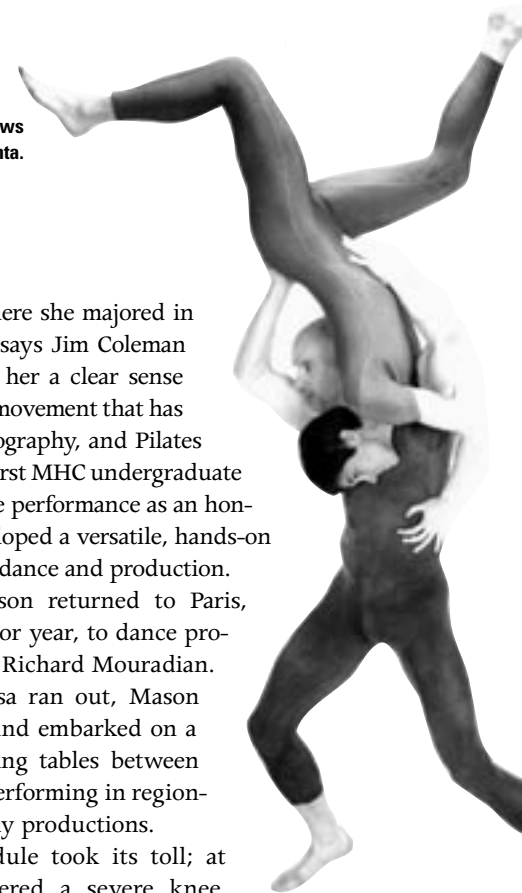
Mason tilts the chair forward, while quickly gesturing with her arms to the dancers: "I don't know if this will 'read' on stage unless the audience knows you're looking in a mirror ... The things that look most interesting to an audience often hurt the most on the body."

and spine. Mason calls out, "Let's do it again!" Martha Mason is artistic director of Snappy Dance Theater, a dancer, arts activist, and Pilates movement practitioner. Mason embodies compact energy, and at times her dark eyes give her an expression of astonishment. Her hands and arms move in rhythm with her voice when she

Mason then leaves the duet to its own development while she works with two other dancers on a different vignette. Mason directs, counting out the beats as she leaps, lifts, somersaults, supports and is lifted, inverted, supported. The sequence ends with a human slide down the curves and angles of her partner's head, neck,



Snappy's signature image shows Mason (upside down) with Jim Banta.



becomes engaged in conversation. Dance critic Theodore Bale says, "On stage Mason is glamorous, elegant, sexy, but there is always a side that is powerfully expressive." The insight that penetrates the dancing also influences how Mason manages the company in collaboration with her husband, Jürgen Weiss, Snappy's executive director.

Audiences are responding to Snappy's spark. The three-man, four-woman company was selected to cap the 2003–04 Bank of America Celebrity Series; was named best contemporary dance company in the 2004 *Boston Phoenix* readers' poll; was one of three American companies invited to perform at a Tokyo festival last year; and has been invited to the Open Look Festival in St. Petersburg, Russia, this year.

At home, Snappy is distinctive for its frequent performances and community and educational outreach. The group performs in schools through its "Snappy4kids" and "Physics Is a Snap" programs, and invites comments and ideas from the public through works-in-progress performances.

Mason also exercises her collaborative impulse by dreaming big for the New England dance scene as a whole. When Dance Umbrella, the primary producer of contemporary dance in New England, folded in 2001, Mason called a community meeting to find new ways of promoting dance and dancers. Mason dared to ask, "Will we fly or fold?" In a time of plummeting financial resources and waning community support, she took a leap of faith, choosing larger performance venues and increasing the number of performances. She also launched a drive to "go pro," hoping to make her company self-supporting through performances and touring while paying members adequate salaries.

Mason says, "Snappy has the potential to be a big fish in a small pond, but [we want] the power to grow the pond so others can grow too. The vision is not of Snappy as the only company in the state to be fully salaried, but as one of many such companies that will bring recognition to dance in Boston and Massachusetts."

With her eyes on that big picture, Mason also must focus on each piece in Snappy's repertoire. The company explores life's irony on the border between tragedy and comedy. While seemingly lighthearted, Snappy's work often has elements that evoke powerful and at times unsettling images, such as a pas de deux of ghosts dancing with their own tombstones.

This kind of expressive freedom is a long way from Mason's early dance training in classical ballet, which focuses on all dancers looking the same and performing identical moves. By age sixteen, she was exploring the dimensions offered by modern dance. Mason choreographed her first work then, finding choreography a compelling channel for creative expression.

At Mount Holyoke, where she majored in dance and French, Mason says Jim Coleman and Terese Freedman gave her a clear sense of anatomy and functional movement that has informed her dance, choreography, and Pilates practice ever since. As the first MHC undergraduate to create a full-length dance performance as an honors thesis, Mason also developed a versatile, hands-on approach to all elements of dance and production.

After graduating, Mason returned to Paris, where she'd spent her junior year, to dance professionally with Compagnie Richard Mouradian. When her money and visa ran out, Mason moved to New York City and embarked on a classic artist's life of waiting tables between taking dance classes and performing in regional touring and off-Broadway productions.

The demanding schedule took its toll; at twenty-four, Mason suffered a severe knee injury that forced her to take a year off as a "dancer on hold" and work a routine nine-to-five office job. To rehabilitate her knee, Mason began to study the Pilates method of balancing body and mind. This interest developed into her own practice as a certified Pilates instructor, practitioner, and master trainer.

That year proved a turning point, and Mason emerged convinced that her work had to align with her creative impulses and vision. Workshops she took with the innovative movement company Pilobolus inspired Mason and a founding partner to start their own collaborative choreographic process with Snappy in 1996.

As a solo choreographer, Mason found that what one person imagines takes different forms as a movement is interpreted by different bodies. Saying she would get bored using only her own ideas when designing and executing movement, Mason welcomes creative interaction with her dancers. She talks about collaborative choreography as a negotiation without limits. The dancers are her sounding board, and they brainstorm as a group. "The magic happens when the end result is something that everybody—and nobody—thought of."

The magic is visible back at Green Street Studios. In the duet, the dancers' bodies arc in unison, a single arm in back moving like a pendulum. Mason's gaze takes in the shape, the effect, the interaction between the static and the dynamic. Then Mason jumps up to demonstrate the next move. With one foot grounded, one stretched along the strong base of another dancer's body, and her arms outstretched, the energy passes from the floor, through the bodies, and out through the skylights. □

Roger Ito