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STAGE

Kaeja d’Dance celebrates its 30th anniversary with ‘31’

Husband-and-wife co-founders Allen and Karen Kaeja explore the concepts of touch and of identity and memory in double bill.

By **Michael Crabb** Special to the Star

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🗨️ JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Allen and Karen Kaeja, the husband-and-wife co-founders and artistic directors of Toronto’s Kaeja d’Dance, return to live, in-person performance with a double bill that celebrates their company’s 30th anniversary except, because of a one-year pandemic delay, their new show flies the numerically more precise banner “31.”

As choreographers, the Kaejas have always had distinctly individual approaches. Karen Kaeja — the couple invented a new family name when they married in 1989 — describes this as “a saving grace” in their long, tight-knit personal and professional relationship.

In the case of their latest show, to which each contributes a new group work — presented by Harbourfront Centre as part of its “Torque” series of contemporary dance — the theme of memory offers a linking thread with the content informed and shaped over lengthy periods of development by the performers’ own life experiences.

Karen, who came to dance performance from a background in dance therapy, explained that “TouchX,” her new work, has deep roots.

“Personally, the concept of touch, the sensory reality of touch, has always been at the forefront in my life. In a way you could say the piece began when I started dance. It stems from my initial curiosity about dance and connection.”

“TouchX” is performed by a core group of eight professional dancers complemented in parts of the work by 28 community

performers, some of them regular civilians, others students or recent graduates of professional dance program.

“Theirs is not necessarily movement that an audience might recognize as dance, but they’re learning phrases and, for a whole section, they’re also invited to bring into the work some very everyday movement and gestures. It’s very important that everyone feels grounded in the work itself.”

Kaeja always knew the work would probe how, as people, we experience, remember and embody touch, physically and emotionally, positively and sometimes negatively. “TouchX” began as a random working title.

“I kept playing with other titles, but nothing ever landed,” she said. “For me, the ‘X’ is the ‘don’t touch’ part of the touch. It’s really important for people to have the agency to say yes or no to touch.”

The work, developed in research modules over a long period, began before the pandemic struck. COVID’s arrival did more than merely slow down the development process.

“Prior to the pandemic I think there was more ease with touch,” said Kaeja. “Now there is so much extra sensitivity to the agency of touch. It has definitely pushed the work into a new realm, which is great. If I’m not growing as a choreographer, what am I doing?”

As for Allen Kaeja’s new work, we can thank Stephen Harper for spurring its creation.

The former Canadian prime minister’s ambivalent, some would argue hostile attitude toward refugee claimants was more than Kaeja could stomach. He wrote a Facebook post in November 2015 that went viral. It was headed: “I am the child of a refugee.”

In Kaeja’s case, it was of a Polish Jewish father whose lost almost his entire family in the Holocaust. While Maurycy Nosal, changing his name to Morton Norris, rebuilt his life in Kitchener, Ont., the emotional scars he bore inevitably impacted the new family he raised there. It’s a subject Kaeja has explored from various perspectives, onstage and in film, since he began to choreograph three decades ago.

Kaeja’s composer then, Edgardo Moreno, was also the child of refugees, from Pinochet’s Chile. The two men have worked together often since, including on this new work.

“It got me thinking, hey, we’re all children of,” Kaeja explained. “So I began inviting dancers in and asking them to write their stories, ‘What are you the child of?’”

The result is a work that examines how certain memories, consciously or unconsciously, shape who we are, how we move through the world and how we relate to others.

“I am the Child of ...” is Kaeja’s latest collaboration with University of Calgary theatre professor Bruce Barton and the creative hub Vertical City Performance, which Barton directs with Pil Hansen. Hansen also served as a dramaturge on “TouchX.”

In his role as co-director Barton, a playwright, director and dramaturge, helped refine and focus the collected stories into an evocative spoken sound score, recorded and spoken live. The dancers also sing a childhood song.

“My role was to help the dancers distil their stories, to pinpoint what’s transformative,” Barton said. “There’s great power in language and in the sound of language.”

Allen has a long history as a maker of dance films and has generally been very open to exploring new technologies. With his new work, Kaeja is incorporating AR — augmented reality — with the already multi-layered mix. As far as he’s aware, this is the first fully staged dance production in Canada to integrate augmented reality during a live performance.

As its name implies, AR supplements what we perceive as the real world with a layer of computer-generated perceptual information.

Audiences for “I Am the Child of ...” won’t be wearing special goggles or headsets — that’s more in line with VR, virtual reality — but they will be invited to deploy their own mobile devices. If they do, the cast of “I Am the Child of ...” will expand from the eight live onstage to include an additional five in AR.

“But if you prefer, you can fully appreciate the work just as it appears onstage,” Kaeja emphasized.

CORRECTION — NOV. 7, 2022: This story has been edited from an earlier version that misspelled the first name of Pil Hansen.