

# SUNDAY Calendar

## Modern? No, That's Too Old-Fashioned

Choreographer Kitty McNamee stands history on its head in her *Hysterica* work.

By JENNIFER FISHER

Choreographer Kitty McNamee may be rehearsing in the studio that once was home to Bella Lewitzky, California's modern dance icon, but she's not about to claim modern dance as her aesthetic turf—at least, not exactly.

"I don't mind making something that looks a bit modern," says the artistic director of the L.A.-based Hysterica Dance Company. "But if somebody says, 'That's so *moderne*,' I know I'm in trouble."

Sitting outside the hillside Studio City rehearsal space, McNamee explains the difference. Said with a campy flair, *moderne* is code for taking yourself too seriously and creating movement that's a bit too stern, in a style of the past.

"I always get concerned when people think my com-



Kitty McNamee prefers to call her choreography "edgy."

pany is a modern company, because it's not," she says, momentarily furrowing her brow. "I call it contemporary, because to a lot of people, modern dance is old-fashioned, and I don't feel that what I'm doing is old-fashioned."

In fact, what McNamee is doing with her upcoming evening-length work, "Noir" (at the Ford Amphitheatre on Friday), starts with something old-fashioned, a clutch of classic film-noir images—the fraught female in flight, menacing music, lurking men in shadows, *femme fatale* types.

But, as has been noted in several favorable reviews of Hysterica's performances—all in the Southern California area—McNamee tends to take familiar images and slant them in unfamiliar ways. The Times' Lewis Segal, describing last year's 50-minute "Water and the Well," noted the way her dancers embodied the contrasts in McNamee's style, "giving pop dance clichés maximum credibility and then showing the exploitation and fear underneath."

To describe shorter Hysterica works (at Open Fist Theater in 1998 and on shared programs at the annual Dance Kaleidoscope festival, at Highways and at a Palm Desert

**"NOIR,"** Hysterica Dance Company, John Anson Ford Amphitheatre, 2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood. **Date:** Friday, 8 p.m. **Prices:** \$15, \$20; \$12 for students. **Phone:** (323) 461-3673.

# Performing Arts

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## DANCE

choreography festival), critics have tended to use words like "pop-influenced," "theatrical," "sassy" and "ironic." McNamee's own favorite description seems to be "edgy."

"I think what I mean by that is current and aggressive," she says, citing as a few of her influences Edouard Lock's manic and super-cool Montreal troupe, La La La Human Steps, and theatrical German choreographer Pina Bausch.

But McNamee also acknowledges the influence of jazzy American dance-makers Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, which you can see in the gestures that pop up in her eclectic style—hands that flip downward like animal paws, hips that angle while the upper body takes on a lyrical stretch.

The eight members of *Hysterica*, who are going over a portion of "Noir" with McNamee's assistant, Ryan Heffington, while she talks, bring a variety of backgrounds to the work. A few have extensive ballet training, some have been more focused on jazz, and there are moments when it looks like they could attract serious attention dancing at a club.

"I think I'm particularly lucky to have the dancers I have," McNamee says. "They also work commercially [in TV ads, rock videos and concerts], and they're very of-the-moment, very contemporary, culturally. I think it brings a fresh edge to my background, which is very ballet and modern."

McNamee's background also includes other experiences that feed into her work. She began her performing life in a high school drill team, and later trained to be an actress in New York, joining the Open Fist Theater when she moved to Los Angeles in 1992. Five years later she formed *Hysterica*.

"Acting wasn't my destiny," she says. "I didn't feel the kind of connection that I feel to choreography. And I didn't particularly like the process of trying to be an actor, so I just came back to my roots."

Although she grew up in Ashland, Ohio, fairly dance-deprived, that didn't stop McNamee from having detailed daydreams of life with a company. Oddly enough, she didn't dream of onstage stardom, but of running the show behind the scenes.

"Even before I started taking dance classes at 15, I would sit in my room and pretend I was touring Europe with my dance company," she says. "I'd take my mom's blank deposit slips from her checkbook, and I would pretend to write checks for hotels and restaurants for the company."

"It's weird, but I would have this

whole fantasy trip. I was always the choreographer and in charge when we were touring. I even had a fake name—Jasmine Peters."

McNamee laughs, looking younger than her 32 years. She talks about other ways her Ohio dreams were fed, including the films noir that inspire her current work—movies based on Raymond Chandler novels or directed by Alfred Hitchcock or starring Humphrey Bogart. Since her other favorites were musicals that featured Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse, maybe it was inevitable that she would combine dance and film images.

McNamee loved her years with the high school drill team—being on a kick line with canes and top hats or pompoms. It was a fun way to get started expressing herself with movement. She also credits that performing experience with giving her a strong sense of independence. When her family moved to Texas from Ohio, she found a performing arts high school and auditioned. Even though she had only a year's dance training at the time, she was accepted. After that came her grounding in modern techniques (Limón, Horton and Graham) at the University of Texas, Austin, where she began to make dances as well.

Once she left acting, McNamee got back into choreography by setting dances for plays and movies. Her theatrical experience serves her well, she says, when she takes on the odd commercial job—she has choreographed a striptease for a Showtime movie ("The Last Word"); staged production numbers for benefits; and made "a little dance" for one of Lily Tomlin's male characters in a network TV special.

"Those kinds of jobs are very challenging," she says. "You have to do what they want, always very fast. It keeps me on my toes. And I think it brings something to my stuff here; I think it makes it more accessible to non-dancers."

One of McNamee's "Noir" collaborators arrives to watch rehearsal—Canadian composer Tim Labor, who has scored short films and contributed music to plays, but hasn't worked with a choreographer before.

"It turns out that Kitty and I have a similar working process," Labor says. "The first thing we did was to start a list of images that have to do with the visual style of noir, things that would evoke an emotional content."

The image that propelled Labor was one of a doe opening its mouth in a forest and emitting not a deer-like noise, but the sound of

a screaming train. His 29-minute score, which grew from this vision, will accompany one section of the evening; other parts of the work use the music of John Zorn, Barry Adamson and Bernard Herrmann (the "Psycho" music that New York choreographer Neil Greenberg also used in his recent noir-influenced pieces, which McNamee hasn't seen).

"I wasn't trying to create music in the noir film score genre, but we do refer to that," Labor says. When pressed for what to call the final product, he pauses and says in a style worthy of Sam Spade: "It's a kind of steamy cinematic ride through ambiguous noir images."

When McNamee takes over rehearsal in the sparse studio, which has one wall open to the darkening hillside, the dancers are already warmed up and launch into the section of "Noir" that uses Labor's score. Indeed, the music is menacing, full of ominous locomotive sounds and impending doom. A solo for the balletically articulate Shari Nyce, which will start on the hillside back "wall" of the Ford, makes her look like both a '40s dame and the Dying Swan.

In following sections, McNamee's style for "Noir" continues to be eclectic. It weaves together specific gestures—waving a cigarette, touching the brim of an invisible hat—and occasional break-dance moves, social dancing and jazzy riffs that appear unexpectedly in a blend of ballet and modern.

Most of "Noir" looks to be in good shape, with only one part requiring completion by McNamee. In the next few weeks, a film segment will be added, featuring close-ups of dancers in street scenes, as well as images of restless animals in a zoo at night.

And if it all sounds very post-modern in terms of the piece's wide-ranging movement vocabulary and fragmented take on nostalgia, at least it won't be "post-moderne," if McNamee has anything to say about it.

But mostly, McNamee just wants the work to be known by her own name—and that of *Hysterica*. "Technically," she says, "[hysterica] means female madness, but I think this is sort of the antithesis of madness. Even though there are guys in the company, the name brings to me a lot of feminine power and energy and creativity. That's what it means to me." □

Jennifer Fisher is a regular contributor to *Calendar*.