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Quarryography: New Life in an Old Quarry

By Janis Goodman

Three hundred and sixty million years ago when the granite coast of Maine was forming, the fairies, wood nymphs, and spirits were planning their debut. A massive rock formation consisting of microcline, plagioclase, and quartz seemed perched at the end of the world – too perfect a place to remain inert. This site of enduring materials was fashioned by the gods, shaped by mortals, and then resurrected by artists. Fast forward to the present, a now abandoned granite quarry, and a choreographer named Alison Chase, founding artistic director of Pilobolus Dance Theater. This explosive combination of person and place recently sparked a site-specific theatrical event called Quarryography. Chase realized that the quarry would be a full partner in this working relationship; her dancers would become sculptural pawns on a game board of granite.



From August 10 to August 12, 2007, the old Settlement Quarry in Oceanville (DeerIsle), Maine, hosted summer folks, locals, and professional artists as they combined their talents and visions to unearth these fairies, nymphs, and spirits. Opera House Arts commissioned and produced the theatrical event, with the cooperation of the Island Heritage Trust. (Opera House Arts is a year-round community performance center housed in the historic 1912 Opera House in Stonington, Maine.)

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Quarryography was a site-specific, time-based, kinetic installation, a multi-disciplinary work that traditionalists would call a dance performance. The elements of movement in Quarryography, however, were both human and mechanical. A larger-than-life puppet seemingly made of rusty cable (found throughout the site) became the protagonist in a conflict of good and evil. Cableman's 30 feet of arms and legs were suspended by his brilliant puppeteer Rick Weed, also the dexterous operator of the Dancing Excavator (the real workhorse of this production). Five additional puppeteers manipulated the gentle monster's arms and legs.



Mia Kanazawa, an artist and co-choreographer, designed the costumes and sculptures for the production. Her inspired designs were most humorously worn on the dancers' heads. She cleverly juxtaposed bright greens, yellows, and fuchsias against the surrounding gray and pale pink hues of the quarry. The agile "Greek chorus" dancers (milkweeds) wore costumes reminiscent of wildflowers. A large faux block of granite adorned the head of the sprite Puck as she beguiled Cableman in her bright pink taffeta tutu. The walking evergreens emerged and disappeared into the surrounding woods. References to nature shifted fluidly between prop and movement.

Composer and musical director Nigel Chase wrote a charming score for the production. His merry Rock 'n Steel Band orchestra, outfitted in snail caps and Day-Glo green shirts, set the tempo for the story. The music's ebb and flow reminded listeners that they were sitting on an island. At times, the rhythms seemed to echo distant offshore islands. The sound of the steel drums

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reverberating against the pine pillars and granite boulders took us back to the beginning of time. Never were we very far from primal forces; never were we unaware of our location.

Chase, who masterminded the performance, wove all of these audio and visual components together with the actions of her accomplished dancers. Their movements were part Busby Berkeley, part Cirque du Soleil, and part Pilobolus. The performers included many students and willing locals, along with a handful of extremely accomplished professionals. They rolled on the abandoned, uneven dirt surface, leapt out from behind granite blocks, and dangled precariously from the mouth of the dancing backhoe. The audience perched about 20 feet above the "stage" in a natural and relaxed large semi-circle. We sat amid irregular blocks of granite staggered at various, uneven levels and interspersed with weeds, large black ants, and wildflowers. The seating provided a simultaneous view out to Isle au Haut and Webb Cove.

On this large-scale stage set within the vastness of the open-air environment, the dancers appeared almost like dolls. Their presence was maintained by their vibrant colors and artful movements. Only Cableman and Dancing Excavator exerted a strong physical force. When granite boulders seemed to jump off the ridge to crush the badass chainsaw-wielding woman, we delighted in the triumph of good over evil. The story line was very much open to interpretation, with a compelling subtext about the relationship between environment and change. The forces of nature, history, and site became the lens for experiencing the production at its fullest.

In this site-specific work, there was a true transformation of place (communal and specific) that occurred during the three days of the performance. The relationship of venue, artist, and audience was strongly established at the onset. The production would never be the same performed elsewhere, and the history of the site was now brought into a new present and presence. As audience members and as performers, the Deer Isle community had a living conversion – sons and daughters of local fishermen made up a large portion of the troupe. It is no small feat to break down old stereotypes and animosities. Opera House Arts, Chase, and Kanazawa understand the profound implications of rebirth. They are part of the change experienced by the region. As members of the resident community, they have deftly walked the line between encroachment and preservation. Whether it island fill reclaimed as a park, the Baths of Caracalla recast as an opera house, a deconsecrated church turned into a gallery, or the Settlement Quarry transformed into a performance space, history and place are fluid.

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Historically the Settlement Quarry was part of the life blood of the Deer Isle fishing community. In its heyday at the beginning of the 20th century, when transportation was limited to ferries and barges, it provide draw material for bridges, courthouses, and museums. It ceased operating around 1980. With the drilling quieted and the coal-fired boilers gone, the Island Heritage Trust, a non-profit conservation land trust, purchased the site in 1996. Under its management, the evergreen forests still ringing the quarry have been maintained and walking trails established.

Chase saw Quarryography as having the potential to resurrect the old quarry for a new use. Her vision, along with that of Kanazawa, their production team, and the community, was jointly supported by Opera House Arts and the Island Heritage Trust. Funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Maine Arts Commission allowed the muses to come alive for one magical hour. They also awakened a sleeping giant.