



Shirley Mordine's dancers in *Quest*

# 40 Years Strong

The Windy City's Shirley Mordine & Co.

Chicago has Polaski Day, Cubs Opening Day, and of course St. Patrick's Day, but it's never had a Dance Day until now, thanks to the talent and untiring efforts of dancer, choreographer, teacher, and producer Shirley Mordine. Mayor Richard M. Daley officially proclaimed February 28, 2009, Shirley Mordine Day.

Mordine didn't miss a beat capitalizing on the occasion to celebrate the vitality of Mordine & Company Dance Theater, the longest-running contemporary dance company in the Midwest. Typical of her inimitable panache, Mordine treated the audience to a performance of her 1981 solo *Silver Lining*, easily the high point of the company's 40th-anniversary concert at The Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago, which Mordine founded in 1969 and directed until 1999.

Appearing in a gold lamé body suit and an endlessly long sequined cape, Mordine captivated the audience first with humor, then with her character's dramatic exit followed by an unexpected return. With pathos and wonder she portrayed an aging diva trying to relive the past and gazing into an uncertain future. The dance epitomized Mordine's unique blend

of theater and movement. Unlike the character in her dance, Mordine & Co., eight dancers strong, continues to sparkle with the richness of her choreography, both in revivals and new work, and shows no signs of slowing down.

Mordine received her initial training in San Francisco with Welland Lathrop (she performed with his company for 10 years), Anna Halprin, and the San Francisco Ballet School. She credits her studies with Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis as especially influential. Her approach to movement is centered in the torso and spine. "Every gesture comes out of that." Mordine's choreography ranges from the character-driven *Songspiel*, influenced by the theater of Bertolt Brecht, to her newest, *Illuminations*, an abstract

movement collage that enlists John Boesche's visual design as an equal partner with the dancers.

Not only have several generations of Chicago audiences and dancers been influenced by Mordine, so have many composers, visual artists, theatrical designers, and musicians. Many former Mordine dancers have gone on to other companies, including Daniel Charon with Doug Varone and Dancers, and Noah Vinson with Mark Morris Company. Jan Erkert (see "Teacher's Wisdom," Oct. 2008), another alum, established her own company while teaching at The Dance Center, and is now head of the dance department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Mary Wohl Haan is the artistic director of Boulder's HAAN Dances, and Margi Cole directs her own company in Chicago.

Mordine is most proud of creating The Dance Center and its active role in the dance community. The small department with courses in dance technique and composition blossomed into Chicago's leading dance training program, but not without some growing pains. Threatened with budgetary problems early on, Mordine sought to save the fledgling department by establishing a performance program. Bringing modern dance companies from New York, the West Coast, and abroad gave Columbia College students access to the world of dance and at the same time brought credibility to the college. In addition, The Dance Center built a strong audience and put modern dance on the map in Chicago. It continues to be Chicago's premiere presenter of contemporary dance.

What's ahead? Under the banner of "New Voices/New Directions," the company will be establishing a "Low Rent/High Impact" lab series of at least three weekends in different locales. Mordine plans to continue exploring the possibilities of technology, and "pursue what intrigues me through collision with other bodies of culture and generational differences. And I still want to perform," she says with an uncharacteristic blush. "I love performing!"

— Lynn Colburn Shapiro



Mordine in *Silver Lining*, 1980.

William Fedeking, Courtesy Shirley Mordine; Richard Klein, Courtesy Shirley Mordine