

A Legacy of Experimentation and Collaboration: Pavlychenko Studio

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Pavlychenko Studio was a mythic location in the tales told by several teachers during my professional dance training. They spoke of this place as though it were more an era than an address, and I heard countless anecdotes about a time where creativity, experimentation and eccentricity flourished. These teachers always remembered “Pavlychenko” with the fondness and slight sense of longing that we reserve for those special things which somehow slip from our hands and are lost forever.

In what follows, I will give a brief historical record of the Pavlychenko Studio, endeavouring throughout to detail the philosophies that prevailed during the thirteen years of its incorporated existence, from 1974 to 1987. Though there is a shocking lack of reference to Pavlychenko in most of the texts that have been written about Toronto dance history, my research has proven beyond doubt that this space played a crucial role in the development of the modern dance culture in this city. In many ways the studio was ahead of its time. The activities of those who ran and used the space contributed immensely to the creation, emergence and evolution of the independent dance scene in Toronto: much of what I have always taken for granted about the professional dance world into which I was “born” can be traced back to Pavlychenko. This paper centres on the studio’s founding and early history, and has been condensed from a longer version which addresses the entire story in a more comprehensive and detailed manner.

Nadia Pavlychenko was born in Saskatoon in 1938, into a Ukrainian family whose members all seem to have had a penchant for visionary thinking, leadership and achievement. Her father Tymofij (Thomas Karp) was a “botanical engineer, community leader, poet, architect and translator,” who discovered the weed-killing chemical 2-4D.¹ Both her parents were very active in their Ukrainian-Canadian community, and her mother Anastasia was a long-serving president of the Ukrainian Women’s Organization of Canada. Both Nadia and her sister Lusia were recognised as innovators within the Ukrainian folk dance idiom, and Lusia spawned an impressive number of dance organizations in her hometown of Saskatchewan. Their younger sister Larisa married famous Canadian painter Graham Coughtry, and enjoyed a career as a Vogue model in the 1960s and 70s.

While studying at McGill University in Montreal in 1956, Nadia had her first encounter with modern dance and the Graham technique. She graduated in 1959 with a degree in Physical Education, then studied with Lisa Ullman in England at the Laban Art of Movement Studio. She also spent three summers at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College, training under Martha Graham, José Limón, Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Louis Horst, Paul Taylor, and Yvonne Rainer, among others.

In 1962 Nadia Pavlychenko moved to Toronto with her husband George Buchan and opened up her own studio on Yonge Street near Isabella. For four years she operated what is commonly accepted to have been the first modern dance studio in Toronto to teach the Graham technique. She also taught creative dance for children both at her own space and at the National Ballet School. When Nadia was pregnant with her second child in 1966, she asked Patricia (Trish) Beatty to cover some of her classes. Shortly thereafter, Nadia and George decided to take their children and join Larisa and Graham in Spain, and Nadia apparently left her students in Trish's hands.

By 1970, Nadia's marriage had ended and she returned to Toronto. She enrolled in psychology at York University but soon switched departments, and in 1974 became one of the first dancers to graduate from the fledgling dance program. Nadia's interest in Eastern philosophy and the connection between mind and body began to mingle with some radical ideas she had about tension in movement, which were inspired by her own experiences in dance class. She decided once again to establish a school, this time to develop and teach her own "Mind/Body Efficiency" technique. Using the Graham floorwork as a framework, Nadia aimed to teach dancers to experience the entire body as an extension of the spine with everything falling, tension-free, away from it. Nadia's approach to training was holistic, innovative, inclusive, and quite unusual. She believed that the senses were inseparable, and in addition to modern, ballet and folk dance, her studio offered classes in music and visual arts. Though she was careful to stress that her work was "in no way a rebellion against Western systems," Nadia Pavlychenko went against the grain of the dance world that existed in Toronto at that time, and helped open the door to an integrated way of working that is now common practice among many of today's movement practitioners.² Nadia Pavlychenko worked hard and she worked a lot. On average, she taught seven hours per day, six days a week. One year after re-establishing herself as a teacher in the Toronto dance scene, Nadia had over one hundred and fifty students ranging in age from three to sixty-eight. One of those people was David Brown, an accompanist for classes at Toronto Dance Theatre who had discovered his own urge to dance. At the age of eighteen he connected with Nadia Pavlychenko, and despite a sixteen year age difference they became partners in both life and work. David identifies himself as co-founder of the Pavlychenko Studio,³ and others recall that "he was very much a part of the beginning of the studio."⁴

In 1977, he left Toronto and joined the Martha Graham Dance Company.

In the early 1970s Nadia and several of the dancers in her small performing company had begun following the spiritual teachings of Tibetan Buddhist lama Kalu Rinpoche, who founded "Dharma centers" in more than twelve countries. Pavlychenko Studio began under the auspices of Kalu Rinpoche, and the presence of monks and enactment of rituals at the studio continued until well into the mid-80s. Just shy of her fortieth birthday, Nadia was diagnosed with cancer for the second time in her short life. She went to the foothills of the Himalayas in Northern India to live out her illness as a nun in the monastery which was home to Kalu Rinpoche. Ruth Abrahams, Marilyn Aikman and Cathryn Rankin were her "disciples," and they took over the running of the studio.⁵ In the archives at Dance Collection Danse there are letters from Nadia to Ruth, written on tissue-like paper and still smelling of incense. In them she continued to direct the studio from afar, explaining such things as the logic behind placement of barres in the studio. She seemed at peace and in good spirits.

Nadia Pavlychenko passed from this world in July of 1980, at the age of forty-two. For forty days and nights, thirty monks sat with her body according to rites prescribed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. There is a story told which says that when she was finally cremated, a bird flew up out of the ashes, circled three times, and flew away.

Kathryn Brown was a former star dancer with Toronto Dance Theatre and Marie Marchowsky, as well as a teacher, accompanist and choreographer. She found her way to teaching traditional Graham classes at Pavlychenko Studio through the connection with her brother, David Brown. Shortly after Nadia Pavlychenko left Toronto for India, there was a “major shift” and Kathryn Brown took over direction of the studio.⁶ While activities under Kathryn’s leadership were a “natural extension” of the work that Nadia started, the freedom in movement that Pavlychenko proposed was quite the opposite of what Kathryn Brown had been trained to believe in as a dancer and teacher.⁷ Kathryn distinguishes her own philosophy by saying that under her there was a “transition from cutting edge techniques...to an arena...for the training of independent professionals...where they could also thrive and present their work.”⁸

By the early 1980s the number of dancers in Toronto was multiplying at an exponential rate, and there was relatively little opportunity for dance artists who wished to experiment outside of the established companies. Desrosiers Dance Theatre had its roots at Pavlychenko. For the company’s first three years, Robert’s open class at the studio was also his company class, and that space was where he rehearsed his first creations. The inviting atmosphere at Pavlychenko Studio made it a logical venue for independent artists to engage in collaborative ventures, which they did often. After presenting several shows at the studio, dancer and choreographer (and now York faculty member) Susan Cash found herself playing an important management role; for two years she worked closely with Kathryn Brown as Associate Director. They shared the workload; Kathryn procured funding, organized workshops and maintained a ludicrously intensive teaching schedule, while Susan coordinated the rental schedule, children’s program, and publicity for shows being presented in the space. They initiated a choreographic workshop which was meant to encourage and support the development of new ideas in choreography. For twelve weeks, Pavlychenko provided rehearsal space and production support to ten choreographers, four musicians, and twenty-four dancers. Many of these choreographers were exploring links between dance and other disciplines — new music, theatre, performance art, visual art, and literature. After this initial extravaganza, Pavlychenko Studio presented two or three concerts per year, each one showcasing a number of different independent choreographers; several of these took place in unconventional, offsite venues. Pavlychenko Studio acted as an umbrella for the community, allowing creators to share resources and shielding them from some of the strain of self-producing.

Pavlychenko Studio never received operating funding from any level of government, and the one and only project grant ever awarded did not come until 1986. Individual artists who used rehearsal space would contribute money from their own grants by way of rental fees, but the studio “struggled every month...to make ends meet.”⁹ Throughout its entire existence, Pavlychenko Studio survived largely on the labour of overworked volunteers; no director of the studio ever received a salary. It was around the studio’s tenth anniversary that Larisa Pavlychenko began to reassert her connection with the dance studio started by her younger sister. It appears that Larisa returned because she wished to raise the profile of the studio so that it

could act as a living tribute to her sister. By 1984, Nadia's presence at the studio was really only reflected in its name, and there was already "constant talk" of a change.¹⁰ Serious tension developed as Larisa's picture of the future of Pavlychenko began to emerge. Faced with a growing deficit, extreme burnout, and a clash of ideologies, Kathryn and Susan resigned their involvement with the studio in the summer of 1984.

The final shift in Pavlychenko Studio's operating mandate can be easily identified by looking at the difference in promotional materials. The Kathryn Brown years were a lot like the Nadia Pavlychenko ones; do-it-yourself, cut-and-paste, photocopied flyers were the norm. Starting with the 1984/85 season, everything suddenly became slick and polished. Sleek, glossy posters adorned with Graham Coughtry's stunning paintings advertised upcoming workshops and performances. Larisa began immediately to draw on big names to headline repackaged summer schools and winter intensives. Increased presence in the local media seems to have been an active (and successful) pursuit during this period of repositioning. Larisa's desire to honour her younger sister's memory was unwavering.

According to Larisa, in a 1986 *Toronto Star* profile, "Nadia's vision was to have the studio be a base for work between artists of different mediums, where they could explore and experiment without fear of failure."¹¹ Since the days of hanging out with their husbands at the legendary Pilot Tavern in 1970s Toronto, the Pavlychenko sisters had long counted numerous musicians and visuals artists amongst their friends. It is no surprise, then, that multi-media projects were to dominate activities at the studio for the remainder of its existence. One example is the work of Pavlychenko protégé Peter Chin, which embodies and epitomizes the combining of artistic elements and collaboration across disciplines that became an almost institutionalized focus under Larisa's leadership.

Gradually participation in events at Pavlychenko Studio became more and more a curated affair. Despite the apparent inclusivity of Larisa Pavlychenko's attempts to bring artists together across generations, styles and disciplines, the editorial slant of her invitations turned art-making at the studio into a series of constructions rather than free experiments. The era of the democratic "free-for-all"¹² was superseded by a pursuit of "complete concepts."¹³

As is often the case, success was Pavlychenko Studio's worst enemy. The cruel paradox is that by acting as "a catalyst for change and new growth," the studio helped to *establish* independent, experimental modern dance.¹⁴ As competition for grants and supplementary income from teaching jobs increased, the ability of many professional dance artists to make a living was severely diminished. Larisa Pavlychenko had a difficult time too. As with each of her predecessors, she did the job of "seven people," single-handedly putting on five to six programs per year without pay.¹⁵ In a 1999 interview with Heidi Strauss she lamented, "It killed me. I never slept. I was up eighteen to nineteen hours a day. And I'd still have to be there to open the studio the next morning. I cleaned the place before I left. I had to do the accounting. I kept going until the lease ran out and then I really crashed."¹⁶ The landlord wanted quadruple the rent for a renewal. Larisa's intention was to save the studio, even if it meant that the entity had to find a new location. She changed the studio's name to "Pavlychenko Dance" and began to prepare plans for a change in focus and a major fundraising drive. In 1988, as the independent dance

boom wound down and the culture of dance in Toronto began to shift toward the world we know today, Pavlychenko closed down “temporarily” for “dynamic restructuring.”¹⁷ It never reopened.

Pavlychenko Studio was a critical element of Toronto’s extremely active experimental dance scene in the 1970s and 80s. There, dancers and choreographers immersed themselves in an environment where new ideas were encouraged, and where it was possible to actually realise them. Each of Pavlychenko Studio’s three artistic directors had innovative ideas about teaching, performing and collaborating, and they all managed to both reflect and shape the ever-changing face of contemporary dance in Toronto and beyond.

The generation of personalities who were involved with the Pavlychenko Studio were and still are my teachers, mentors and heroes; many of them are now also my colleagues. From the outside and looking back, it is easy to paint those years as a time of revolution and rebellion. Yet when I speak to these artists about this vitally important time and place, I hear only stories of dancers living the lives they wanted to live, of artists seeking simply to express the truths of their existences. I hear humble expressions of the desire to find one’s own voice, without aspirations of fame, or even of establishment.

Less than twenty years after the Pavlychenko Studio ceased to exist as an entity, it is in danger of being forgotten. There are many dancers now who have never heard the name, and it appears that those days have often become a distant, sometimes foggy memory for many who were there. The relationships in this saga are circular—or perhaps it is more appropriate to describe them as a series of intertwined spirals. Again and again I find ideas reiterated, yet somehow always refreshed. It is a tale of families, and of friends, and of descendents. This chronicle is my personal homage to the legacy of profound influence left by Pavlychenko Studio.

NOTES

¹ “Dr. Thomas Karp Pavlychenko.” 3 May 2006.
<http://www.ucc.sk.ca/programs/nbuilders/1995/index.html#NB06>

² O’Toole, Lawrence. “Letting It Go In the Zorba Tradition.” *Globe and Mail* [Toronto]. 27 Sept. 1975, 32.

³ *Body Code*. David Brown. 3 May 2006. <http://www.bodycode.us/brnbio-old.html>

⁴ Whyte, Phyllis. Interview with the author. 21 April 2006.

⁵ Brown, Sienna (Kathryn). Telephone interview. 23 April 2006.

⁶ Brown, Sienna (Kathryn).

⁷ Brown, Sienna (Kathryn).

⁸ Brown, Sienna (Kathryn).

⁹ Cash, Susan. Interview with the author. 22 April 2006.

- ¹⁰ Brown, Sienna (Kathryn).
- ¹¹ Citron, Paula. "Studio Stresses Dance Innovation." *Toronto Star*. 31 Oct. 1986, D14.
- ¹² Kelly, Deirdre. "Independents Inspire Dance Scene. *Globe and Mail [Toronto]*. 27 May 1985, M09.
- ¹³ Pavlychenko, Larisa. Interview with Heidi Strauss. 7 September 1999.
- ¹⁴ Kelly, Deirdre. "Dance Studio May Be On Its Last Legs." *Globe and Mail [Toronto]*. 30 July 1987, D01.
- ¹⁵ Pavlychenko, Larisa.
- ¹⁶ Pavlychenko, Larisa.
- ¹⁷ Pavlychenko, Larisa. "Pavlychenko Dance In Transition." Unpublished document. c. 1987/88. Pavlychenko Achive Collection. *Dance Collection Danse*.

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