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Dancers take wing in 'Bird Brain'



Anja Hitzenberger

This weekend Jennifer Monson's troupe will give outdoor performances of "Bird Brain: Ducks and Geese," hatched after she observed circling pigeons.

By Camille LeFevre

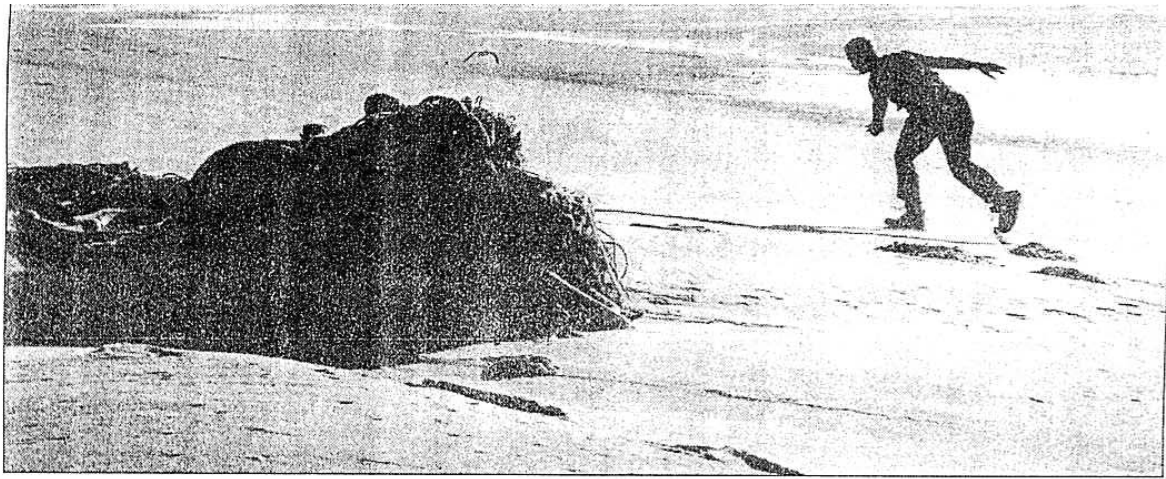
Special to the Star Tribune

Growing up in southern California, Jennifer Monson was drawn to nature and spent her youth camping and hiking in such spectacular locales as Joshua Tree, the Sierras and the Rocky Mountains. But when a life in dance called her to New York City, she was surprised by what she discovered.

"My first impression of New York was, 'Oh my god, this is a wilderness, too.' Mysterious, uncontainable, diverse and with huge, cavernous avenues lined with skyscrapers like canyons," she said in a telephone interview.

When she noticed pigeons circling in the sky outside her Brooklyn apartment, Monson started thinking about bird navigation — the shapes, formations and movements that birds instinctively use to make their way through space — and how dancers use their bodies as creative tools of expression in space.

DANCE continues on F4:



Gretchen Till

Jennifer Monson's dance project "Bird Brain: Ducks and Geese" explores the migratory patterns of birds through dance. The piece began in March in Corpus Christi, Texas, and the troupe has followed the migratory trail of ducks and geese up the Mississippi River flyway.

DANCE from F1

Previously, 'Bird Brain' followed gray whales from Mexico to British Columbia

Her multiyear navigational dance project, "Bird Brain," was hatched, the third wing of which, "Bird Brain: Ducks and Geese," alights in the Twin Cities this weekend, presented by Walker Art Center.

The piece explores, through dance, the migratory patterns of these species, as well as the metaphorical relationship between migrating birds and a roving band of dancers that is following them. The piece actually began in March in Corpus Christi, Texas, and the dancers have followed the migratory trail of their subjects up the Mississippi River flyway — through Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa and Illinois — all spring. After landing in the Twin Cities, the dancers move on to Du-uth, and the piece concludes in Canada.

"The concept is about how we navigate through the world, not only as dancers as we're making the artistic work, but also as we move through different ecosystems and communities," Monson said.

Previous components of "Bird Brain" included following gray whales from Mexico to British Columbia in 2001 and migrating with osprey from Maine through Cuba to Venezuela in 2002. Next year, Jennifer Monson Dance follows northern wheatears from the Arctic through Europe to West Africa. Along the way, the four-member dance troupe not only performs at various sites, but also teaches movement to schoolchildren. Panel discussions about the relationships between nature and culture, between environmental preservation and artistic presentation, follow each performance.

While in the Twin Cities, the troupe

will perform four times. Friday night's performance takes place at the former Twin Cities Army Ammunitions Plant in Arden Hills. The four-square-mile arsenal, once a site of weapons manufacturer, remains a largely undisturbed natural area of rare native prairie, woodlands and a 49-acre ecological corridor that connects the Carlos Avery Wildlife Area with Rice Creek's chain of lakes and the Mississippi River. Not only ducks and geese but sandhill cranes and tundra swans stop here. The Minnesota National Guard and Army Reserve hold claim on 1,500 acres for training exercises, but developers, the postal service, Ramsey County and sports enthusiasts also want a piece of the property.

The company (which includes local dancer Morgan Thorson) will perform beside a freshwater pond in an area of rolling hills, a former Superfund site that has been decontaminated. "Unlike a lot of Walker productions, this is low-tech," said Philip Bither, performing-arts curator. "It's really artists who are in a natural setting creating a movement piece inspired by the wildlife that surrounds them."

The piece will use set choreographic structures as a framework. "From my research watching ducks and geese, I've developed some material I call meditative flocking based on the repetitive endurance, the hard work, it takes to migrate," Monson explained. "It's very repetitive, shifts in space gently, is pretty much the same rhythmically. So for us it has a meditative quality. My hope is that, in some way, it refers to the journeys the ducks and geese go through."

Within this framework, the dancers improvise movements in response to what's happening in the environment at that moment, whether the wind blows, ducks quack or an airplane flies overhead. "The foundation of the improvisational process has to do with developing our sensory and perceptual skills, and homing in on them so we can identify what it means to be primarily working from sight, sound, smell or touch," Monson said. Even though the movement is abstract, she added, "hopefully it will

IF YOU GO

Bird Brain: Ducks and Geese

What: A series of outdoor performances by Jennifer Monson Dance.

When: 6:30 p.m. Fri. at the former Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant, Hamline Av. N. at Hwy 16, Arden Hills. Also 11 a.m. & 2 p.m. Sat., Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Walker Art Center, Mpls., and 11 a.m. Sun., Bell Museum courtyard, 10 SE. Church St., University of Minnesota, Mpls.

Tickets: Free, but reservations required for Friday. 612-375-7622.

Related events: Free screening of the documentary "Winged Migration," 12:30 p.m. Sun. Bell Museum. Panel discussions follow Friday and Saturday shows.

trigger people's own kinetic response to the environment as they watch us."

The Saturday-afternoon performance at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden will take a similar approach. The morning performances at the garden and the Bell Museum will involve dancers and schoolchildren in a "flocking dance." As Monson explained, "This dance is much more literal. We stand in a big flock, make a honking noise, get all set and ready to take off. It starts very slowly and develops, with literal arm movements that look like flapping."

Last week, Monson was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for choreography. And after years of researching migratory species, following their migratory paths and migrating across the world with her dancers, Monson is experiencing an affinity with her subject that she never had imagined. "In doing the project," she said, "I've begun to think of migration as state of being, that dancing is about movement, and movement is a place of home."

Camille LeFevre is a St. Paul writer.