



Muscles in the meadow

Dance Preview

By JUNE VAIL

Photography by Martha Mickles

FIVE weeks of preparation have enabled internationally known touring artists Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig to create "A Curious Invasion" — an hour-long environmental performance inspired by the 60 acres of meadows, marshes and woods at Maine Audubon Society's Gilsland Farm wildlife sanctuary in Falmouth. Daily rehearsal sessions at the sanctuary, with members of their New York dance company, faculty and students from the Bates Dance Festival, Maine dancers and local "extras" will culminate with performances at Gilsland Farm on Aug. 13 and 16.

"A Curious Invasion" begins with 16 dancers costumed in red among the round hay bales dotting the North Meadow. The tour progresses from place to place — on trails through woods, along the edge of the salt marsh, by a large rock outcropping. Sometimes the dancers move while the audience is stationary, sometimes the audience is free to rove while the dancers occupy a limited space — at ground level, or above them, close enough to touch, or over the hills and faraway. In one section there are solo shenanigans on the mudflats. In another, dancers promenade to original music by New Yorker Robert Een, in the formal garden planted with the peonies that were the pride of Gilsland Farm's original owner, Portland lawyer David Moulton. The performance ends by the pond with a sparkling finale of waterworks.

Like filmmakers, the choreographers people the landscape, working from various viewing angles, using perspective, scale and dynamic relationships to create visual images that also work at levels of metaphorical meaning. But the two Gilsland Farm performances — one at dusk, the other in full afternoon light — promise more immediate and unpredictable viewing experiences than any edited film. Performers and viewers alike are part of the invading hordes, casting ephemeral human shadows on the abiding earth.

Pearson and Widrig say that while their works for the proscenium stage open up internal environments, their outdoor performances expand awareness of external surroundings. Last year in New York City they presented "Love Notes to Central Park," a celebration of the city's green oasis. "A Curious Invasion" lets the directors use familiar choreographic methods in an unfamiliar place,

Pearson and Widrig emphasize this sense of awakening — becoming more alert to the familiar and more appreciative of local traditions — during their frequent teaching residencies in the United States and abroad. Pearson, sturdy, witty and straightforward, and Widrig, thoughtful and gently humorous, have worked together since 1986. Their teaching and working methods

encourage curiosity about movement and its possibilities, and they like to challenge students to find unique solutions to movement problems.

Pearson and Widrig's approach "integrates head, heart and body" so that students can "let go of the ego" and "allow the dance to reveal itself, through their performance." The choreographers say that viewers immediately recognize the special quality of such a performing presence. "The mind asks questions," they explain, "and the heart responds, if we let it, at a level of awareness deeper than intellectual understanding."

Similar techniques of directed improvisation are useful in working with a large group of dancers over a short period of time in a large expanse of territory; megaphones have come in handy for long-range direction. In works such as "A Curious Invasion," they encourage collaborative contributions from performers. Pearson and Widrig say these performances require the dance to evolve with the participants, in the spirit of the place.

"A Curious Invasion" was commissioned by the Bates Dance Festival in collaboration with Maine Audubon through the Environmental Performance Network. EPN connects arts presenters and environmentalists, enabling performing artists to make and present site-specific works in natural settings. The idea is to broaden audiences and heighten awareness of ecological concerns through the lens of the performing arts.

Maine Audubon and the Bates Dance Festival invite audiences for "A Curious Invasion" into a setting of unsurpassed natural beauty. Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig welcome the opportunity to bring dance to new viewers, nature lovers or passersby.



Dancers rehearse 'A Curious Invasion,' a Bates Dance Festival environmental performance project, at Maine Audubon in Falmouth.



giving free rein to what they call their "passion for space."

Conversely, for Maine audiences, while the quality of the light, contours of the land and silhouettes of dark trees on the horizon may be familiar, the appearance of dancers in the meadow and fiddlers in the treetops revitalizes attentiveness to the natural settings we tend to take for granted.

A Curious Invasion will be performed 7 p.m. **Aug. 13** (audience members are welcome to bring a blanket and picnic to the North Meadow at 5:30 p.m.) and 2 p.m. **Aug. 16**. Tickets are \$8/\$4.

For information, call 781-2330.

