



PHOTOS BY JENNIFER MUELLER — HUMAN LANDSCAPE DANCE 2007

Jennifer Rivers and Alexander Short at Freedom Plaza in "Leaving Home." Human Landscape Dance will perform again Saturday.

# This Troupe's Stage Is the World

By LISA TRAIGER  
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**P**lace and home hold a special power for Washington choreographer Malcolm Shute.

For Shute, the founder and director of Human Landscape Dance, an experimental dance troupe, they are the starting points for exploring our ultra-mobile, ultra-urban society.

"We're called Human Landscape Dance because I'm very interested in our relationships with the places we inhabit, the places we live, the places we experience and in a larger sense our relationship to nature," Shute says. That's why it is rare to find Shute's three dancers — April Betty, Jennifer Rivers and Alexander Short — performing in traditional venues. Shute prefers the outdoors, and his troupe has danced in a fountain, on a grassy patch of Freedom Plaza on Pennsylvania Avenue, in a stairwell, in Dupont Circle and against the wall of a building.

On Saturday, Shute's "Leaving Home," a 25-minute meditation



Dancer April Betty says moving so slowly allows her senses to reawaken.

on birth, growth, separation and change, will be performed on the Mall between Fourth and Sixth streets NW at 11:30 and then at a spot between Sixth and Seventh streets at 1:30. At 4:30, the dancers will reconvene at the Atlas Performing Arts Center on H Street NE with a premiere of "Nonstop," performed not on the stage but in

the theater's lobby against a wall. The three dancers tremble, tumble, flail and cling to the wall in what the choreographer says represents "a long-distance journey."

It is the kind of work that allows dancers and spectators to expect the unexpected. The company, founded in the fall, seeks to find beauty and surprise in life's most ordinary settings. By putting dancers into the prosaic and mundane landscapes that we encounter on a daily basis, Shute says he hopes to encourage passersby to see the same old things in new ways. He also hopes to capture the imaginations and interests of those who may not typ-

ically attend a contemporary dance performance.

"I wanted to find a way to reach out to people who would ordinarily go to a ballgame and not a dance concert," says Shute, 33.

In "Leaving Home," seeing something new comes from watching movement unfold at a snail's pace. Among his influences, Shute cites the Japanese American dance couple Eiko and Koma

for inspiring him to explore the outer edges of dancing through a process Eiko calls "delicious movement," in which dancers use their bodies from the inside out, with their eyes closed, to feel, rather than display, movement. It is a decidedly different approach, unlike anything dancegoers raised on the refined technique of classical ballet, the

fully embodied attack of modern dance, the rhythmic articulation of tap or the high-octane personality of Broadway and jazz might expect.

In "Leaving Home," the three dancers begin in an egglike space on the grass, demarcated by a huge swath of silk. To a score of waves, rumbles, beats and pings composed by Shute, who collected and manipulated sounds, including traffic, doors, birds and construction noise, the dancers lie in a fetal position, eyes shut and breathing steadily.

Karen Bradley, an associate professor of dance at the University of Maryland, where Shute studied, commends the choreographer for "his nuance and specificity. . . . There's a great sense of ongoingness, flow, control and then release, and Malcolm has come to make very specific choices that I think are quite interesting."

Shute encourages viewers to take in the work from multiple angles and notice their own changes in sensation and experience by watching the steady unfurling and slow evolution of the dancers' movements, like an awakening, or, indeed, a birth.

In life, Shute says, "we have the conceit that we're in control everywhere we go, and we're actually not. We're still just animals; we're still as much a part of nature as we ever were."

Company member Betty says that in moving infinitesimally, her senses slowly awaken. "Moving so slowly gives me the opportunity to make many more choices, and many more choices present themselves to me at every moment in dancing in this piece because I have time to consider them. I think I could do it seven different ways, and you would look at it from the outside and it doesn't seem much different at all. But from the inside, it's a completely different terrain every time."

## Human Landscape Dance

On the Mall  
202-547-3506

Saturday