

Publication: Times Transcript; Date: Jan 23, 2015; Section: Main; Page: A7

Tackling outmigration with dance

Toronto contemporary dancer, choreographer and arts advocate teams up with the Atlantic Ballet

ALLISON TOOGOOD
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Home is where the heart is.

But sometimes it simply isn't where the opportunity is.

Shannon Litzenberger, like many young adults before her and after her, left her rural homestead and home province to pursue a dance education and eventually a career.

As a contemporary dancer, choreographer, writer, director and more, Toronto may be Litzenberger's base, but her roots remain in Saskatchewan on her parents' farm just outside Melville, a community of about 5,000.

Litzenberger, who is working Moncton this week as a guest artist of the Atlantic Ballet Theatre of Canada, began to see an entire generation uproot itself to Canada's largest urban centres and places of prosperity. At the same time, she saw the stunning effects of the outmigration on the landscape back home.

The arts advocate, researcher and policy strategist has melded the world of this social and geographic phenomenon with the contemporary dance aesthetic and, a few years ago, her one-woman production, *HOMEbody*, came to be.

No stranger in using the performing arts as a tool for societal change, the Atlantic Ballet, headed by CEO Susan Chalmers-Gauvin, is teaming up with Litzenberger for a collaborative approach on the subject of outmigration.

The ballet and Litzenberger's own contemporary dance company have organized a multi-faceted symposium, set to be held on May 6 in Fredericton.

"The goal with *HOMEbody* was not just to create piece of art, it was also to instigate a conversation about change in our country."

Litzenberger, who attended Ryerson University for her undergrad and received a master's degree at York University, said there's a big question mark hanging over the future of small-town Canada – something New Brunswickers



Contemporary dancer, choreographer and arts advocate Shannon Litzenberger performs in her production *HOMEbody*. PHOTO: KEVIN KONNYU

know all too well – and the change in population demographics.

Only 100 years ago, she said, it was dominantly rural, and now about 80 per cent of the Canadian population lives in urban centres.

"The symposium looks at what would make it compelling for us to help these communities flourish? How do we build possible futures for rural parts of our country, what does it mean to people to live here? And what does change mean, and what would be compelling for a new generation to make a home here?"

Litzenberger, who trained with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School in her youth, uses props, including a rustic fence that transforms as the performance evolves, and wardrobe changes as a means to propel *HOMEbody*'s choreography and emotions further.

"People ask, why use dance? Because it is such a physical, emotional, visceral medium, and that's where home lies for us, I think. It's a feeling just as much as a place."

During her many trips back to Saskatchewan, she digitally captured the changes to her hometown landscape – much of it being sold off to major farming corporations and in other commercial deals – and projects video clips onto the screen during the performance.

"Farm land on both sides of my where my parents live has changed so much over time. It struck me as quite sad but quite beautiful because the environment claims these abandoned homes. The piece portrays thinking of the

houses as decaying monuments of our pioneering roots."

Though she's premiered and performed *HOMEbody* in Ontario, the symposium is the first collaborative approach Litzenberger has taken about the issue and hopes to offer others in the Maritimes, too.

"The Atlantic Ballet is an incubator for potential touring in the Maritimes," she said. "There's a sense of vitality in communities with the presence of artistic activity. It helps us feel connected, and the arts reflects on our own identity as a community."

Chalmers-Gauvin said earlier this month the symposium will feature post-secondary student delegates and public and private sector officials who will participate in conferences and break-out room activities in the effort to identify key aspects that will keep them in New Brunswick to live and work.

ArtsLink NB will be involved, Litzenberger will perform her piece and there will also be a visual arts exhibit component.

Litzenberger also works with organizations like Business for the Arts, the Canadian Arts Summit, ArtsVote Toronto, the Laidlaw Foundation, Dance Umbrella of Ontario, the Canadian Arts Coalition, and the Metcalf Foundation, among others. She has published over 100 articles on arts policy through contributions to local, national and international publications. Litzenberger was the 2012 recipient of the Jack McAllister Award for accomplishment in dance.