

# Magic Moments

by Caroline Hall Otis

Contactworks' improvisational concert last Friday night was cozy and inventive. First of all, the performing space at the Ozone studio is warmly beige, intimate and inviting. As the audience filtered in, the dancers were warming up—rolling, lifting and rubbing each others' backs. Contact improvisation is about touch—physical communication and trust. Vicariously, I could feel those fingers rippling down my spine, and it felt good.

By definition, an improvisation doesn't have the visual design of a choreographed work. Some movements are ineffective or overly repetitive, and "magic moments," once seen, are gone forever. To some extent, all of this held true Friday night, yet Contactworks has more than its share of magic moments.

The transition between warming up and starting the concert was subtle. The dancers simply sat down, collected themselves, breathed and waited. Slowly, Patrick Scully began to inch across the space on his derriere, rocking his head and torso back and forth. Jay Smiley repeated Scully's movement, percussively this time. After a Smiley chain of effortless somersaults, Terri Krusan and Wendy Oliver joined the dance to create a crazy-quilt of lifts, taking and receiving the weight of other bodies, falling, writhing and balancing.

The impulses were very clear. As one dancer initiated a movement idea, the others picked it up, wrung it out and moved on. Not in a "She's swinging, so I'll swing, too, and now we've swung enough so let's do something different" sort of way, but in a natural evolution of



Contactworks dancers get in touch

movement, impulse and rhythm. These people are so attuned to each other that there were none of those static (and embarrassing) pauses when one person starts something and others fail to follow. It's even more remarkable—considering that this is improvisation—that these dancers can leap at each other, be thrown in utterly unexpected ways and land on their feet. It's all smooth as silk and nobody gets hurt.

When, in the middle of the first dance, Scully began to recite "Twas brillig and the slithy . . ." I thought, "Uh oh, it's going to get precious." I was wrong. In lieu of music, which would have been distracting, the use of voices turned out to be natural and very engaging. For example, Scully and Kru-

san's duet, *The First Time* (my title) was a verbal narrative on a couple who, after four years of dating, decided to Jeep out to her parents' Minnetonka carriage house and "do it." This scenario was reinforced with hysterically funny movement—bashful pussy-footing and a riotous writhing summation.

The program's second duet, danced by Smiley and Oliver, could have been a classroom choreography assignment, so well did it illustrate the basics of space, weight, impulse motivation and dynamics.

The final work of the evening began with the company in a "human junglegym." Some truly magic moments grew from the shifting tangle of bodies—effortless

handstands on any available back, an embracing couple helped aloft by a 6' 8" Scully elevator, the melting flow of bodies and weight shared between people who know and trust each other. It was obviously sensual to do—and to watch as well.

An improvised performance is a curious beast, necessarily loose and casual, but a performance nonetheless. The dancers have to concentrate on each other to pick up verbal and physical cues, but they must also project to their audience. That Contactworks strikes that balance so well is a tribute to the four attractive individuals in this group, and to the intelligent, imaginative, and energetic approach they take to movement.