



Photo: David Hou

Ottawa XPRESS Preview Asylum of Spoons

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By T.S. Warren

Bringing Dance Hot To The Table: *The Kaejas stir up family dynamics with Asylum of Spoons*

Allen Kaeja was strolling through Honest Ed's budget emporium when he spotted the spoons on sale. Cheap, shiny, ordinary tablespoons.

"Out of impulse I bought 40 spoons," recalls the Toronto choreographer and filmmaker who with his partner Karen created Kaeja d'Dance, a contemporary company renowned for vigorous athleticism and exquisite fluidity.

"I walked into rehearsal of my new piece *Silent/Still* and unbeknownst to my dancers, I just put the spoons on the table and the transformation was amazing. What had been a sedate, reflective piece about an abandoned house recalling the family that lived there became [an] absolutely bizarre and dynamic asylum of the family. It was as if the spoons stirred up their struggles, needs and hidden passions.

"So then I went out and bought 200 more, then I bought 200 more, and now there's over 2,000 spoons!"

No wonder there's all the clatter about *Asylum of Spoons*, a Canada Dance Festival commission and world premiere on June 10 in Ottawa. After a 16-minute preview of the full-length work, Toronto critics compared it to the theatrical absurdism of dance great Pina Bausch, but disagreed on whether it's "a family get-together from hell" or "one big happy, dysfunctional, memorable family."

Kaeja, who jovially does 7 a.m. interviews while preparing his kids' breakfast eggs, says it was only after he had created *Asylum* that a brother put it to him at a family gathering: "So which one of characters am I?"

"Only then did it hit me that there are seven people in my family and there are seven characters on stage. I can't say that the work is autobiographical but growing up in a large Polish family in Kitchener, I can say that one thing that's similar is the absurdity. We have always had this ability to find the insanity within any situation."

Intensifying *Asylum's* visceral family connection is the stunning presence of real-life partner Karen as the fiery and sensuous matriarch who commands not only the destinies of her on-stage children but the unrequited lust of a male servant. Kaeja admits that *Asylum's* matriarch and his wife share "an incredibly frenetic and energized sense of self. Karen's a hyper, hyper, hyper detailed person and that sort of dynamic neurosis is alive in the piece. It's not a negative thing, it's quite beautiful."

For her part, Karen sees *Asylum* as a slightly altered direction for Kaeja d'Dance. "Allen's work in the last 10 years has been very athletic and abstract in its revelation of character, but this piece is very theatrical, though still has the vigorous partnering with lots of lifts that are a hallmark of his kinetic style." (Kaeja came to dance from a background in judo and wrestling.)

Performed on a white stage, with costumes designed by Cheryl Lalonde that easily transform from staid to sensual, *Asylum of the Spoons* is accompanied by a lush score from longtime musical collaborator Edgardo Moreno.

Nor has Allen forgotten Honest Ed's. The Toronto store, along with two managers who bent over backwards to locate more spoons after the original order was sold out; get a credit in the program.

CANTERBURY CONNECTION

"Moving into a school is second nature to us, be it in Atikokan or Lapland," notes Allen, of the Kaejas' 15-year goal of educating young people about dance. "So to move into a performing arts school such as Ottawa's Canterbury High School is fantastic. The kids are completely committed, physically adept and their energy is unbelievable."

Underwritten by TD Canada Trust and created with the input of 10 senior dance students last February, the short piece *Unsettled Years* will be staged at the festival just before *Asylum of Spoons*.

The residency also gave Kaeja dancer and choreographer Tanya Crowder the chance to return to her alma mater to teach workshops and assist with *Unsettled Years*.

"I received a lot of great training and support at Canterbury," says Crowder, who graduated in 1992-93. Involved with Kaeja d'Dance since 1997 and a company member for two years, a drabbed-down Crowder dances in *Asylum* as a young maid who both admires and envies the family matriarch.

ASYLUM OF SPOONS KAEJA D'DANCE
THURSDAY, JUNE 10 AT 7:30 P.M.
NAC THEATRE