

Performing Troupes Blending Their Art

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LEAD: ROBBY BARNETT, an artistic director of the Pilobolus Dance Theater, said he felt "a bit starry eyed" when David Hays, the founder and director of the National Theater of the Deaf, suggested two years ago at an art function in Hartford that they collaborate on a new works. Though it was the first time that the leaders of the two Connecticut-based companies had ever met, Mr.

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"We were both a bit shy about the idea at first," Mr. Hays said. "It was a little like a teen-age love affair where you can't understand why anyone likes you that much."

Once they overcame their initial reserve, Mr. Hays said, the two companies submitted a grant proposal to the Storm King Theater Institute in Cornwall-on-Hudson, N.Y. The institute, which finances residency programs for professional artists, quickly accepted their request. With the money that they received, Pilobolus (pronounced puh-LOB-a-lus) and the National Theater of the Deaf spent three weeks last summer at Storm King developing a work based on Ophelia's death in "Hamlet." The collaboration, the two directors said, was a fruitful one.

Refining Work

"It was one of the most unusual and rich experiences of my life," said Mr. Barnett, who lives in Washington Depot, where his dance

company is based. "Suddenly it seemed so strange that we hadn't gotten together sooner."

Another grant, for \$12,000, recently awarded to the two groups by the Connecticut Commission on the Arts has allowed them to refine the work that they began in 1989. The result of their efforts will be presented at the commission's annual arts dinner, on Sept. 7, at Connecticut College in New London. Tickets for the dinner are available through the Office of the Connecticut Commission on the Arts. For information, call 566-4770.

The acting executive director of the commission, John Ostrout, said the collaboration blends two of the world's most innovative theater companies. "And to think that they both happen to live in Connecticut," he said. "We find this all very exciting."

The final rehearsal for the piece, held recently at a hall at the National Theater of the Deaf, in Chester, included four dancers from Pilobolus and five actors, two with speaking parts, from the theater company. In an interview before the presentation, the directors of both troupes said the additional grants had enabled them to go beyond their experiment of last summer.

"At that point, we focused on the process of creating the piece without restrictions and worry about a finished product," Mr. Hays said. "It was a little like the painter who slowly doodles on his napkin while he's eating supper. Now we have an opportunity to transform our doodles into a portrait. And so often in the art world, the money is so scant that you cannot afford that luxury."

For Pilobolus, which is internationally known for its acrobatic dance movements and quirky sense of humor, the collaboration has offered an opportunity to integrate its style into a spoken narrative, Mr. Barnett said. For the members of the National Theater of the Deaf, who use sign language along with the spoken word, the collaboration has provided a chance to blend movement with text, Mr. Hays said. He added that the dance theater "has undoubtedly left its imprint."

For the collaboration, the two companies chose to develop a work based on Gertrude's speech from "Hamlet," beginning, "There is a

willow grows aslant the brook," which relates to Ophelia's drowning. Set to the foreboding sound of a bachel, a musical instrument that is part drum, cymbal and bassoon, the piece opens with Ophelia elevated by four dancers whose movements ebb and flow as if she is floating down a brook.

Drama, With Whimsy

When she is placed on the ground, the work becomes a whirlpool of flashbacks. The actress who plays Ophelia, Camille Jeter, uses sign language in fluid dance movements to convey the character's thoughts and emotions, which range from frivolity over her love for Hamlet, who appears indifferent, to anger and grief over the death of her father by Hamlet's sword.

The composer of the musical score, Naaz Hosseini, uses violin and flute music along with the bachel, whose vibrations can be felt by a deaf person, to mirror Ophelia's impending emotional devastation. As the tension builds, Ms. Hosseini chants a haunting melody.

Though the piece is for the most part serious, there are a few whimsical moments when the tempo lightens and the dancers break into an Elizabethan dance. In the end, when Ophelia, in a state of delirium, falls into a brook while placing garlands on the bough of a willow tree, the dancers cascade around her, their hands moving like waves of water that finally overpower her.