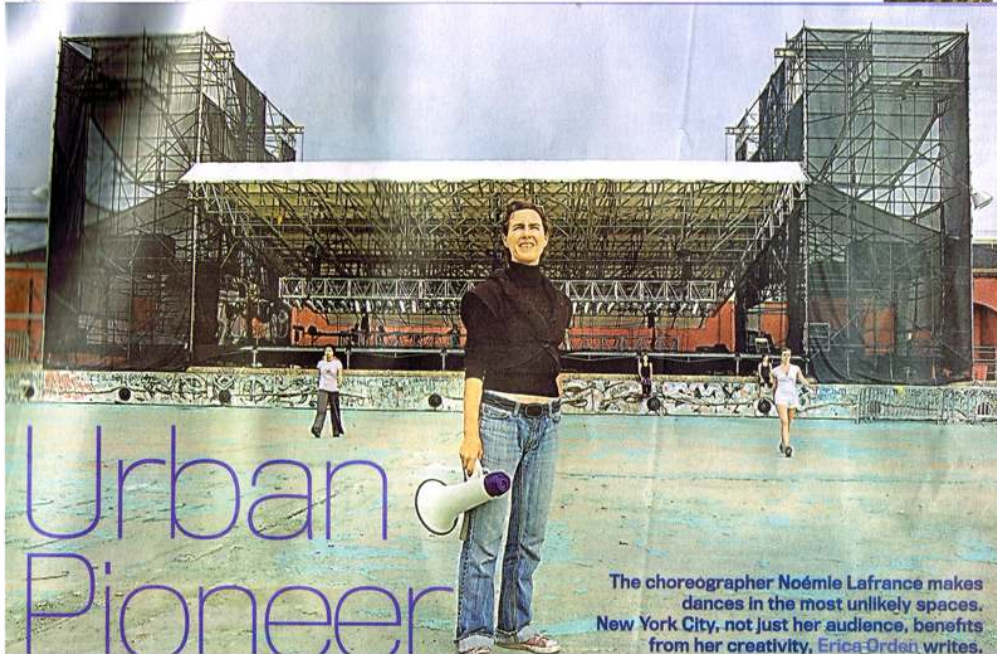


# ARTS+



The choreographer Noémie Lafrance makes dances in the most unlikely spaces. New York City, not just her audience, benefits from her creativity, Erica Orden writes.

**M**cCarren Park Pool in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, is today an urban playground, a place where stylish crowds gather for outdoor concerts and events. For two decades, however, it was an urban wasteland, a 50,000-square-foot drained swimming pool strewn with broken glass, covered with graffiti, and surrounded with a barbed wire fence.

The catalyst in its transformation was choreographer Noémie Lafrance, New York's reigning queen of site-specific modern dance. In 2005, she adopted the gritty pool as the location for her large-scale dance work, "Agora." Following the final performances of "Agora," the site—now less hazardous and more public-friendly—has become a stomping ground for Brooklyn's vigorous art and music scene. The transformation was both an artistic success—the work advanced Ms. Lafrance's oeuvre, which will continue September 13 with "Agora II"—and a public example of how the arts can aid urban reclamation.

"I had to fight a lot of political fights to get this project to work," Ms. Lafrance, a Queens area native, said, staring off toward the distant end of the pool during a recent rehearsal. "This project is political because of what it brings up in terms of the meaning of public space. Public space is supposed to be about everybody, not the government."

Though civic groups are at odds over whether the pool should be turned back into a working swimming pool, many credit Ms. Lafrance with single-handedly reviving, at least in spirit, a descript eyesore.

"She was the only one to bring it to life," the parks and recreation chairman of Community Board 1, Mieszko Kalita, said of Ms. Lafrance's presentation of her plans to the board. Ms. Lafrance and her nonprofit company, Sens, worked with the board and the Parks and Recreation Department to gain permission to use the site, and to secure some of its structural liabilities.

With that complete, the pool became the location for free concerts staged by Jelly NYC, a music video production company. Sarah Hooper, co-director of Jelly NYC, sees the impact that Ms. Lafrance has had in clear terms: The concerts, which featured bands like Les Savy Fav and Deerhoof, drew an average of 5,500 people.

"Noémie was the first one to get in there and actually do something to open it up," Ms. Hooper said. "Someone had to get in there and spend two weeks getting up all that broken glass and making all the changes that needed to be made."

Ms. Lafrance, 32, is no stranger to the perils that come with staging dance in unusual locations. In the last five years, she has choreographed pieces the margins of city life. "Descent," which ran between 2001 and 2003, was staged in the stairwell of the City Court Building Clock Tower. In 2004, she staged "Noir," a lusty, dramatic show performed in a parking lot—with the audience observing the performance through the windshields of parked cars; it was later included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Ms. Lafrance then turned to the underground tunnels beneath Fort Adams in Newport, R.I. to create "The Invisible Sins of Fort Adams" in 2004. And more recently, she participated in "Dancing in the Streets," in which she and four other choreographers were given just



TAKE TWO Dancers in a preview performance of Noémie Lafrance's "Agora II" in McCarrren Park Pool.

**'She creates events that are way more than just a dance.'**

five days to create dances around Fort Jay on Governor's Island.

"They're all challenging for different reasons," Ms. Lafrance said of her sites. "When we did 'Noir,' getting these cars and charging the batteries—it was a nightmare. When we did 'Descent,' you couldn't hear anybody. You were always going up and down the stairs—13 floors—so you were going, 'Could you move your arm? Pass it on to the next person. Could you move your arm?'"

While challenges become her, "Agora II" and "Agora" have posed more problems, on more fronts, than perhaps any of her other endeavors. On the physical level, the McCarrren Park Pool, created in 1936 as part of the Works Progress Administration under Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, is almost inconceivably huge, with a capacity of 6,800 people. Staging a dance that will neither alienate the viewer nor physically expire the dancers requires serious creative intervention. For this work, Ms. Lafrance employs skateboards to assist some of the dancers in tackling the space, but admits that, even with 60 bodies, making a dent in the visual landscape has proved difficult.

But not impossible. "She thinks bigger than most choreographers. She creates events that are way more than just a dance," the rehearsal director, Reba Mehan, said.

In a recent rehearsal, wearing sparkly pink Converse sneakers and white plastic-framed sunglasses, Ms. Lafrance traipsed across the pool's chipped surface, appearing younger than even some of her tireless dancers. She speaks in lightly accented English, and retains some of the syntax indicative of a foreign tongue. But Ms. Lafrance's speech isn't what trips up some of her colleagues.

"Sometimes working with her is overwhelming because she's got this big idea, and she understands it from so many different angles,"

site-specific work, performing pieces in the school elevators and the cafeteria. "I remember I felt like, oh my God, we're so misunderstood," Ms. Lafrance recalled with a laugh. "We were just throwing ourselves on the wall."

But the feedback she received on her own early choreography proved even more influential. She fed eagerly off of reactions from her nondancer classmates, who told her they could relate to her choreography. In works like "Agora II," she employs movements that aren't necessarily specific to dance technique. In a recent rehearsal, she instructed a group of two dozen female dancers to make flicking movements as though they were "brushing away mosquitoes."

"I care to be accessible to a larger audience," she said. "That's important for modern dance right now, to come out of its little family and really reach the outside world."

To her credit, she has found ways to meet that goal. Those purchasing tickets for "Agora II" will be offered the choice of "Viewer" tickets, which will allow them to watch the show from the pool's perimeter, or "Player" tickets. "Player" ticketholders will be assigned to one of four teams and will receive a cell phone text message during the show, instructing them to participate in the performance in a specific way. The concept makes Ms. Lafrance's work not just intellectually accessible, but physically so as well.

And how might Ms. Lafrance follow up on such a large scale work? When asked about her plans for the future, a little grin spreads over her face. "This is the mega," she said, looking out over the expanse of concrete. "I'm interested in working in the microscopic now. My next piece is going to happen on the surface of my body. That's my next site."

"Agora II" runs between September 13 and 30 (Lorimer St., between Driggs and Bayard streets, 718-302-5024).

Ms. Mehan, who danced in "Agora," said. "You can't possibly understand, and she doesn't have time to share with you what's going on in her head. You have to just trust, and surrender, and know that it's okay."

The intensity comes well earned. Ms. Lafrance trained as a dancer with the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance between 1994 and 1997. There, she welcomed the school's stringent style. "I really liked the disciplinary aspect of it," she said. "A lot of people complain about that, but that's the rigor that dance really needs to be very profound and expressive. It's very hard to train the body without pushing its limits."

Prior to training with the Graham school, Ms. Lafrance attended an arts high school in Montreal, where she received her first taste of