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Preview: Desko dancers reconnect

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By Jane Vranish, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's only her second major concert with the two-year-old Pittsburgh Dance Connection, but budding dance entrepreneur Gina Desko is ready to "Rewind."

Still basking in the positive reaction to the company's debut, "Fast Forward," Desko says she was a little afraid to jump into the encore program. But she ultimately decided to give up her administrative job with Attack Theater, add teaching courses to an already killer schedule and plunge into the tangled responsibility of running a company.

"Next time we'll call the concert 'Pause,'" she quips.

The concept of the original program will remain virtually the same — "to produce artists who don't produce regularly and are not necessarily grass-roots artists." But Desko has plenty of new angles to offer, including two residencies at the University of Pittsburgh and Greater Latrobe High School that will add members to the ensemble.

Desko also found time to contribute two solos to the program, a vastly reworked "No Angel Came" with a Gothic aura and "Bookmark," recently premiered at a Hazlett Theater community event. She'll also once again feature her fast-moving Formula One piece, "Fastracking."

"Rewind" co-producer Amanda Schneider will add a premiere, "ToshiTo," and Michele Dunleavy will blur "the line between art and life, dream and reality" in "Right Here, Right Now."

In an artistic coup, Desko convinced **New York City choreographer Sarah Skaggs** to "Rewind" with the company. Skaggs quietly sneaked into town last year, establishing Pittsburgh as her home base with partner Michael Rectenwald of Carnegie Mellon University's department of cultural studies. It's something that she has been toying with since she choreographed "Get Out of the House" for the Dance Alloy in 2002.

A noted cutting-edge choreographer, Skaggs began ballet lessons at the age of 4 and didn't begin modern dance until she attended Sweet Briar College, located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia.

She moved to New York, where, after performing with several companies, she established Sarah Skaggs Dance in 1991. Drawing on a community-based dance philosophy and an audience-inclusive format, this "ethnographer of dance" merged her formal concert dance training in the Jose Limon and Erick Hawkins styles with "club" or social dance in acclaimed works like "Higher Ground" and "House."

Along with studying alternative body awareness techniques, such as Alexander, Ideokinesis and Elaine Summers, Skaggs received six fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and two from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her company has appeared at Lincoln Center, The Joyce Theater and Dance Theater Workshop and toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe and Asia.

Following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Skaggs was caught up in the downturn in funding for the arts. She now shares her time between Pittsburgh and New York, mostly participating in concerts instigated by friends and colleagues without the pressures of running a company.

And she's "trying out life" by visiting Pittsburgh's cultural organizations and taking a class in religious studies at the University of Pittsburgh, something that she feels "may impact" her dance outlook.

After meeting Skaggs in an Alloy workshop, Desko e-mailed her to suggest that she "show her work in a low-risk environment." Skaggs' interest was piqued, and she offered a new duet, "Dances for Airports," to be performed by Desko and Schneider.

It's a work that goes against the usual grain of Skaggs' high-energy approach to dance. Created in the shadow of Ground Zero, it's "very spare, very meditative, full of pregnant pauses."

Set to Brian Eno's 1978 seminal masterpiece, "Music for Airports," it uses a recreated score by Bang on a Can.

With focused details in the wrists and fingers, the piece is "about presence, like a dance that's about to happen." Skaggs envisions it as a site-specific piece for the new World Trade Center "down the road."

And perhaps another chance to rewind.