



"I love to make people laugh," says dancer turned playwright and actress Dulcinea Langfelder. "And you can't be funny in dance, if you haven't noticed."

A theatrical dervish

Dulcinea Langfelder has flitted from mime to dance to drama in pursuit of telling stories such as *Victoria*, her piece about a wheelchair-bound Alzheimer's patient

BY DEIRDRE KELLY, DANCE CRITIC

Dulcinea Langfelder runs into the green room backstage at the Markham Theatre, which seems remarkable because just minutes ago she was bound to a wheelchair as part of her theatre piece, *Victoria*, now touring Canada.

In the work, she plays a 90-year-old woman with Alzheimer's disease, an inmate of a hospital and its gruff orderly (played by Eric Gingras).

Victoria has lost her memory, but not her spunk or zeal for life. And while slowly dying before the audience's eyes, she is the personification of vitality. Much like Langfelder herself.

The 46-year-old thespian, a native of New York who has lived in Montreal for the past 25 years, Langfelder is a jill of theatrical trades.

Her first love is mime, which she studied in France under the legendary Étienne Decroux, and this is the reason she moved to Canada — in pursuit of the Quebec mime troupe Omnibus in 1978.

Mime led to studies in dance, and in 1985, she choreographed *Victorious Circle* and performed it across the country.

Acting, which she studied under Peter Brook protégé Yoshi Oida and Eugenio Barba, preoccupied her when she found dance limiting to what she wanted to achieve in theatre — story telling.

"I had been dancing since I was 4 — it's in my bones," Langfelder says, perched on a couch. "But I realized eventually that I needed to

tell stories. Dance is too abstract. I am fascinated by people, by people's behaviour. Dance didn't allow me to get into character enough. And besides, I love to make people laugh. And you can't be funny in dance, if you haven't noticed." And then she guffaws.

Her body is sinewy and lean, like a dancer's, and it barely contains her naturally buzzing energy. She visibly vibrates. Part of the energy surge comes from just coming off a performance — she is still high from the all-out verbal and physical experience. But she's also on the verge of bolting out of her chair because she's strapped for time. Tonight's performance in Markham, Ont., has been tied to a reception highlighting a local seniors home, with members of the Alzheimer's Society distributing pamphlets. It was supposed to take place the next night. Or so Langfelder thought. She is guest of honour and torn between talking about herself and doing the meet and greet thing, with hors d'oeuvre galore.

So, she tries a compromise. Some of the Thai nibbles are sitting on an adjacent table. She reaches over and snarfs one back, stuffing it into her mouth voraciously. Her eyes bug out, her body twists as she tries to cover the desperate feeding with crooked elbow and hand. With her two-toned skunk coil, she looks clownish. In her play, she says in a voice-over just before the curtain rises, "Imagination is funny. It is stronger than you and it will live longer." You get the feeling that Langfelder lives inside imagination's powerful em-

brace.

But for *Victoria*, the point of departure was a real moment in time. Or rather two.

The first involves her friend Charles Farfala, whom Langfelder credits as originating the idea behind her one-act play. He was an orderly in a long-term care facility for the aged, and one day he calls Langfelder up and says, "You must meet Victor. He's senile but so rich in imagination."

Instantly, Langfelder could imagine a theatre piece around this man, except that she wanted him to be a her.

"I liked the idea of calling her *Victoria*, which means victory," says Langfelder, smiling broadly. "*La Victoire! Victoria! Vive!*"

She relishes language and word plays like this. She wrote *Victoria* first in French and then translated it back into her native English to present it to anglophones. The daughter of a non-practising Jewish father and a Catholic mother, she has long been comfortable with migrating between two solitudes.

"I always work in French. Yes, I'm from New York City, but I enjoy writing in French because it has a distancing effect. I can really see better what I'm writing. I plan next to translate it into Italian. The play's gotten off the ground. There's a lot of demand for it all over the world."

After Canada, plans are to take *Victoria* on tour to Europe in the fall with stops in France, Switzerland, Italy and Belgium.

The appeal, Langfelder says, is the fact that the piece deals with aging and dying. The subject is particularly salient to members of the baby boomer generation who are eyeing retirement.

And if it isn't their own imminent demise that's preoccupying them, boomers are also obsessed with

carrying for their aging parents. And this is Langfelder's other moment in time, the thing that really gelled *Victoria* in her mind.

Her own father was dying a few years ago. He was ill, and Langfelder watched as life slowly deflated out of him. Langfelder held his hand and tried to feel what he was going through. He had had a stroke and couldn't say.

"That's when I realized I had no choice," she says. "I had to do *Victoria*. I needed to know what was going on in his mind. I needed to get under his skin to understand what he was going through."

Part of the challenge and excitement of the creative process was learning to work with a wheelchair. Ever since her *Victorious Circle* dance piece, Langfelder has been obsessed with wheels and circular movement. "The wheelchair, when I saw it, instantly seduced me."

Langfelder meanders along in it as a nonagenarian. And when her character's mind fills with vivid memories of the past, such as stepping out to a Gershwin tune, the wheelchair becomes an assured dancing partner leading Langfelder through a variety of movement styles. For *Victoria*, she learned four new dance techniques — tango, tap, jig and acrobatic rock 'n' roll. No wonder she's famished after the show.

And just as she reaches for another illicit morsel of food, Gingras, her fellow actor, appears at the door. Psssssst.

"Oh, hey, I've got to go." And she runs away down the hallway, propelled by art, and the chance of a free dinner.

Victoria plays in St. Albert, Alta., on March 29; Kelowna, B.C. on April 4; Whitehorse, Yukon, on April 11-14 and North Vancouver on April 20-21.