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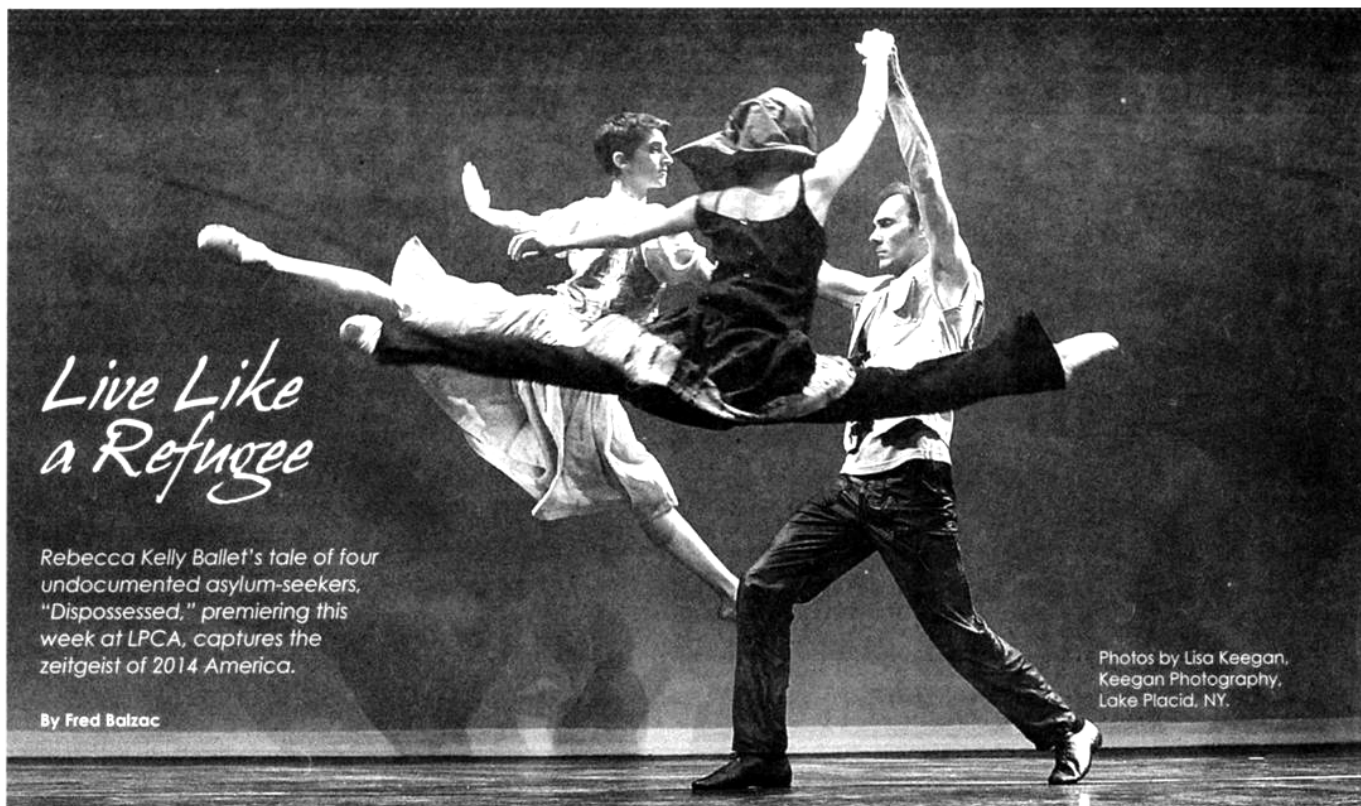
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## Live Like a Refugee

Rebecca Kelly Ballet's tale  
of four undocumented  
asylum-seekers captures the  
zeitgeist of 2014 America.



# Live Like a Refugee

Rebecca Kelly Ballet's tale of four undocumented asylum-seekers, "Dispossessed," premiering this week at LPCA, captures the zeitgeist of 2014 America.

By Fred Balzac

Photos by Lisa Keegan, Keegan Photography, Lake Placid, NY.

*On Thursday, July 24, at 8 p.m. at the Lake Placid Center for the Arts (LPCA), Rebecca Kelly Ballet (RKB) will present the world premiere of "Dispossessed," the story of a difficult passage of a small group of refugees and their hope for asylum in the United States. Also on the program are two recent works – "Filigree" (2013) and the solo piece, "Jibun Jishin" (2014). The company will also appear in its annual "Onstage Youth Performance" at the LPCA on Friday, July 25, at 10:30 a.m.*

*The performances are the latest in a 30-year association between the New York City-based ballet company and the Adirondack region, which now includes a variety of dance and other cultural activities at the Tahawus Center in Au Sable Forks, NY. Lake Champlain Weekly (LCW) arts reporter Fred Balzac caught up with RKB Artistic Director and choreographer Rebecca Kelly and filed this Q&A.*

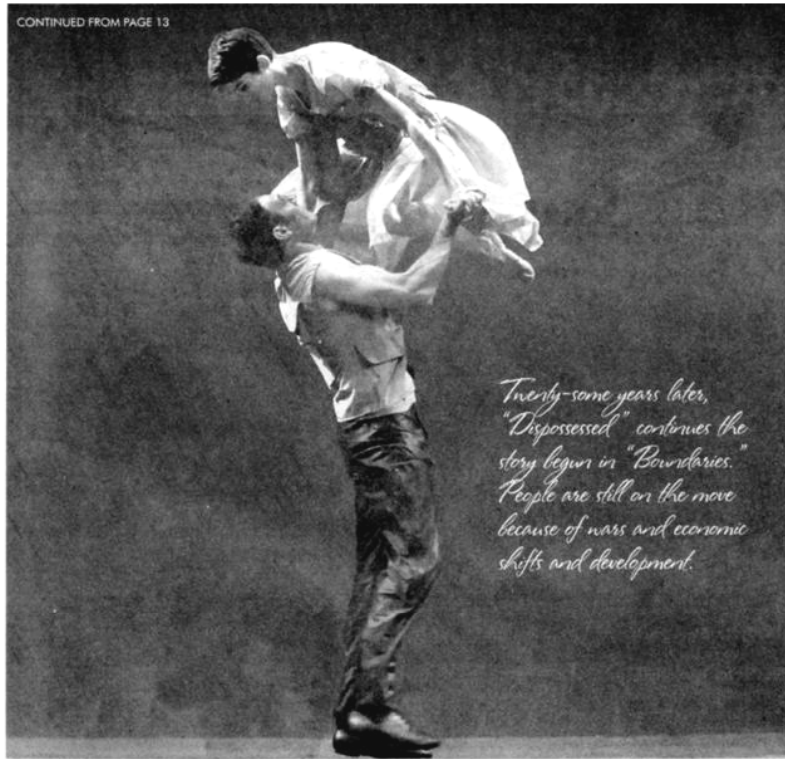
**LCW:** Where did the idea for "Dispossessed" come from, and what were the steps in translating and then developing the idea into a full-blown, 20-minute ballet?

**Rebecca Kelly:** A woman from Eritrea was telling her story on NPR about her difficult passage across Africa to South America, up through that continent and finally into America. I was only partly listening, but then I became caught up in the details as they unfolded — the danger, the expense, the immense risk, all with no real guarantee of success in finding a better place.

So how does listening to the radio become the launching pad for a dance? I found myself thinking about refugees, how much courage it must take to face so many unknowns — think about it — language, customs, new terrain; learning about money; learning who to trust, who not to trust, safety.

**LCW:** How did you decide on five dancers for the piece? What "parts" do they play or what is the function of each in the ballet? What has the rehearsal process been like?

**Rebecca Kelly:** All dancers make a risky or difficult choice to come to New York to be a dancer. Two of our dancers came to this country from Italy and Spain and, at first, language and customs were big adjustments. I select dancers who can convey emotion — along with their considerable technical skills and athleticism. They are actors who are masters of body language so that meaning is conveyed even though we don't use words. There are four refugees. There is the slightest suggestion through costume where they might be from: one wears a hajib,



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shifts and development.*

another wears a hoodie, and two who travel together could be from any troubled place. Then there is "El Coyote." This is danced by Raul Peinado. The Coyote is the guide, the person who puts himself at risk to get his "clients" where they want to go on what is often a perilous journey, and for this refugees must pay a lot of money.

The rehearsal process is always one of discovery and "deepening." As the dancers begin to take on their characters and provide depth to their roles and define who they are, I adjust who is who, and who does what, and what happens — all through movement, of course.

I have a basic outline mapped out before the first rehearsal, knowing there would be four characters who meet for the first time at a designated place and travel together, and then they would arrive somewhere, and from this place their new lives would begin. My ballet begins with a family pair, and we sense that they are growing increasingly agitated and need to leave. The next scene suggests an urban landscape and the individual in this setting is beginning to grow panicked. I knew there would be a dangerous river crossing that would be part of the passage.

**LCW:** How did you go about choosing the score for this piece, and how would you describe each of the components—spoken word, environmental sounds, and passages from Adrian Carr's "Boundaries." Isn't Adrian Carr a Plattsburgh-based musician and artist? How did you become familiar with him and this piece of music?

**Rebecca Kelly:** I made the ballet "Boundaries" in 1993, collaborating with Adrian Carr, using a spoken word and music score. At that time many societies were disturbed by shrinking boundaries. There was war in Bosnia. The Yanomami Indians of Brazil had sent a representative to the United Nations about the loss of their homelands.

Twenty-some years later, "Dispossessed" continues the story begun in "Boundaries." People are still on the move because of wars and economic shifts and development. What Adrian composed and we assembled two decades ago has been adapted and still rings true. His recordings of Tonya Gonnella Frichner, President of the American Indian Law Alliance; Anna Holmer, L.A. poet recording "Too Much White"; and me, at the time a young and concerned mother, are still relevant.

Adrian and I worked on several projects together in New York City in the 90s, but after 9/11 he moved up to the Montreal/Plattsburgh area.

**LCW:** How relevant is "Dispossessed" to the current issue involving thousands of children and young mothers fleeing from murderous climates in Central America, walking the length of Mexico, and crossing the border into the U.S., where they are being housed in overcrowded facilities and where controversy has erupted over their status as asylum-seeking refugees? Your timing seems remarkable, if not prescient. What is your own view on the issue?

**Rebecca Kelly:** I pay attention to the world — as we are all here in it together. Surely my childhood growing up outside of America makes me take notice of certain parts of the world and particularly Africa. I make dances about people and what affects them — and what affects me. I give shape to emotions, or questions, but not necessarily answers. If, through dance, we inspire the audience to get caught up for a moment, it is something. Sometimes the arts enable us to confront unexamined assumptions. They challenge and make us less sure of our virtue. In a dance like "Dispossessed," to question and ponder is important.



**LCW:** Why did you choose to include the other pieces in the program, “Filigree” and “Jibun Jishin,” and how do they compare with or even provide a complement to “Dispossessed”?

**Rebecca Kelly:** There is such a range of the dance experience. So in a program I like to offer our guests the pleasure of joyful, exuberant dance with no story or message — that would be “Filigree.” And sometimes it is wonderful to single out a performer for her unique gifts. “Jibun Jishin,” which translates from the Japanese as “My Heart, My Soul,” is a vehicle for the dancer to simultaneously explore an interpretation of a samurai warrior and a geisha, and RKB’s Therese Wendler seemed perfect for the role.

**LCW:** What is your approach to choreography in general? What do the dances you’ve choreographed over the years owe to classical ballet and what do they owe to modern dance?

**Rebecca Kelly:** Rebecca Kelly Ballet is classical and contemporary. Our dancers are all classically trained and they are adept and versatile, but my choreographic sensibility is purely contemporary. Puzzling out how to convey meaning in movement is endlessly intriguing, reading bodies, determining what a gesture means...trying to find the most honest or universal expression so that it can be felt and understood, that kind of thing; it never ends...

**LCW:** What is the appeal of working in the Adirondacks each summer

and presenting and performing at LPCA? And does the Tahawus Center fit in with Rebecca Kelley Ballet?

**Rebecca Kelly:** We couldn’t have known in 1986 that my ballet “Dream Driven” would spark this almost three-decade-long association with the Lake Placid Center for the Arts. Robin Pell’s invitation and encouragement to make ballets in and about the Adirondacks set us on a path that has enriched us as performing artists and developed into a permanent bond with the region.

The Tahawus Center in Au Sable Forks is becoming a place where other artists are encouraged to explore, develop, teach, and showcase their craft. Dance has taught us that tenacity and risk-taking are the substance of creativity, to dare to try our hardest to achieve, never to fear hard labor, and to strive always for excellence. It has never been easy, or secure, but it continues to be a privilege.

*As an LCW arts reporter, Fred Balzac is the co-recipient, with Benjamin Pomerance, of the New York Press Association award for Best Arts Coverage in New York State of 2013 (circulation division 2). The LPCA is located at 17 Algonquin Drive, Lake Placid. Tickets for the July 24th performance of “Dispossessed” and other dances are \$20, \$17, and \$12 for seniors and students. For reservations, please call the box office at (518) 523-2512 or visit [www.lakeplacidarts.org](http://www.lakeplacidarts.org). To learn more about the dance company, visit [www.rebeccakellyballet.org](http://www.rebeccakellyballet.org).*