

Venturing Out of the City and Into Creation

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TIVOLI, N.Y.



(photo by Phil Knott)

LATE one chilly afternoon last month the choreographer Doug Varone was demonstrating a phrase for his dancers in a vast, window-lined studio. Compact and wiry in a T-shirt and sweats, he whipped sharply through a series of turns, handling their violent torque with surprising ease for a 50-year-old, his close-cropped hair now silver. As he finished, a smile crossed his face. Then he watched as a quartet of younger dancers flung themselves into the steps with the same wheeling abandon.

Outside, a torrential rain battered the windowpanes. Still, even through the downpour, one could make out the shapes on the other side of the glass: two old barns, a field and a wood.

Ordinarily Mr. Varone and his New York-based dancers commute to rehearsal by subway and sidewalk, not by trudging through a muddy field. But the troupe had come to the hamlet of Tivoli for a three-week residency at the Kaatsbaan International Dance Center, where it was readying Mr. Varone's new work, the evening-length "Dense Terrain," for its New York debut.

"Dense Terrain," which opens on Wednesday at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#), arrives at the 20-year mark in the life of one of the most distinctive and successful companies in contemporary dance. Mr. Varone's troupe is among an elite few in the hardscrabble dance world that can afford to employ its dancers for more than 30 weeks each year. And Mr. Varone is regularly awarded grant-supported residencies like the one here. In the last year his company has spent more than 10 weeks at creative residencies in California, Kansas and New York.

Over one of the few breaks in his eight-hour day, Mr. Varone leaned against a table near the front of the studio, eating a delayed lunch from a plastic container. Behind him lay a massive 60-by-65-foot dance floor, dominated by the two enormous walls from the set for "Dense Terrain." In front of him rose seven rows of tiered theater seating, topped by a lighting booth.

"Having space like this helps you understand what you're capable of creating as an artist," Mr. Varone said. "Actually, since I build dances with my eye, as if on a canvas, I do some of my best work when I'm alone in a space like this, just listening to the score. You can't afford to do that in New York."

The very notion of a residency — repairing to a secluded location to concentrate solely on making a dance — seems extraordinary to a generation of itinerant New York City dancers and choreographers accustomed to second and third jobs, compressed rehearsal periods and scarce space rented hour by costly hour. (Even Mr. Varone's well-established company rehearses in a series of rented studios.) To most of them the opportunity to spend uninterrupted time in a single location — to leave cumbersome sets in the studio overnight, to come in early or stay late — seems an incredible luxury.

But residencies should not be considered luxuries, Mr. Varone said: “They really are vital for the art form to survive, especially for New York City-based artists. This is where you have time to make the best work you think you can make, as opposed to just having to get something done.”

Writers and composers can scribble in a corner, but choreographers have always needed space — lots of it — to forge their dances. And for more than two decades, as Manhattan property values have soared, a long list of dance companies have lost or given up their leases.

As early as 1988 Kaatsbaan’s founders (including Kevin McKenzie and Martine van Hamel of [American Ballet Theater](#)) had begun discussing the possibility of finding a barn in the Hudson River Valley to use as overflow studio space for Manhattan’s professional dancers. In 1994, after a few false starts, they found the place: a 153-acre estate on the Hudson River, two hours north of the city and just up the road from [Bard College](#).

A childhood stomping ground of [Eleanor Roosevelt](#) and a former horse farm, the property was dotted with barns: five in all, including one designed by the architect Stanford White in the 1890s. Mr. McKenzie and Ms. van Hamel — along with the Woodstock-based former dancers Bentley Roton and Gregory Cary — secured loans to purchase the \$1.15 million site in 1997 and named it Kaatsbaan, from the Dutch word for playing field. More fund-raising enabled construction of the new barnlike building that houses the present studios, finished in 2000, and the first of several planned “dancers’ inns,” completed in 2003.

For the moment, until more housing is built, Kaatsbaan, a nonprofit institution, is used primarily for residencies by single companies like Mr. Varone’s. Last month, with just 12 dancers and Mr. Varone sharing the huge complex, Kaatsbaan’s resources seemed almost unreal: a second studio almost as big as the first, a smaller third studio for warming up, large dressing rooms with showers, laundry facilities, a communal lounge and a kitchen. Several of the 16 spacious motel-style rooms have views of hayfields stretching to the Hudson, interrupted only by the occasional deer passing by.

If postcard-perfect Kaatsbaan appears too good to be true, it almost is. A fund-raising crunch after Sept. 11, 2001, and a series of legal disputes over construction projects, in addition to the mortgage on the property, have left it \$6 million in debt. Whereas other American residency sites are affiliated with (and often supported by) universities or festivals, Kaatsbaan was conceived differently: as an altruistic annex to New York City. In November the center narrowly avoided foreclosure when a local patron stepped forward to guarantee more than a million dollars’ worth of its loans.

For now Kaatsbaan continues to furnish artists with a sanctuary for making new work. And Mr. Varone, a seasoned professional who has also worked extensively in opera and theater, knows how to use the gift of resources. By his own account, “Dense Terrain” — a meditation on interconnectedness — is one of his most ambitious creations. In addition to arranging its dozen dancers, Mr. Varone continually reconfigures the space they occupy, by shifting the two big walls, mounted on wheels.

“I love that I can arrange and rearrange the space in a cinematic way,” Mr. Varone said, as three offstage dancers swiftly rotated a wall. For the dancers, who will move the scenery during the actual show, the residency provided the first chance to practice the set changes, which are essentially a part of the choreography.

The walls, Mr. Varone said, also serve as screens for a series of films made this year in the 12-by-15-foot living room of his Manhattan apartment: dense terrain indeed. The films, which feature Mr. Varone’s dancers and a stage actor, flicker throughout the dance, sometimes as accompaniment, sometimes as focal point, depicting the tense interior life of a desperate man. The score, by the film composer [Nathan Larson](#), has a driving, unsettling quality that enhances the tension.

As always in Mr. Varone’s work the exceptional dancers who will perform “Dense Terrain” project an unmistakable real-people quality, and that is how they will be dressed, in everyday clothes. For the project Mr.

Varone, who says he tends to work “with adults who have a strong sense of themselves,” has assembled a diverse group ranging in age from 23 to 57.

Being away at a residency, Mr. Varone noted, bonds the company “on many levels.” At Kaatsbaan dancers used to dashing out of rehearsal to meet the babysitter or get to Pilates class found themselves cooking meals together and sharing rides to the supermarket. A poker night was instituted. Some dancers developed a habit of warming up at the barre together in the morning; others headed into the town of Tivoli at night to check out its handful of restaurants.

That esprit de corps was palpable in the studio: Though the dancing was strenuous and the day long, the mood was easy and buoyant. Mr. Varone urged the dancers not to be afraid to make mistakes in trying new things; for once, he said, they would have time to fix them later. As he invented new phrases on his own body, he grew steadily bolder and more energetic. One moment, arms flung wide, he hurled himself into the air; the next, he plummeted to the ground.

“When he gets going like this, it’s like a high,” one dancer said.

By 6 p.m., the three-liter bottle of Diet Coke that Mr. Varone had been nursing all day was empty, and it was quitting time. Despite an intensely productive day, he was more preoccupied than satisfied. He was already working out the next section in his mind.

“New York City is such an insular environment for an artist that you always question whether you can live and breathe and create outside of it,” he said as he packed up his bag. “Then a residency like this reaffirms that you can. And that when you do, it feeds you in new ways.”