

named Best Local Play by *BroadwayWorld*.

The commission served as her introduction to the Central Works Method, which entails casting a production and developing the play around the actors. "It's a wonderful way to write," Milton said. "They provide all this incredible support, people who helped me with the research, and feedback from the actors. When I have an actor who embodies the character, it helps to grab onto that role. That said, I wrote *Reduction* in six nights. It was a rollercoaster, and it was terrifying."

Since then she's been deeply involved with the Central Works Writers Workshop, a play incubator that brings together eight playwrights for weekly writing and reading sessions with Gary Graves, who's directing *Bamboozled* (and runs Central Works with Jan Zvaifler). Her 2015 play *Enemies: Foreign and Domestic*, which was named Outstanding World Premiere Play by the Theatre Bay Area Awards, was born out of the workshop. So was 2016's *Hearts of Palm*, a two-act sojourn that she describes as "unrequited love meets unregulated capitalism" amid a team of American land negotiators determined to expand a Southeast Asian palm oil plantation.

*Bamboozled* is the first of four plays in Central Works' 2018 season, which also includes Graves' *Palace Wreckers, Inc.* (May 12-June 10) and an adaptation of Cuban-American novelist Cristina García's *King of Cuba* (July 21-Aug. 19) also directed by Graves.

After watching Milton's evolution as a writer Graves believes she's due to "break out to a wider audience," he said. "I think she's a remarkable playwright. She gets produced around a lot, but I think she's a bit of an undiscovered secret in the Bay Area. We're a well-kept secret, too. A lot of people don't even know we're in Berkeley. *Bamboozled* is our 58th world premiere. We've got a small but very devoted audience. When you're doing new plays, it's a tough road."

Milton didn't focus her full attention on writing plays until midlife, but it's not difficult to trace the path of her creative ambitions. As a precocious writer smitten with theater, she created a comedy for an all-female cast at her San Francisco school, Star of the Sea Academy, a production that earned her a scholarship to San Francisco State and played at high schools around the Bay Area.

Growing up in a creatively charged family—her older

brother James Milton is the artistic director of Verse Theater Manhattan—she felt like certain theatrical paths were more accessible than others. "As often happens in families, we kind of divided up what we did," she said. "I was always a terrible actor, and I didn't want to direct. I loved writing and collaborating with people."

Rather than plunging into the Bay Area theater scene after college, Milton embarked on a long, winding path that included a seven-year stint in the Coast Guard as a photojournalist and various positions in marketing and publicity. All the while she continued to write, "personal essays, short stories, and plays, but I didn't really turn to theater until 2001," she said.

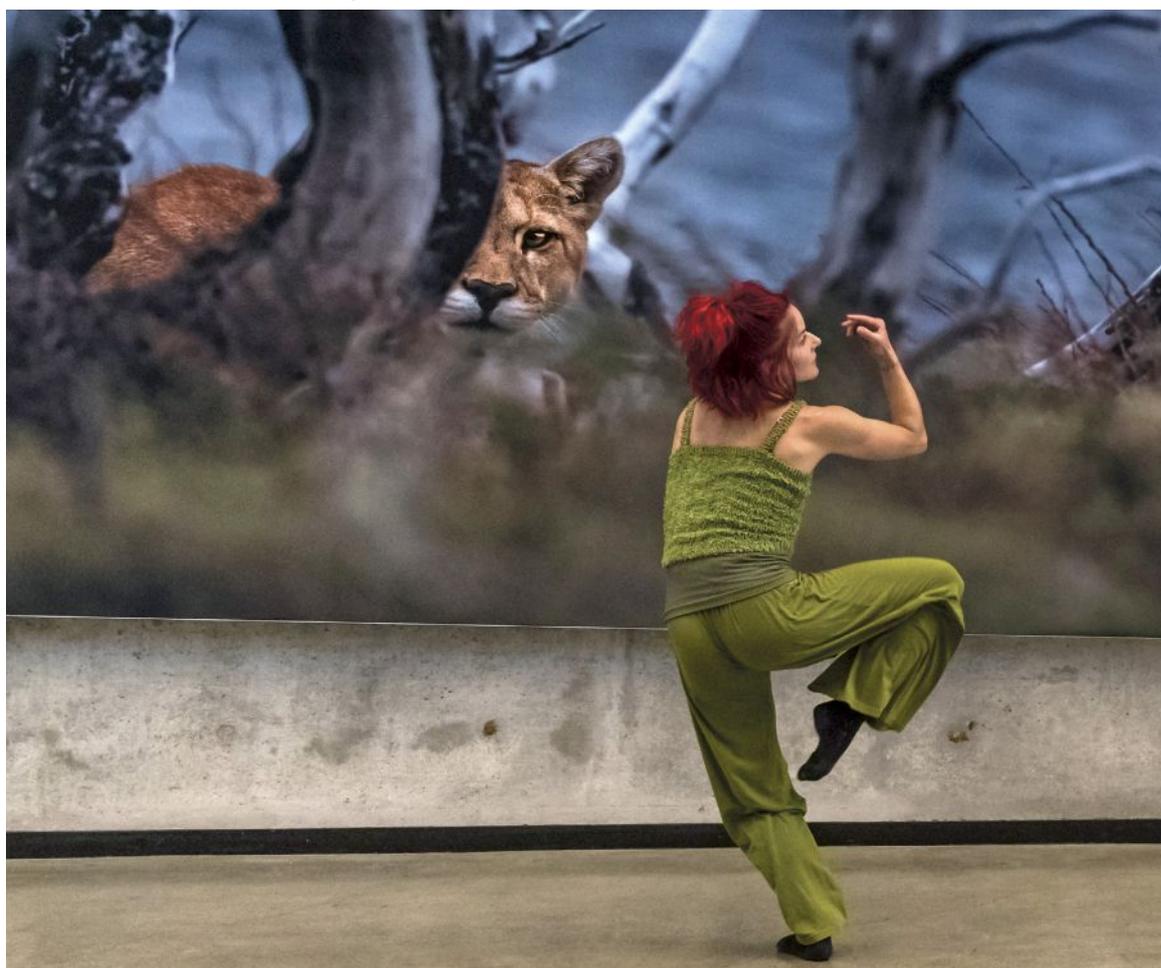
That was the year that Andrew Black, a co-worker at a company that focuses on training people for workplace collaboration, approached her about writing a play together. Their first effort, a short comedy that transported a Pygmalion-inspired plot to the gay porn industry, was a finalist in Dramarama, a national playwriting contest. After premiering in San Diego, it has been produced around the country, including New York City.

They went on to write three more plays and a musical about the women's suffrage movement in Wyoming, *Not Without Our Women*. When Black left the Bay Area, Milton established herself as a force in her own right. She served as resident playwright for 3Girls Theatre in San Francisco for several years, writing the chamber musical *Moments of Truth* with music and lyrics by Caroline Altman.

One thread running through her work since high school is an intense focus on the lives of women. Many of her works feature all-female casts, including *Bamboozled*. She was already deep into writing the play when the earthquake of the 2016 presidential election provided a bracing jolt.

"The knowledge for me as a white woman that white women helped vote this guy in, I'm not sure whether to call it an inspiration or an exasperation," she said. "One of the things the play tries to do is poke some fun at people eagerly stereotyping others. What you think is going on at the beginning might turn out to be quite different. I think we still haven't really dealt with the Civil War and the trauma of slavery. It's something people want to move on from, but I don't know if we can without examining that legacy more than we have so far." ♡

## CRITIC'S CHOICE | DANCE



Nancy Karp + Dancers mix media for the dance installation at the Brower Center this month.

# Choreography Installation Fills the Brower Center

Nancy Karp + Dancers commune with the building to blunt its sharpness.

**K**nown for Dan Solomon's ecologically impressive architecture, the David Brower Center in downtown Berkeley is a home for more than two-dozen environmental organizations. For one weekend this month it also hosts the Nancy Karp + Dancers performance installation *On Beauty*. The building's stark luminosity and the current exhibit, which honors environmentalist Doug Tompkins, inspired the work.

Having the creative process take place in the building and open to the public gave Karp the opportunity to see how her six dancers might relate to an ambient audience. In an early December rehearsal, they felt quite at home pushing themselves against rough concrete walls, squeezing through tight spaces, slithering along the floor, and appearing to be flying against window walls. And all of this happened in the context of the luscious beauty of nature photographs taken from a plane. Karp has created close to two dozen installations in her 30-year career. The invitation from the Brower Center intrigued her because of the rigorous architecture and her admiration for Tompkins. "I like the brutalist-inspired architecture," she commented about the building. "I think the rounded shapes of my dancers can soften

it." Before starting the process, Karp had walked the gallery and took notes of her reaction to what she saw and felt.

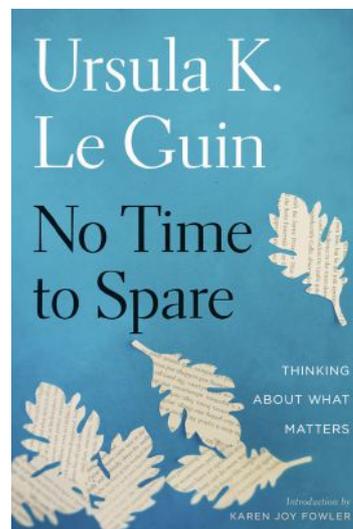
Karp, like many of her colleagues, relies on a give and take with her dancers. Here she let two of them work out an intricate lift and had another one create a relationship with a banister. What looks like a casual relaxed process will turn into subtle, crystalline, and resonant choreography—if Karp's previous work is any indication. Her musical taste veers toward contemporary classical scores. For *On Beauty*, she considered foregoing music. But then

she decided to approach composer Charles Amirkhanyan with whom she has worked before. He was a logical choice: His Other Minds contemporary music organization has its headquarters upstairs. He, apparently, decided on using sounds from nature. "I see him every once a while going in and out of the building," Karp said. He just might also get ideas from the dancers.

Nancy Karp + Dancers, *On Beauty*, Feb. 9, 8 p.m., Feb. 10 and 11, 6 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., \$35, Brower Center, 2150 Allston Way, Berkeley, NancyKarp.org.

—Rita Felciano

## BOOKS



### Fond of the Latest From Le Guin and Corrigan

**T**wo collections of essays top the recommended books for early 2018. With 87 years under her belt, Berkeley native and writer Ursula Le Guin's swarthy sampling of blog posts in *No Time to Spare* is unparalleled in its clarity and authoritative voice on aging and other matters. And Oakland writer Kelly Corrigan, weighing in with 12 phrases she's learning to live up to, pulls no punches in *Tell Me More*.

Le Guin was born in Berkeley in 1929 and now lives in ▶ 22