



BY JENNIFER PONDER

Choreographer Peter Schmitz doesn't talk with just his hands, but rather his whole body, constantly in motion. Two hip replacements don't slow him down in the least. I'm not sure how old he is; I've heard him claim anywhere from 12 to 73. He most frequently claims to be in his thirties.

"Obfuscation" is one of Peter's favorite terms. For a while, I thought he had made it up, in the same way that I thought he had made up "penumbra" which he informed me, with some disbelief at my ignorance, was the shadowy not-quite-darkness just outside a circle of light falling on the stage.

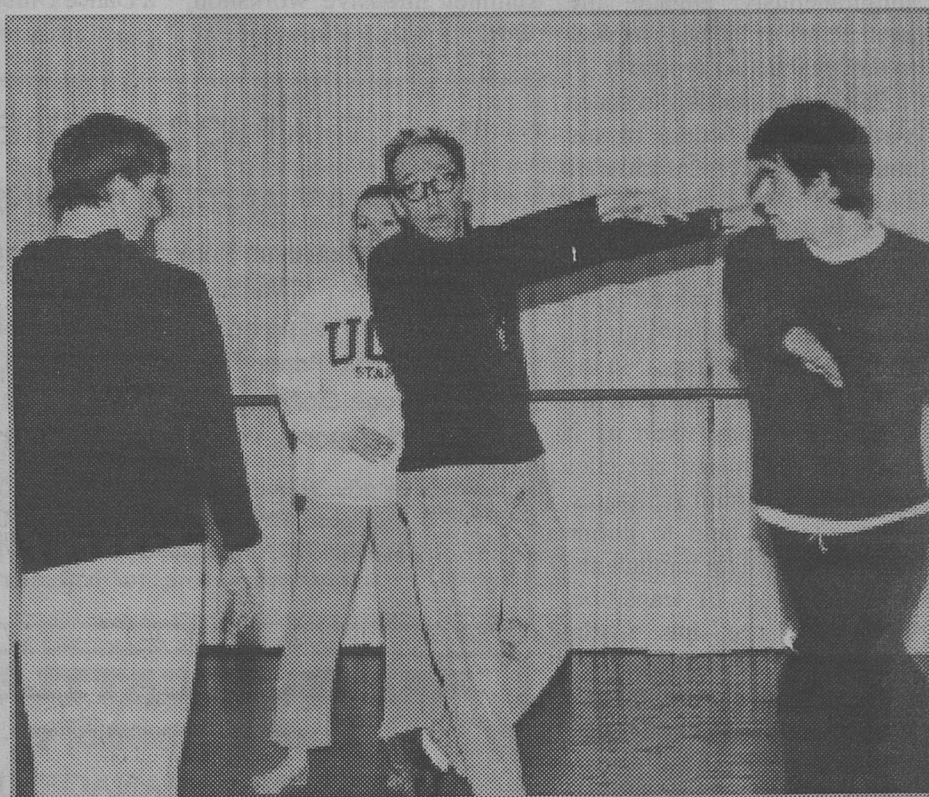
As it turns out, to obfuscate means to confuse, to make unclear, or to darken. One of Peter's primary choreographic concerns is not to show us a story, not to demonstrate athletic and graceful movement, but to obfuscate that story and movement from the audience. He would much rather watch something unfold on stage *through* another, possibly quite different, event.

During Peter's master class on the stage of the Flynn Theatre in Burlington recently, he was having the students show their obfuscating solos, that is, the solos created in and around and in front of another student's work. There were about 20 students, men and women, of all ages and skill levels. The class was held on the stage of the theatre, under the mysteriously beautiful pools of

down-directed worklight. The stark architecture of the stage was revealed, the brick back wall, the hemp ropes of the pinrail, the gloomy periphery of the house seats. It seemed like the audience seating disappeared, but the dramatic atmosphere made it one of the most visually interesting dance classes I had ever watched.

The class began with a warm-up. Peter had the students cross the floor, motivating their movement from different body parts, beginning with the skull. As the students' bodies followed wherever their skull led them, Peter reminded them that the average skull weighs ten to fifteen pounds, and is not nailed to the neck and shoulders in a fixed position. As he encouraged them to feel the weight of their skulls rolling in different directions, pulling the rest of the bodies behind them, the quality of movement changed. People who, just a short time before, turned their heads, necks, and shoulders together like one large, fused body part, were now snaking their spines around the room. It was an amazing transformation.

Next were the ribs, then the pelvis, each leg, then each arm. Each time the motivating body part changed, Peter would squirm, leap, run, and convulse across the stage, demonstrating and articulating the infinite variety of movement choices. As the class progressed, adding more body parts to the repertoire, the tempo increased. People began to run as they reached the cumu-



lative point of moving from every part of their body.

It was when Peter asked the class to continue this movement while considering the space, to notice the floor pattern of the charging amoeba of people, to become aware of what parts of the stage were occupied or not, that I realized that this was not just a warm-up. It was a warm-up, a group bonding event, and an exercise in movement invention and spatial composition.

Later Peter explained that each stu-

dent had composed two solos, the first one contained within a small box of space, and the second one, the obfuscating solo, moving in and around another student's work. The twist was that as the pairs of students showed their work, they first showed the duet created by combining a box solo with an obfuscating solo, and then they showed their obfuscating solos independently. It was revealing to me, and to the students, that these solos, created in a contextually dependent relationship, then gained a