Robert Kormos, University of Pittsburgh professor of surgery and director of the UPMC Artificial Heart Program, is not a ballet dancer. Yet the surgeon found himself onstage in February performing in Heart (Function vs. Emotion), Maria Caruso’s first full-length ballet, at Pittsburgh’s Byham Theater.

It happened this way. Dennis McNamara, Pitt professor of medicine and director of Heart Failure/Transplantation at the UPMC Cardiovascular Institute, was having a conversation with Caruso, the dance group Bodiography’s founder, artistic director, and choreographer. (McNamara’s daughter performs with the Pittsburgh-based ballet company—and her dad has as well.) McNamara noted that Bodiography occasionally touches on medical themes. Perhaps some of his patients’ stories could serve as inspiration for a new work, he suggested.

Caruso was intrigued.

Soon she met with a half-dozen heart transplant patients who had been treated by McNamara and gave them a homework assignment of sorts: Bring her three physical gestures and three tangible items related to their experiences with heart disease. Some spoke of their struggles with illness, others the prospect of living with another’s organ inside them.

Kormos came in to consult—“A lot of it had to do with helping translate motions we use in surgery and do those in an exaggerated but legitimate fashion so that they can be seen by the audience,” he says—and eventually was persuaded to perform. (Caruso and Kormos are shown above during a dress rehearsal. McNamara did not appear in the production.)

“There were two things that made me reluctant to do it,” he says. “One … I’m your typical, overweight male; and standing onstage with fit, beautiful women was a challenge to my body image,” Kormos says with a laugh. “And, two, I didn’t want to distract from the dancers or the message.”

The message, Kormos and Caruso say, is one of struggle and recovery—of people who neared death and persevered.

—Joe Miksch
—Photo by Eric Rosé