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VISUAL & PERFORMING-ARTS / BLOG / DANCE-CONVERSATION-JOANNA-KOTZE-PER
CHOREOGRAPHER-CAMARGO

Dance Conversation with Joanna Kotze, Performer and Choreographer (Camargo Foundation past resident)

October 1, 2016 | By Visual & Performing Arts Department



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Nicole Birmann Bloom (N.B.B.): You have been dancing for more than 20 years and a couple of years ago, you started to develop your own choreographic work. Could you speak of your work as an interpreter for other choreographers such as Wally Cardona, Kimberly Bartosik and Netta Yerushalmy, versus developing your own work: The challenge? What are the differences between developing a piece for a company such as Zenon Dance and James Sewell Ballet versus your own ensemble.

Joanna Kotze (J.K.): I started dancing when I was 6 years old and studied ballet until I went to Miami University to study architecture and join the modern dance company there. I did choreograph a few pieces at University, but when I graduated from Architecture school and decided to move to New York to dance, I was much more interested in purely being a dancer. In my first year in New York I was lucky enough to get into two small companies that afforded me the ability to perform and tour right away. I went to class every day in many different studios around the city. This is how I began meeting amazing teachers and other dancers in the community.

I danced for Wally Cardona for 10 years, 2000-2010. These were extremely formative years. Wally's work and process really forced me to come up against a lot of new ideas and creative processes and redefine what I thought dance was and what I thought I could do. He opened a lot of doors for me, most importantly, physically. His work ethic and creative visions drove me to push myself hard, and he challenged me in ways I continue to benefit from now.

Similarly, I have learned a lot from Kimberly Bartosik, Netta Yerushalmy and others I have worked closely with. I have been lucky to work with people who are interested in using me as a collaborator and not only as a body meant to replicate their movement. This collaborative aspect of our work - practically speaking - meant I was expected to share ideas, thoughts, and movement vocabulary as we developed a dance - not just reproduce movement. They expected a lot from me all the time and gave me opportunities to grow.

I have always been, and continue to be, interested in dancing in other people's work. I find being in someone's process fascinating and energizing. I particularly appreciate being challenged physically, in ways that I may not challenge myself. And because it is their vision we are trying to fulfill, I can give myself to that fully without having to wear all the other hats that choreographers inevitably wear.

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I wasn't interested in making my own work for a long time. I felt fulfilled learning from others and helping to realize their choreographic vision. I had the opportunity to start creating work on students around 2004 and then showed my first work-in-progress in New York in 2009. To be honest, I caught the bug. It was such a scary and exhilarating experience to show my own work! As I made this next step in my career, I was really lucky to already have a supportive network in the dance community who knew me as a dancer. Fortunately, some people were willing to take a chance on me as a choreographer. I feel very grateful to those who have supported me along the way, especially in those early making days. It is very easy to feel alone in the process.

A challenge for me was discovering who I was as a dancer and maker outside of the work I had done with other choreographers. I realized through the doing of it that I had my own voice, visions, concerns and desires to express. Wally really influenced my love of challenging the body's potential so I set out to explore that and kept building. I have now created several works for my own group as well as commissions on several other professional dance companies and student groups around the country and in Canada. The biggest differences between doing a work on my "company" and a commissioned work is the amount of working time and the people involved. I generally work on a piece for my company anywhere from one to two years or more, showing the work in progress several times before the premiere. For commissions, the time varies but it is usually between a week and 3 weeks. I was lucky enough to work with Toronto Dance Theatre for 6 weeks this past winter, which was a wonderful luxury for a commission. Each time I begin a commission I am also getting to know the dancers, whom I have usually never met before our first rehearsal. Because much of my work relies on the uniqueness of the individual, I spend a lot of time getting to know them in various ways. For my company work, I generally work with people with whom I have some sort of history or relationship, so we can jump into the rehearsal process.

Another difference is that I have danced in each of my works so far - but I am not in the works I make for other companies. It can be difficult to be on the outside, and also really wonderful to have that perspective.

N.B.B.: You recently spent several weeks in residence at Camargo Foundation, Cassis, and at Marble House Project, Vermont. Tell us more about your time at Camargo? Was it a time of reflection for a next piece? Did you connect with artists from the area?

J.K.: Camargo was one of the most profound experiences I have ever had. I know that sounds extreme but it is true. The residency time was a coming together, or maybe a breaking apart, of many things that needed to happen for me then. I had just premiered my last evening-length work, a piece I had been working on and performing in stages for over two years. It was a dense time and I was ready to have some space apart from it.

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Camargo afforded a unique experience in many ways. First, they do not have a dance studio on location. Although I was able to use a studio a little while I was there, that was not my focus. Usually during a residency, I would spend 90% of my time in the studio, dancing and finding information physically, so deciding to actively begin a dance in another way was an interesting challenge for me. Secondly, the setting, location, and environment of Camargo is stunning, almost in an overwhelming way. My apartment overlooked the Mediterranean, and viewing the daily activities of the village became a morning ritual for me.

These and other unique aspects of Camargo made it an ideal place to begin a new project - away from New York, largely on my own, no set schedule, no obligation to show a finished product. I wanted to work in new ways, gathering information in ways that, for me, are usually secondary to movement - reading, writing, photographing, walking, talking. I resolved to wake up each day and not have a plan, each day would take on a unique path depending on what took hold. This was a vast contrast to my New York City life which is driven by schedules, appointments, rehearsals, emails, classes, subways, etc.

I realized that each day this location - the place, the people, the impending elections, the mountains, the water, the farmers market, the fishermen's boats, the other residents - all affected how I worked and what I created. I felt changed by the place and therefore able to work in a different way, unbound from my usual cycles. I was there with two other residents who are both choreographers and we were able to talk about the ups and downs that indeed occur when you work for a month on your own, even in a place that looks like paradise! I saw performances in Marseille, met directors of spaces and festivals, and visited museums.

This experience birthed the seed of my new project with the working title Panorama 39-42, in which I am using location as a collaborator and panorama as a metaphor for multiplicity. Premiering at New York Live Arts in Spring 2018, Panorama 39-42 will be a new dance performance created with long time collaborators Netta Yerushalmy (dancer), Jonathan Allen (visual artist) and Ryan Seaton (composer). As our lives continue to be ever dependent and driven by tiny screens, I'm interested in putting the attention on the human body, physicality, emotion, humor and the deep attachments we create with place and space and how those shape whole communities of people. Panorama 39-42's creation will continue during a series of upcoming residencies. During each residency and working period, we will use panorama as a metaphor for multiplicity, inputting information about a place and community by looking through various lenses - kinetic, aural, and visual. Spending time outside of the studio, getting a feel for the area and the community, taking in sounds, visuals, physicality and anything we can absorb, we will delve into the complexities of viewing, being viewed, relationship to others, and relationship to place. All of the information will synthesize in each unique residency location creating its own panorama. Starting anew with each location we will challenge linear or singular ways of creating.



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N.B.B.: Your recent work FIND YOURSELF HERE included the collaboration of several artists from visual, musical and dance backgrounds. Could you tell us more about your process of developing this work? Will it evolve further? and what are your next projects?

J.K.: For FIND YOURSELF HERE (FYH), I initially made three separate trios, each involving two dancers and one visual artist. These were created in a short period of time (2-4 weeks) and performed in non-theatrical spaces - two art galleries and one studio. They were a way for me to understand the process of the visual artist, for them to be introduced to my process and for us to make something based on those intersections and information. Each artist was also a performer in the work.

We then began the next phase all working together - 6 of us, three visual artists and three dancers - and introducing a composer into this second year of the process. For me, this was not about having visual artists create something that we danced in or around but rather to have an intimate collaboration about making and performing that making. I wanted the disciplines to intersect in ways they normally don't by having the visual artists perform and the dancers manipulating materials usually used by artists. I wasn't interested in just putting the three trios together and calling it a piece so instead we put all of the information on the table and then continued the process as a team of 7 to create a new whole. The piece depended on everyone as individuals and what part we all played in the whole, reflecting on the work of making work, the work of being an artist, and the work of living life, especially in the complex web of New York City.

We showed FYH in process many places and had our first premiere at American Dance Institute (ADI) outside of Washington, DC in April 2015. Then we premiered in NYC at Baryshnikov Arts Center in September 2015. This was a full, dense project from which I learned so much. I was really happy we got to share the process and progress with so many people along the way. It definitely heightened my interest in working with artists of other disciplines which will carry over to my next project.

N.B.B.: I read you had a BA in Architecture. How did you move from studying architecture to becoming a dancer and a choreographer? How did your studies in Architecture help you as a choreographer?

J.K.: I do have a BA in Architecture! My architecture and contemporary dance studies began at the same time and influenced each other every step of the way. Architecture and dance, especially creating dances, are so similar to me: they both deal with space, the body in space, the design of body and space, the way a body in space is seen and felt, how you experience a body in space, and the architecture of the body itself.



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I loved architecture school and I graduated at the top of my class. But then I decided to move to New York to be a dancer! My first job in New York was with an independent architect. Every day I would take class in the morning and then go work for her in the afternoon, eventually adding rehearsals at night. Then, my dance load became bigger so I stopped working there but continued to be a freelance model builder for various architecture firms for many years. After I started making my own work, doing commissions, teaching dance and still dancing for other people, I didn't have the time to continue model building. Also, the computer industry had all but taken over my trade, which was building 3-D models by hand.

I use my studies in architecture every time I dance and choreograph, every time I work in a space, any time I see dance, any time I design sets for my work and any time I am creating movement for other bodies. The principles are the same for me.

N.B.B.: As a dancer, do you train every day? How crucial it is to you to keep a daily physical practice?

J.K.: I used to take class every day - modern or ballet or Klein technique which I started studying with Wally in 2000 and continued with Barbara Mahler since 2003. Because of my schedule now, I generally take Klein 2-3 times a week and sometimes I get in a ballet or modern class. However, when I am in a rehearsal process and rehearsing most days, I do have a daily practice that I do myself or with my dancers. It has been very crucial for me to keep taking care of my body as well as to keep pushing it. As I get older, I definitely feel the changes and I understand that will keep happening. But in many ways I feel like a better dancer than when I was younger. My body is smarter and I understand it more.

Because much of my time is doing my own work or teaching my own movement, I appreciate going to class and being in other people's projects even more as it pushes my body to go outside of what it might want to do. This keeps me from getting injured from rote movement. Part of my personal practice is to also keep challenging myself to find new physical potentials so that I don't get stuck on one way of doing something. We all have our habits and they are very hard to challenge but I give it a try!

N.B.B.: What do you think would be helpful for a choreographer in the U.S.?

J.K.: It really depends on the stage of their career, but I think in general, the most useful things would be more funding and more support in terms of administrative and managerial help. We tend to have to do everything ourselves, or certainly most things, and that is too many hats to wear all the time. It is one of the reasons we continually ask if what we do is sustainable.

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I would also like to see choreographers have more touring opportunities that are connected to a premiere, so that once you premiere a work, you would automatically have 2-3 places to tour. We all work SO hard to make our work that having the support to bring it to other audiences while it is still in our bodies could be a crucial turning point for someone's work or career. Often choreographers spend years developing material that is shown for 2-3 nights. This is a shame, and a waste of resources.

I also think it would be extremely useful to have more opportunities to take our work outside of the US. I know this is complicated and expensive, but it's important. We need to have more exchanges and more ways to not only get our work outside of the U.S. but also to SEE work in other countries and cultures.

N.B.B.: Who among European artists surprises you the most?

J.K.: When I was in residence at the Camargo Foundation last year I went to Marseille to see a few shows and the one that stood out to me by far was a solo by Radouan Mriziga, a Moroccan dancer/choreographer who is based in Belgium after studying at P.A.R.T.S and dancing for Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. I was really taken with his solo, -55, and with his performance of it. He tapped into many of my own interests - relationship to the viewer, architecture of the space and the body, use of materials - but it seemed very unique to who he is and what his body can do, or at least what he is interested in it doing right now. It was direct and abstract but for me also felt very human and real. It was a human scaled dance using movement and imagery that could be absorbed in various ways depending on the viewers perspective. I like the freedom to take things in and have the meaning not be so clear. I am very interested to see more of his work in the future!

New York - September 2016



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