Crossroads: Part II: Choreographers

by Mary Carbonara
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THIS ARTICLE is the second in a three-part series on the transformative experiences of Bay Area dancers, choreographers, and dance teachers. The first article on dancers ran in the September issue of the newspaper.

I’ve danced for different kinds of choreographers over the years—some who’ve asked me to generate movement material, those who wanted me to learn their steps exactly, some who wanted me to generate the material through improvisation, and some who were completely open to the idea of me generating the material. In some cases I was responsible for integrating my ideas into the larger work, and in other cases I was responsible for putting other artists on stage, while often managing with very few resources.

As so a follow-up to my recent conversations with dancers, it was natural for me to want to ask choreographers about their experiences with dancers the way I asked dancers about their experiences with choreographers. To begin with, I’ve asked some general questions about how they have found and new dancers, how they test them, and how they develop the relationships. Many choreographers find it convenient to talk about the dance company that their work is a part of, since it’s a perfect model for many different situations. The relationships that I’ve talked to about are often long-term, sometimes having worked together for over a decade. But whether choreographers are working with a small group of dancers or the company of a major dance company, the job of choreographer is twofold: to create a dance and to mentor the dancers who will perform it.

Over the years I’ve struggled with calling myself a choreographer, perhaps because I have such a different idea of what that means. I’ve learned that writing about one’s own work is an act of self-education, and that I haven’t yet learned to think of myself as a choreographer. In a way, I’ve always admired anyone who can make innovative and compelling choices with movement, see the larger picture, and accept the responsibility of putting other artists on stage, often while managing with very few resources.

"I don’t like to go with the current," says Yannis Adoniu, 42. "I usually go the other way than everyone else in the dance world. And the more exciting something is, the more I’m for. I don’t want to think about it too much."

Yannis’ choreography experiments with movement, mixed media and a theatricality that frequently bounces, but is not a twist, the way you can dance. His interests have always been varied. As a youth, he played tennis, tennis, and dance with an interest in interior design. (He remembers as a child rearranging his family’s living room at night while they slept.) Yannis left Greece to train at the University of Michigan and later with the American Dance Festival. He has his own Company, Dancers, and dances for a living. From 1993 to 1990 he danced for Alonzo King Line Ballet.

Now running his own company for more than 10 years, Yannis recently opened Kunst-Stoff Arts, a studio that explores the relationships between dance and other disciplines. "I feel that I have been a dancer for 40 years and I have discovered that I actually love to work with the body, whether in dance or in sculpture," he says. "I suddenly have a new view of the world."

That sense of herself and her work expanded when Joanna had her son, now 10. "It has solidified and fully articulated for me that dance is the expression of deeper forces within me," she recalls. "I no longer feel that I am the body, the dancer, the movement."

For Alex Ketley, 37, dancing is non-studio settings and improvisation were part of his early training. A dancer later at the School of American Ballet, Ketley joined the corps of San Francisco Ballet, learning that the formalized structure wasn’t right for him. He decided to leave SFB and began making experimental work with long-time friend and dancer Christian Burns.

He and Christian explored everything that interested them, from movement to film to furniture. Their first video work was created as they filmed each other improvising in the Bonnieville Salt Flats. The film ran on a loop, lasting about 400 feet long and being re-run as time altered by scale. How does place change influence the way we perceive an idea? I can’t say that I’ve thought much about it."

As a transgender artist, Sean also recognized at once at his uniqueness within the field and said that he could serve his community by being an artist, but it was a gradual process. He explains, “I didn’t think that I was going to be an artist. Somehow knowing I was different, I didn’t recognize it. I thought that I would be a working artist.”

And work he does. Like most choreographers he is artistic director, grant writer, promoter, publicist, fund raiser, and, of course, a performer. "We just discovered. The Dairy Project and it had a real impact on me. Here I was on stage, portraying this incredibly courageous transgender activist who had contracted HIV and who suffered horrendously as he was dying. Every night I was being touched by the life that this person had lived and was being shown on stage. It was so exposed on stage—even removing his shirt at one point and the cumulative emotions that come with that. That was the impact of the piece of Sean’s work. It means nothing if you can’t be present and vulnerable in a real way," he says.

Like Sean, Janice Garrett, 56, made a career change in her 20s when she left the field of Mathematics to become a dancer. In 1985, she joined the Robert Moses’ Contemporary Dance Company as a founding member. In 1988, she returned to New York and performed with the Paul Taylor Dance Company in a few performances. In 1989, she moved to San Francisco to teach at the Dance Theater of San Francisco. In 1993, she became the dance director for the San Francisco Arts Commission. She is now artistic director of the San Francisco Dance Festival and has been with the company since 1995. She has also been a choreographer for the San Francisco Shakespeare Festival and has taught in Europe. She was also teaching at Mills by then and developing an ample local following among students and audience. She founded Janice Garrett & Dancers in 2002.

As it happens, right now Janice is undergoing a major transition, having decided to begin working with new dancers. "I always wanted to work with new dancers," she says. While she intends to continue making work locally, this winter she will spend one month in Paris while working on a new dance. "It’s a good way to work with new ideas," she says. "It’s a good way to develop a work with 75 school children. These are a kids who come from different regions and tribal areas. To all of them I have said, ‘I want you to be broken. I want you to show me your life story and what is it that connects me to people in the world and how can I authentically respond to that?’"

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