



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 2010 issue of In Dance.

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 emphasized improvisation, others focused more on theatricality rather than movement, and even one who insisted the entire performance—and many of the rehearsals—be conducted entirely with my eyes closed. The choreographic process is as varied as the individuals who engage in it.

Over the years I've struggled with calling myself a choreographer, perhaps because I have such high regard for those who do it well that I'm self-conscious of claiming the same title. I've always admired anyone who can make innovative and compelling choices with movement, see the bigger picture, and bear the responsibility of putting other artists on stage, often while managing with too few resources.

So as a follow-up to my recent conversations with dancers, it was natural for me to want to speak with choreographers about the challenging and transformative events in their professional histories and how they handled them. I found myself conversing with people who are fiercely independent and intrigued by the unknown. I was humbled by their willingness to share their own self-doubts and inspired by their curiosity. While each expressed gratitude for being able to do what they do, a sense of risk and adventure also marks their paths.

"I don't like to go with the current," says Yannis Adoniou, 42. "I usually go the other way than what's popular. I think the more exciting something is, the more I'm for it. I don't want to think about it too much."

Yannis' choreography experiments with movement, mixed media and a theatricality that frequently bends, if not twists, the way dance is viewed. His interests have always been varied. As a youth, he was a painter, filmmaker, and a dancer 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 Hamburg Ballet and later while dancing with Bonn Ballet, made his own dances and even ran a theater. From 1993-2000 he danced for Alonzo King Lines Ballet.

Now running his own company for more than 10 years, Yannis recently opened Kunst-Stoff Arts, a new dance space on Market Street intended as a haven for experimentation. "Having a space suddenly you're here," he says. "That was a scary moment, but I also feel more connected. If someone comes through the door, I want to know their name. I want to make sure they have a great time. I feel responsible."

Joanna Haigood describes feeling an inextricable link to dance, but recognizes it as only one part of who she is. "Don't get me wrong," she adds. "I don't know what I would be doing if it wasn't dancing. But I am not a dance; I am something much larger than that."

That sense of herself and her work expanded when Joanna had her son, now 10. "It solidified and fully articulated for me that dance is the expression of some deeper force within me," she recalls. "Watching myself shift priorities emphasized that even more. My priority now is my son, my family and then my work. It was somewhat of a math problem to figure out how to make it all function together."

Known for her large scale, site-specific projects, Joanna explains, "I began to look at my work more like a time-based sculpture and became interested in exploring the concept of dimension and longer and sometimes repetitive time frames. I began to think about a different set of questions: How do you create choreography for a space 400 feet long and how is our sense of time altered by scale? How does place change or influence the way we perceive an idea? I can't say that I've answered these questions yet and I'm not sure I ever will."

For Alex Ketley, 37, dancing in non-studio settings and improvisation were part of his early training. He later trained at the School of American Ballet then joined the corps of San Francisco Ballet, soon realizing 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 pivotal work was created as they filmed each other improvising in the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. He recalls, "We kept at it for a week, and it was just horrible. Finally, out of exhaustion, some idiosyncratic things and things responding to the environment emerged. Some kind of beauty around loss came out of us. I realized that some processes can feel really crappy, especially with improvisation. It taught me not to recoil from being uncomfortable."

That lesson continues to inform how he works now. "Part of my process, generally, is to throw people off cliffs," he says. "I have this belief that dancers are tremendously heroic. I'm fascinated with putting people in positions they're not comfortable with."

Sean Dorsey, also 37, was on a very different path headed into a graduate program in community economic development in Vancouver when he was encouraged to audition for a graduate program in dance. He got in and simultaneously was accepted to a professional training program at a private studio. Yet, despite the validation he still struggled with the decision to commit to dance. He recalls thinking, "How could I possibly do this? How could I turn my back on what I feel is responsible, these communities that I intend to serve?" He recalls an ordinary event that shifted his thinking. "I remember looking across from me on the bus and seeing an older person. I thought to myself how I would want to look back on this moment when I was that age."

As a transgender artist, Sean also recognized at once his uniqueness within the field and saw that he could serve his community by being an artist, but it was a gradual process. He explains, "I didn't start off thinking I was going to make powerful transgender dances. Somehow knowing I was different ignited me. I didn't imagine that I would be a working artist."

And work he does. Like most choreographers he is artistic director, grant writer, promoter, publicist, fundraiser, and in Sean's case, performer. "We just did *Uncovered: The Diary Project* and it had a real impact on me. Here I was on stage, portraying this incredibly courageous transman activist who had contracted HIV and who suffered horrendously as he was dying. Every night I was reliving that. I wanted to be as transparent as I could and convey his ecstasy and suffering." Being so exposed on stage—even removing his shirt at one point and the complicated emotions that created for him—has become an identifiable nuance 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 shift in her 20s when she left the field of Mathematics to dance. She enrolled in the graduate dance program at Mills College and after graduating with an M.A. she joined Dan Wagoner's company in New York. In 1992 she began making and performing collaborative work with British choreographer Jonathan Lunn. She got some commissions and 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 "people in the world who seem to be interested in developing new paradigms for connection." While she intends to continue making work locally, this winter she will spend one month in Kampala, Uganda collaborating with her life partner, choreographer Charles Moulton, on developing a work with 75 school children. "These are kids who come from different regions and tribal areas," she explains. "They're all in school together, but their respective communities have histories of strife and tribal warfare. We'll be working with them using movement and music to explore interdependence and their shared humanity."

While seemingly a big shift, for Janice this path is a clear convergence of her life-long love of movement and interest in the healing arts. She notes, "I always feel like what I'm being challenged to grow into in my life is very much reflected in my work." She adds, "It's about what I'm interested in, what I'm passionate about, what is it that connects me to people in the world and how I can authentically respond to that."

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