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Liz Lerman (third from left) with a cross-generational group of dancers. Image originally created as an illustration for her book *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults* (1984). Photo by Dennis Deloria.

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Liz Lerman is the founder and artistic director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, a cross-generational performance company and learning institution based just outside Washington, D.C. As she explained in the online dialogue carried out by the authors of this volume in the spring of 2001:

We began 24 years ago with these questions: who gets to dance? what are we dancing about? where is the dancing happening? and who cares? Answering these and other inquiries is at the basis of the work my company does both on stage and in community.

The Dance Exchange's work consists of formal concerts, interactive performances, specialized community workshops and participatory events, and training that encompasses the technical, aesthetic, community and process-dimensions of its practice. Company residencies—conducted at home in the Washington, D.C., area, at sites around the United States and abroad—seek to include all of these activities.

This essay describes a path into the community cultural development field that begins in the conventional training institutions of "mainstream" arts practice and—finding that practice inadequate or even threatening to the true purposes of the artist's work—takes a turn into trailblazing collaborative endeavors in which the artist is first and foremost a partner with other community members. In the U.S. community cultural development field, some have perceived a tension between community and art, often expressed in the requirement that practitioners defend their work against a "dilution" that funders and policymakers fear will attach to collaborating with nonprofessionals. In this essay, Liz Lerman offers a truly substantive response, one that may surprise readers who may never have considered that such collaborations could strengthen artistry rather than diminish it.

As part of the editorial process, we asked Liz if working with a defense industry—the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, shipyard project described below—had presented a political or ethical dilemma. Here's how she replied:

One day in 1993, I got a phone call from an arts presenter in Portsmouth, New Hampshire: would we be interested in considering a residency that would help the community face up to the very likely possibility that the shipyard would be closed as part of government cost-cutting measures? The presenter explained that among other things, the shipyard was on the federal government's "Superfund" toxic waste clean-up list. Some families in town had worked at the yard for 12 generations. I found it very complicated and very interesting, despite the fact that I considered myself anti-military and an environmentalist.

This raised questions: Who has the right to tell their stories? Who has the opportunity to discover new things about themselves and their world? Who gets to tell the history of their families? Who gets to participate in a project affording an opportunity to reconsider their ideas about neighbors or co-workers who may be of different racial or class backgrounds, sexual orientations, or political ideologies? As my father liked to remind me as I was growing up: look carefully. Things are rarely as one-dimensional as they seem.

Art and Community

FEEDING THE ARTIST, FEEDING THE ART

by Liz Lerman

When I first began teaching dance in a senior-adult residence in 1975, I was struck by the number of well-meaning friends, colleagues and guests whose response upon visiting me at work was to pat me on the head and say, "Isn't that good for them?"

Now actually, it *was* good for many of the older people who found their way into the class I taught for 10 years at Washington, D.C.'s Roosevelt Hotel for Senior Citizens. The physical range of their bodies increased as they found the joy in moving; their imaginations became animated as they learned new mind/body connections; their trust in each other grew as they partnered in dance; and their self-esteem blossomed as they made works of art. They were strengthened as a community as well: when the residents of the building staged a rent strike against the management, it was the dance-class regulars who organized it.

But it puzzled me that while observers immediately recognized the social good of this practice, they never conceived of the possibility that my work at the Roosevelt was also good for me as a person, as a teacher and as an artist—and ultimately not only good for me, but good for the art form of dance as well.

In the following pages I will describe through stories, anecdotes and observations how working in a variety of community settings has informed and vitalized my artistry and that of the countless dancers who have traveled with

me over the past 25 years. This is not to suggest that the social and political good that emerges from such projects is unimportant. It is vital, and I have lots to say on the subject. But I consider this an opportunity to unveil a point of view which is not talked about very much: making art in community settings forges better artists; and it can also help to forge interesting and important art.

This essay is drawn from my own experiences and path. Trained in classical ballet and modern dance from childhood through my student days at Bennington College, I always expected to take my place in a conventional modern-dance company. After much turmoil and experimentation and many attempts to quit, I claimed a place for myself in the world of dance by merging my interests in making art and making community.

The Dance Exchange, the dance company I founded in 1976, has been committed to exploring the relationship between professional artists and community life, and to the principle that each is made better when informed by the other. Over its long history we have examined myriad ways of playing along this dynamic continuum. We are still trying to understand it. Of course, the basic context of our work is grounded in the culture and society in which it was born: late–20th-century contemporary art making in the United States. All of our language, questions and assertions are of that time and place, and are not meant to relay a completely global picture.

As a way of examining this premise, I want to divide the subject of an artist's evolution into three overlapping categories. Perhaps by pulling them apart, we can find a framework and an evolving curriculum to make the relationship of artistic practice and community interaction a way of life, not a burden; a means of building strengths, not interrupting aesthetic will.

- **Artist as technician.** What constitutes the craft of dancing, and how is it taught and learned? What aspects of this training can be taught outside the technique class and why?
- **Artist as performer.** When and how do dancers learn the skills they need to excel on the stage? In addition to academic curricula, what other avenues can prepare and sustain an artist's growth in this area?
- **Artist as choreographer.** As the dance field in the United States continues to explore methods to develop imaginative, challenging and strong choreographers, what value do community projects have as a learning playground?

TECHNIQUE: ARTIST AS TECHNICIAN

I first noticed that a community setting might actually be a wonderful place for training in dance technique when I was in graduate school at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., in the mid-'70s. As a graduate teaching assistant in dance, I was responsible for training relative beginners along with more advanced dance majors. At the time I taught a technique class similar to hundreds I had taken myself. It was designed to give students a warm-up, impart information on how their bodies could achieve more physical range and teach certain stylistic dance patterns that would allow them to actually dance for the latter part of the class.

I had grown up with structures like this. I understood what was expected between student and teacher. But I also found myself questioning some of the conventions we practiced in these technique classes. I considered them an odd form of American folk dance; you stood in lines, facing the mirror, separated and never touching, always trying to best the next dancer by getting the leg higher, turning one more revolution or looking thinner. I thought these classes were a far cry from why most of us had begun to dance in the first place. But they were and are the accepted form of learning Western-style concert dance.

My contribution to the form of technique classes was to try to make them a safe environment for people to discover what was important to them about becoming better dancers, then how to push themselves to achieve their goals. Also, unless dancers are in a company or involved in a project, class is the only time they can really dance. So I tried to make sure that at some point in the hour-and-a-half of the lesson, people could enjoy their dancing selves.

I spent a lot of time making sure everyone knew each other's names, since I had noticed that I danced better when my teacher could name me. I worked on focus because I was tired of going to dance concerts where the dancers' inner-directed focus made them seem like automatons. I wanted the students to look like people dancing instead of little machinelike technicians. I encouraged my students to find pleasure in what they were doing and to support the struggles of those around them. I taught them what I had learned by then about how the body can function in time and space in recognizable classical Western forms.

It was at this time that I also began teaching at the Roosevelt Hotel for Senior Citizens, a residential facility commonly known as the Roosevelt Hotel. My mother's recent and rather sudden death from cancer had propelled me into an emotional period of loss and reflection. Although still fairly new to

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange leads a workshop at a senior center in the early 1990s. Photo by Stuart Bratesman.

choreography (I had at that time made one formal piece for the concert stage and many informal works for my high school students in a previous teaching job), I realized that I needed to make a dance about what my family and I had gone through. I was interested in finding older people to be in that dance. My search led me to the Roosevelt Hotel, and after much discussion and good humor on the part of the staff, I was allowed one night each week to teach a class in modern dance to anywhere from 20 to 50 older adults.

Suddenly, everything I believed in was called into question—especially everything that I believed about how to train a person to become a dancer. What exercises did these folks need? How and what could I ask them to achieve? What made them look beautiful? In fact, I began to question accepted notions of who and what was beautiful. I found each class a struggle and an inspiration. I discovered new ideas and new processes at every moment. Slowly I realized that my own teaching was changing, and I brought these changes with me back to the academy.

For example, the older people danced harder, with more investment, if they understood the source of the movement. From this discovery, these older dancers and I began to develop what was to become for me a whole methodology of talking and dancing, storytelling and dancing, text and dancing. I tried similar approaches with my more sophisticated college students and found they evoked a new investment and curiosity in their dancing as well.

But the real changes occurred when I brought the college dancers to the senior center. I encouraged each of them to move around the room before the class actually began, meeting the older people and learning their names. They were greeted with great smiles and often with direct, outspoken comments about their looks, such as, "You are so pretty," or "What a great body you have!" I had become used to this type of conversation, but I was unprepared for the positive impact it had on the women students.

I also warned them that, because of the hearing and vision impairments that affected some of the older people, they might have to exaggerate their presence to make connections. I noticed that some of the shyer students were laughing, talking loudly (in order to be heard) and in general participating at a very high level. The older people made it so easy to extend oneself, converse with strangers and be big about it all. I wondered if I hadn't stumbled into a way of teaching dancers how to project character on stage. If dancing is primarily a mute form, perhaps we had found a way to evolve performance personality that was both authentic and larger than life.

At the Roosevelt, I taught a modified technique class. We began seated in chairs, working our way to standing while holding onto the chairs as a kind of barre. Eventually we would gather in a circle in the middle of the room and do some kind of extended improvisation with the goal of keeping the older dancers on their feet for as long as possible.

I made sure that everyone could and did participate at the beginning of the class. But I also made sure, as the class became progressively more physically demanding, that those who had reached their limits could become encouraging observers, able to re-enter the movement whenever they saw fit. I also encouraged all to keep adapting the movement so that even as many of us stood up, others could continue seated.

I realized that the participants were learning theme and variation in this way; when I posed all of this as artistic practice, the participation level soared. What became evident to me is that conventional technique classes assume that every student's body will proceed at the same pace as the teacher's. (I've known many dancers who would come to a certain class early to warm up so that they could be ready for the teacher's warm-up, for example, making clear the inaccuracy of this assumption.)

A favorite improvisational structure late in the class was a kind of free-form dance done in the center of the circle with each person taking a turn to solo. I always shadowed these solos, making sure dancers had plenty of room to move while remaining available to them in case of a balance problem.

Sometimes, in the excitement of the music or the audience's appreciation, the older dancers would find themselves close to falling. I wanted them to stay aware, but I also found shadowing them an interesting form of partnering.

This exercise is where I noticed the biggest change in my students. Everybody had to take a turn in the center of the circle, including the visiting dance students. Taking their turns, they danced more freely and more beautifully than I had ever seen in class. On the way back to campus they were full of excitement: "I was never able to do triple turns before. What happened?" or "My leg has never gone that high and with so much ease." This happened over and over.

I traced this new ability and agility on the part of my college students to the loving environment of the class and their audience at the senior center. I realized that in our professional training we were never in a context which was not hypercritical. The moment these young women entered the room they were considered beautiful; this was probably the only time in their dance career they had such an experience of affirmation. Instead of personal feelings of loathing about imperfect bodies, they found an opportunity to dance with people who were free with their appreciation. That in turn affected the dancers' technique, so they danced better.

I began to experiment. What happened when my students started from a place of positive feedback, a way to appreciate what they had accomplished? I observed that if they could name something particularly meaningful for themselves in what they had done, they could more easily take the next step, isolating a particular technical problem they wished to work on. It wasn't just a global, "I need to be better," but rather, "I want to work on the way I swing my leg in my hip socket."

But my larger concern as a teacher of dance was how to get my students to be human as they worked on their technical deficiencies. I have heard the same thing from other teachers, not just in modern dance but in ballet and in classical music too. Just recently I had a conversation with a ballet master who said, "We train them to be phenomenal technicians, and then we damn them because they have no passion or personality when they perform." I had tried numerous approaches in college classes, mostly various partnering schemes, where facing each other students had to accomplish difficult physical tasks. It seemed they could handle either seeing their partners or working on their technical assignments, but not both at the same time.

Professional company members (left to right) Pene McCourty, Margot Greenlee, Martha Wittman and Marvin Webb perform in "Hallelujah," a 1999–2002 project of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. Photo by Lise Metzger.

So back to the Roosevelt we went. (An interesting aside is that when I brought my students from George Washington University with me to the Roosevelt, the number of older participants might double. It was as if they could smell young people in the building. Perhaps many of the residents came just to socialize, but eventually they were all dancing, which led to wild events with as many as 100 people cutting loose.) I began to push the older people more in their physical prowess by experimenting with the idea of shadowing. I paired everyone up early in the class, reminding my college students that they had to keep dancing while keeping an eye out for their partners' health, balance and technique. As the exercises became more demanding, problems for the young dancers increased. If they stopped dancing in order to be sure their partners were okay, they found their partners quit too. So they had to find ways to be externally involved with someone else while maintaining their own physical work.

We had spent time both at the college and at the senior center talking about what was meant by a safe environment. I had become convinced that a safe environment meant not just a nurturing place, but also a place where people were challenged to do better. The older people didn't want to be commended just because they could raise their arms at the age of 80. They wanted to learn how to do it better, bigger, in unison, with dynamism. They wanted to improve. The older people took pride in the fact that some of them were able to do push-ups, dance for a full hour, turn or jump. I didn't realize how important this was until I brought the younger dancers to class.

The question for me and my young students was whether we should dance to our full capacity, or in effect to "dumb down" in the hope of making older partners feel better about their own limitations. What we discovered was, for me, revolutionary.

My young students began to develop real skills as they partnered the older dancers. They learned how to dance fully while remaining aware of someone else. They learned how to be in support roles and how to step forward into leadership roles, whether partnering or taking a solo turn. They learned how to focus outward even as they listened to their own inner stories. They figured out how to read a room for space, for personality, to spark new movement ideas. But above all, they learned how to be themselves, to be human as they danced.

I began to talk about the work in senior centers as a training ground for professional dancers. I talked about how it was like money in the bank: the experiences we had at the senior center could serve us later in so many capacities in the dance world.

PERFORMANCE: ARTIST AS PERFORMER

I first met Keith Antar Mason at a national gathering of artists interested in community-based work. Originally set up as a way for artists from the American Southeast to congregate, Alternate ROOTS (Regional Organization of Theatres–South) had expanded to include people from all over the country, making it possible for this Los Angeles–based artist to come and perform. His performance was explosive. He is a very tall, very broad African-American theater artist and was, at that time, also very angry. In the performance he stalked the stage, moved with enormous speed and power, screamed, confronted the audience and compelled us to think about our own experience of race and racism in the United States.

I saw Keith again just 18 months later. In this later performance, he lay on the floor and moved very slowly, then rose just as slowly into a kind of ethereal dance. I was just as shocked as I had been the first time I saw him. I asked him directly, "What happened? How could you change your movement range so drastically?" His answer went something like this: he had spent the previous six months working with young offenders in the juvenile justice system. If he moved fast, percussively or with quick changes of direction (all formerly standard practice for Keith), he terrified the young people, causing them to respond with hostility. So he had to learn to move more quietly. He said it was practically a matter of life and death.

To me, this illustrates the reality of working in community. There is no pretense. Craft joins necessity to force artists to become our fully capable selves. Keith could not afford *not* to learn to move differently. He had to expand his craft, and that in turn changed and charged his performance.

Keith's story is a dramatic and very tangible example of how working in community can affect performing artists' range. Here are a few more.

For most of the '90s, my choreographic work focused on issues of identity. With my company, I did a series of works that allowed us to look at questions of belonging. In "The Good Jew?" I was put on trial to judge whether I was "Jewish enough." In "Shehechianu," we explored our own individual family and tribal histories, examining their impact on our stories in the present. In "Safe House: Still Looking," we worked with various communities in Wilmington, Delaware (on the east coast of the United States), to examine the local history of the Underground Railway,[1] as well as contemporary issues of safety and comfort. In each of these works, we carried on community projects in association with the formally staged performances. In some cases we were joined by our community partners, which in this case included local professional dancers and students, young people from a primarily Latino urban arts program, and a gathering of local storytellers. Sometimes the community and performance events happened within the same time frame, but not in the same space. Because we worked so intently on both concert and community projects, we discovered many ways in which each informed the other.

[1] The Underground Railway was a network of safe houses and individuals who helped runaway slaves reach free states in the northern United States and Canada. It operated from about 1840 to 1860, most intensely after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 enabled slave hunters to pursue runaways onto free soil.

Describing the particulars of the work "Safe House: Still Looking" will help to explain these relationships. "Safe House" was originally commissioned by the University of Delaware. We were asked to spend time in Wilmington, the largest city in the state of Delaware and about a 20-minute drive from the university. The commissioner hoped we would make a work that celebrated something about the city. One common thread in all of our conversations was how proud people were of the city's role in the history of the Underground Railway. That got us to thinking about contemporary connections to running away, aiding refugees, the comfort of the known and the fear of the unknown. I would describe the structure of the dance we made as "big story, little story," where we look for our own personal stories inside the larger fabric of history. This dance was constructed as a series of solos in which each dancer told a contemporary, personal story that revealed something about these questions. These in turn were interspersed with larger-group sections that contained either fierce dancing, stories taken from narratives of escaped slaves or sections involving the whole group in a kind of prayer.

One characteristic that marked the period of making and performing "Safe House" was the work's site-specificity, meaning we found ourselves performing in many places other than stages. Although we had been doing this for some time, our work in "Safe House" grew because we connected the content of the dance with the conditions and situations of the sites in which we performed. Whether dancing in someone's home, swimming pool or church, the events proved engaging, fruitful, surprising, useful and delightful for our audiences. Subtle changes happened to the dancers and their performing, and again it is these changes I would like to discuss.

One form of site-specific engagement we evolved in this period is what we call "house parties." These are intimate performances held in someone's home for audiences of 50 to 100. We will often try new ideas at house parties or use segments of longer stage works for these small and intimate portraits. Both of these processes are of great importance to our choreographic explorations, teaching us so much about the dances and about ourselves as performers.

So we found ourselves making a dance about historical safe houses while also performing in houses. One of these performances took place in a rather small home, which meant that most of the dancing occurred in very tight spaces. At one point in the evening, the dancers scattered throughout the house to perform their solos from "Safe House." Each reported how strangely real it became to try to move expansively in small spaces and to tell stories of running in the night, terror, escape and comfort while dancing in a linen closet, a tiny space under the stairs, behind a door or in a dark bathroom. All reported that it changed the way they next performed the work on stage. Partly it was a matter of scale, of having to force large physical movements into tiny spaces, making the experience of the concept much more real.

The final performance of "Safe House" in Delaware took place in the Quaker Meeting House where Thomas Garrett and Harriet Tubman did so much of their work on the Underground Railway together. He was a member of the Quaker Meeting and is buried in the courtyard. She led many escaped slaves through Wilmington, often relying on his protection. At the conclusion of the performance, we taught the audience a simple dance made up of some of the gestures they had just seen. We again mentioned the incredible strength of these two individuals. We asked the audience to think of their own ancestors who they would wish to "walk with them" in this life. Then we invited everyone outside to perform the dance in the courtyard in close proximity to Garrett's grave. Suddenly the first movement of the dance, reaching down and touching the earth, had concrete meaning; it was no longer just a symbol. Likewise, the gesture of reaching back to make a beckoning circle of the lower arm took on new meaning, as if we were calling Mr. Garrett and Ms. Tubman to join us in the present.

What happens to the performance ability of a dancer asked to research stories about a time and place, live with these stories over the course of a year, work with people in many settings to aid them in discovering their own stories, perform these stories in a house and on a stage and in a place where the actual events happened? I believe that the accumulation of physical, emotional and historical meaning leads the dancer to a new level of investment and a different understanding of what the movement itself might mean and convey to another person. In a world as abstract as the world of movement, such experiences carry enormous weight.

For me, an excellent dance performance includes the following: the dancers are 100 percent committed to the movement they are doing; they understand why they are doing what they are doing. And something is being revealed in that moment: something about the dancer or about the subject, about the relationship of the dancers or about the world in which we live. Something is revealed. Too many dance concerts lack these elements. When I think about our dance training, I realize how little time and encouragement we receive to develop our skills in finding such meaning in dance.

This is precisely the information so many professional dancers lack as they take the stage in dance after dance without knowing the meaning of their movement. Given no compelling reason to make one movement instead of another, a kind of ennui sets in, and both audience and performer are relegated to perceiving the movement in purely physical terms, and therefore often only able to measure its success against a standard of virtuosity.

As one company member explained to me recently, the impact of working in community and then bringing the resulting images to the stage is in part that she has a much better and truer picture in her mind as she performs. When she has a true picture, she feels her own performance is more nuanced, and she believes audience members can find their own pictures sooner. As the piece gets performed over and over in different settings, there is an opportunity for the performer to reflect and synthesize anew the information she receives from her interactions with sites and audiences. This keeps the dance fresh and the performing experience unique, and that is always a blessing.

Lastly, interaction with community folks on stage requires a delicate balance that sustains multiple levels of excellence and authenticity. Each company member must constantly solve the dilemma of being a person who dances and has high technical capacity, who must both play a role and remain aware while onstage. This is the synthesis that artists at the Dance Exchange attempt to make at all times. This is what makes them such interesting and beautiful performers.

CHOREOGRAPHY: ARTIST AS CHOREOGRAPHER

There is a symbiotic relationship between choreographing in community settings and for the stage. In my artistic practice, the way they inform each other is complete. But this wasn't always true for me, and so I will try to document some of the more salient moments of change.

My experience in making art within community settings has evolved over time. In the beginning, I taught people a dance I had made for them. The most successful of these dances (which we still perform) is called "Still Crossing." The company performs the first part of that dance alone. At the end they are joined onstage by many others who have all learned the same dance. Originally choreographed for older adults, we now do the piece as a large community effort that makes it possible for diverse groups to work together quickly and with satisfaction. While we always teach the dance so as to ensure that the movement has real meaning for the performers, in "Still Crossing" they are not the originators of the movement.

Over the years, however, I began to feel that I could intensify the art-making experience for all of us if I worked differently. During the "Safe House" period, we began to integrate new stories into an existing work. As we toured, we included community members onstage with us telling stories of their own that we had curated for the performance. But after awhile, this too felt formulaic.

When we got a commission to work with the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard (a 200-year-old federal facility in New Hampshire, on the east coast of the United States), we decided to enter the community with no preordained idea of structure or content or even the form of the culminating event of our collaboration. Through months and months of conversation, participatory workshops and small gatherings, including little performances, the final event took shape. This opened up a whole new world of choreographic exploration which, as I write, is continuing to unfold.

With this approach, the community is a full artistic partner from the beginning: what we do, how we do it, who does it, what it is about—all questions are resolved in the context of time spent in the community devising the dance together. We still make many artistic decisions, but these decisions are taken in dialogue with the participants.

Many interesting aesthetic challenges emerge from this process, and I would like to focus on two that involve the kind of artistic process native to the rehearsal studio. The differences in our approach concern who is involved and how public the processes become. The first I would categorize as naming and defining. The second is about choreographic structure.

It is inspirational to work with people who are untrained in artistic practice, yet totally committed to making art together. One of my jobs in this equation is to communicate where we are in the creative process—sometimes to apathetic listeners or curious but skeptical onlookers—and to help people understand why we are doing what we are doing. Once people commit to joining us, they are in for quite an emotional and intellectual journey. As a schoolteacher in Portsmouth said to me several years after we had finished our work there, "You taught me that I didn't need to know the ending before getting started at the beginning. This is a great life lesson. In fact it has changed my life completely." I am convinced that her confidence in us came about in part through our willingness to explain the artistic process as it unfolds, to name the experience as it happens. We don't do this alone. There is ample time for reflection by the participants as they begin to discover their own ability to acknowledge to each other their personal and collective experience.

But this naming process has a peculiar and I think useful effect on me too. The act of naming helps me understand my own choreographic methods better, to repeat them as needed in other settings and to pass them on to my students and colleagues. It doesn't mean that I act in a rote way, but rather that I have become accustomed to communicating with my collaborators as either intuitive leaps or familiar methods lead us to our goal.

Sometimes I think this naming feels counterintuitive and frightening, especially for artists who are trained to equate inarticulateness with the mystery of art. Quite the contrary, I have found that the more I can describe and name, the more mysterious and miraculous it all becomes. Indeed, it appears that this very understanding makes it easier for me to take on risk. Comprehension leads to freedom in quick problem solving that gives me the courage to enter even more complex and challenging circumstances. It helps me to work quickly, which is good because so often there is very little time and people are busy.

As I enter communities and begin conversations and experiential workshops, the people with whom I am working often introduce me to interesting and subtle choreographic ideas. These are ideas I would not have had alone, nor if I had stayed in the studio working only with my wonderful company. For me, this is where it gets so exciting, because the more I think I understand, the more mysterious the road in front of me becomes.

The brevity of our initial encounters and the short time span in which we often make and craft work with community partners has taught me much. Often those first encounters allow me to develop "muscles" that come in handy as the projects unfold. For example, when we were asked by the major performing arts center in Portsmouth to come and work on the shipyard

project, I was surprised, delighted, scared. Over a period of three years we made many visits, eventually carrying out a weeklong festival with events occurring both in the shipyard and in the community beyond the yard. It took constant attention to introduce the idea of a modern dance company working with the history and stories of a shipyard and the people who lived there. We continuously enlarged the circle of participants. I want to describe four different encounters where the naming of our process brought me insight and where—simply by explaining something about how dance might be used—I learned new choreographic tools from the audience.

First, our initial public meeting brought out a very diverse crowd, including retired engineers, older community members who had worked with us before, several arts professionals, a relative of someone lost in a submarine accident of enormous consequence to the yard and some folks from the staff of the Music Hall, the presenter who had commissioned this work. I talked about how we might develop the project and gave people a sense of what I imagined might take place. During a question-and-answer period, one of the engineers asked if I knew how submarines worked. I didn't. As he began to explain, his hands flew through the air with a delicacy that belied his size. Other engineers jumped in with their own explanations, and again hands danced through the air as they made me see the physicality of the boats and the design elements that allow them to function.

One of the tools I rely on is something we call "spontaneous gesture," which means watching for choreographic ideas in the natural movement of people's hands as they express themselves. I had never before seen gestures so graceful and lively. As I watched the engineers work to express themselves, I also gleaned a new understanding of another tool—physical metaphor—which describes the many ways in which an idea and its meanings can be translated through movement. This concept would prove to be one of the aesthetic paths we would pursue as the project unfolded. In short, I noticed at this first meeting that while I could continue to depend on a choreographic tool I knew and understood, I was also beginning to discover and utilize another one, one that had emerged from the engineers.

Second, early in the project I had to visit the Rotary Club (an organization of local business and professional leaders with chapters around the world) to explain what we were doing. In previous experiences of these kinds of civic clubs, I had often encountered the most intense skepticism. I knew I would have to make my points clearly, directly and with charm. I was delighted to find that the Portsmouth club was not a men's-only affair. American women had entered these formerly all-male clubs, making the atmosphere decidedly different. I talked for a few minutes, then asked people for images of the

shipyard. One woman spoke up immediately to say it wasn't an image, it was a sound. It turned out that she had used the horn signaling the morning shift as her alarm clock all through school; her connection to the yard was completely aural. Then others began talking about the sounds they had heard. It was a moment of swift enthusiasm, with stories told one on top of the other. For me, it opened up a new area of aesthetic representation I had not previously considered for this project. In naming the experience for myself, I named the choreographic structure, enabling myself to begin to imagine a new section of the dance.

Third, after several meetings with an odd mix of individuals interested in the project, it was suggested that we have lunch at the shipyard with the heads of all the departments. This meant a mixture of military and civilian employees, most with administrative responsibility. I was given 10 minutes to talk and take questions and another few minutes for the company to perform. (They ended up doing an improvisation based on the conversation they heard dancing around tables throughout the room.)

What I remember most about this encounter was the amazing quantity of artistic ideas that poured out from the men who had gathered, beginning the moment they were invited to speak. One suggested that the berth where boats were docked for maintenance was a natural amphitheater; in fact, he had privately thought of his work as a kind of performance. Another mentioned the different uniforms connoting different services carried out at the shipyard. Everyone laughed at this, taking enormous pleasure in thinking of the various colors and types of uniforms as costumes (especially those for workers in the nuclear division). Once again, I was taken into new choreographic avenues, given ideas we could take back to the studio and prepare into structures for the community to explore and we could use in our concert work.

Fourth, things moved along in our shipyard project—up to a point, which was the ongoing problem of getting access to what was still a semi-secret government operation. It was decided that I should meet with the commander to negotiate a little more ease in our comings and goings. I was given five minutes of his time.

I spoke very briefly about our project. The commander responded by saying he thought projects like this helpful. When I asked him to explain more, he really began to talk. He said that the shipyard was still cloaked in the secrecy of the Cold War, that the public didn't understand what they were doing, that it all seemed like a great mystery. And that he wanted to change this.

I asked him if he was talking about the shipyard or about modern dance. Except for the Cold War imagery, I said, we could have been discussing

Community participants in the Shipyard Project, 1996, perform with the bridge linking Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with Kittery, Maine, in the background. Photo by George Barker.

either. We both loved that connection. Access was granted, and we launched what we both thought of as a literacy project. I was able to give a new name and new slant to our work by making an analogy to the story I heard from a naval base commander. And he got to see his work and the work of those around him in a new light. The shipyard is a place of immense creativity, collaboration, performance, much a like a small modern dance company. By giving a name to our common ground, we each discovered something new about our disciplines.

IN CONCLUSION

Over the years, as I bustled between concert work and community practice, I often felt I was bringing what I had learned from art making in the studio to my endeavors within the community. The equation seemed more weighted toward sharing concepts and ideas from our studio work with the communities we worked with, to their benefit. But in these last few projects, I have come to see how much my work in the community has emboldened me to make more cutting-edge work for the stage. I see that the freedom to work in so many different ways, with so many invested and excited people, has given me nuance and approaches I would never have discovered had I practiced choreography in isolation from community.

Here is one final example from my work in religious settings, especially synagogues. In the past few years, I have been given the opportunity to build participatory dances within the worship service itself, and I have found this

amazing. In my early work in the Jewish community, I spent most of my time in workshop mode, giving people experiences with text and movement in the guise of study groups. Then, as a fledgling member of a local synagogue, I began to experiment with building participatory dance experiences into the service itself. We took it very slowly. I usually did my sessions in 10- or 15-minute segments, often at family services where, out of the desire to involve children, there is high tolerance for experimentation within the framework of tradition. Only in hindsight did I realize that much of this exploration had taken place during a time of deep introspection on the part of religious leaders seeking ways and means to help their congregants make deeper spiritual connections.

I found that many people were seeking new paths within the worship experience. Despite the traditions surrounding typical services, they were even willing to try movement. Over a seven-year period, I was able to discover several ways in which dance could be a valuable part of public prayer. Now when I create a worship experience, I see the "audience" doing so many different things. They will sit and read, sit and listen, sit and sing, sit and talk, sit and dance, stand and do all of the above. The shock was that contrary to my thinking, congregants were willing to try new things in the most traditional of settings. We could stretch the participatory nature of art and religion in many contexts, even within the formality of worship services.

When I noticed the complexity of congregants' experience, I began to compare it to the typical performing-arts audience, which basically sits and watches. That made me wonder: for a long time, I had thought a formal concert was the last place to experiment. We felt free to do many things in strange sites, so long as when it was time for the formal concert in the big theater with the fancy lights and the high ticket prices, we were bound by the expectations that milieu carried.

So now I have begun to try to break that down too. Our most recent project —"Hallelujah"[2]—is for the "audience that won't sit still." I would never have attempted some of what we are doing now if I had not seen first in countless community settings how far people are willing to go to have a real experience. This taught me that even an audience seated in a theater helps to make the art that they watch.

[2] The word is based on the Hebrew for "praise" and "God," an exclamation of praise associated with Jewish and Christian worship, but also used in secular parlance. Conducted in 15 cities throughout the United States, the Hallelujah project created a series of dances "in praise of" topics emerging from the Dance Exchange's community encounters at each site.

As I write this final paragraph I am one week into a four-week residency for the Hallelujah project that is to culminate in a large performance at a beautiful 1200-seat theater at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in the Midwest of the United States. The project will include participants from both Detroit (the major urban center sometimes known as "the Motor City" for its role in the auto industry) and Ann Arbor. Some people we have been working with for over a year, and some are new to us and our process. From many years of making art by myself, with my company of professionals and with so many people in communities seeking meaning and enlightenment, I know that making this dance experience valuable will require merging what I know as an artist and what I know as a human being. It is my work in community that has taught me how to do that.

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