

A Look Back and Forth Interviews

Heather Elton interviews choreographer Daniel Leveille, and composers Eric Kory and Don Stein.

(Editor's Note: *A Look Back and Forth* was a celebration of New Dance Horizons' 10th anniversary in 1996/97, and featured remounts/reconstructions of works from the past).

Daniel Leveille

("for the day was brief and the day was all" featuring Robin Poitras)

HE: I'm curious to know your thoughts about New Dance Horizons, and about your work with Robin Poitras.

DL: As an artist, Robin is extremely amazing. Of all the dancers I've worked with, and the number is probably over 200, she's the one who can dive the more inside of herself. She dives so deep and I wonder how she will be able to emerge at the end of the work, and then she does and I'm amazed every time. She's also extremely sensitive to so many things, and so you can just give her something to work on or with and she will manage to translate it. It's a very good quality.

HE: When you say you give her something, is it a movement phrase or more of a psychological intention?

DL: If we are talking about "for the day was brief and the day was all" it's more of an emotional intention. I wanted her to express an emotion

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as big as can be, to even "overdo it" like in movies from the 30s with lots of overacting. I wanted her to do that with one simple emotion, and then dive into the contrary emotion in the same way, like love and hate, for example. With this piece, the body is really just repeating one simple movement, as a basis or as a frame that she can hang on to. If it's not really going well one night when she performs it, she can almost just do the movement, but when she's in good shape there is no limit to where she can go. This work is part of my interest in emotion and movement. Usually I like to start with a movement and see how it can become an emotion. You know that if you repeat and repeat and repeat the same movement that some kind of emotion will happen.

HE: Do you use improvisation to arrive at a particular movement phrase, like the repetitive movement Robin does when she jumps up and down in the light?

DL: Yes. Most of the time, I don't know what I am going to do when I enter the studio. I've been a choreographer for more than 30 years - it's not like when you are young and need to know exactly what you are going to do because you are not safe enough.

HE: Your work is distinctive. There are these exquisite constructions of phrases that come out of the darkness and they're really precise and they're really emotionally-based. It's almost like the performers disappear into darkness then remerge into the light again. It's revealing, and it's not like there's a continuous movement, more like it stops and starts, stops and starts.

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DL: Yes, and the duration is important. I ask my dancers to do a movement as long as they can. At some point you, as a watcher, the audience, need to let go, and then something happens - you, the watcher, are in the movement with the dancer. It's like a runner, who runs so far and thinks he can go no longer, and then continues on until he reaches another level where he feels he can run forever. It's the same thing with the repetition - watching a dancer do a repetitive movement for 2 minutes seems like a long time; watch for 20 minutes and it becomes an extremely different thing.

HE: Does "for the day was brief and the day was all" shift from youth to old age?

DL: It can be read like that. Or it may be five different people that you know, or five different relationships. The chairs can be read that way, too.

HE: And the fourth chair she couldn't even deal with.

DL: Yes, she just ran off - just like in life. Sometimes there are things we can't deal with.

HE: And the third chair was interesting - she kept putting on this face.

DL: Yes, it represents the pretending we have to do in public sometimes, the smiling. What she's really doing is smiling bigger than anyone would normally do, and then letting it go. It's erased, just like that. It's quite amazing to see.

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Erich Kory

("Blue Room" featuring Robin Poitras and Dianne Fraser)



1. INTEMPCO, a few small snips / Two Fridas

HE: I am curious about your work with Robin - this piece is improvised, right?

EK: Everything I do starts out with improvisation, what my feelings are when I see whatever she is doing, so I just play along or do something that sounds right.

HE: Were you inspired at all by Frida Kahlo and if so in what way?

EK: Well yes, I think Kahlo was a special artist, in some way similar to Robin. Robin is especially creative, with a distinct style. She's also someone easy to do a piece with because she's so expressive and says so much in her work. I think Robin relates strongly to Frida, as well.

HE: I guess what I'm asking is if you used any of Kahlo's paintings as sources for composition, or the incredible tension and emotional pain that Frida went through -did you use that for your work at all?

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EK: I would have to say that I used Robin as a source more than Frida Kahlo, though we did specific things from the paintings. The music that started the piece is actually written on one of Frida's paintings, an actual line of music in the painting, like a score. So we used that.

HE: And is there any Latin rhythm to what you were playing for the performance?

EK: No, I took strictly aesthetic and personal feelings toward what was going on. It was more European influence, if any. But that's what the *Two Fridas* is about anyway, the two that were represented in this piece – the Mexican one and the European one.

HE: Was there a European Frida?

EK: I think she's half and half, but you can ask Robin-she knows so much more. The performance, though, has one woman in a European outfit and the other in a Mexican one. It's a conflict of two selves. So I believe that Frida either came from Europe, or had some kind of significant tie, perhaps through her parents.

HE: When you look at the performers on stage, I guess you respond to their own rhythm and pacing, as well as the emotional intention.

EK: I'm responding more to the emotional intention. I never go so much with the rhythm or the exact movement. That's the trick of composing to any type of visual imagery. It's not to do something exactly like that

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imagery, it's to do something that will compliment it. You don't want the music to be subservient to the dance or vice versa. They should be two equal components.

HE: And then you put them together unrehearsed?

EK: Yes, the piece with Robin was this way. The first part where I play, she moves - I didn't know what I was going to play, and she had her own pace, both of us improvising. We knew we were going to do it that way. We didn't know how it would actually happen down to the second, but we both knew that the music and the dance would relate.

HE: Sometimes I was watching you play your instrument and you'd stop and the music would continue, so I thought something else was going on there - was it pre-recorded?

EK: Yeah, the middle section was pre-recorded. I have a looping machine by Lexicon that lets me make loops upon loops, so there can be a lot of tracks. I can use the delay in the looping machine, too, or there's electric guitar sounds, chorusing, pitching, things like that. It's like an instant recording studio.

HE: So you are kind of like a post-modern cellist.

EK: Yes, well, I'm using what's available these days. My initial reason for leaving classical music was to interest people of my generation to the cello, and the main way to do that is electronically, and loud. And to play in clubs and whatever else. Once you do that it doesn't matter what

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you play. I started playing Bach suites in clubs in Harlem and they loved it, because I brought classical music into venues where it doesn't usually go. Now, however, I play almost no classical when I'm doing my own music or playing with a band.

HE: How do you describe your music now?

EK: New age jazz, I guess. It's the beauty of improvisation.

Don Stein

("Action Transferred" featuring Robin Poitras and Marnie Gladwell)

HE: How would you describe the score from *Action Transferred*?

DS: It's an electro-acoustic score done with a sampler. It's a remount of a piece done in the 80s. The idea was to make a sound track current to the 90s while still referring to the 80s.

HE: Did you compose it without seeing movement?

DS: No, I had a video taste of the original dance that Robin and Marnie did in the 80s. I watched it a bunch of times, and, through a vocabulary of musical ideas, tried to match what was happening with the movement. My first version of the music was too literal for their purposes, so I took their feedback and remixed it all. The second version, the one in the piece, seemed to work much better.

HE: How would you place the work of INTEMPCO, and your work with

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Robin, within the context of the Canadian art landscape?

DS: I've always said that the most interesting dance in Canada outside of Montreal happens here in Regina. I think that what New Dance Horizons does in terms of identifying interesting artists in the rest of the country and bringing them here to perform is light years ahead of anybody west of Toronto, for sure. I've seen the best butoh here in Regina, for instance. The most interesting young artists like Paul-Andre Fortier performed here years before anybody else in the west thought of presenting him. And the INTEMPCO work is the same. New Dance Horizons finds very interesting artists and brings them together. I was fortunate to be involved in the INTEMPCO production *Dido and Aeneas* with Benoit Lachambre and Davida Monk and Richard Martel. It was a piece that was filled with many really strong and diverse components. And working on an IMTEMPCO is great because New Dance Horizons has such respect for the artist, and an understanding of the creative process. You know, Regina is a small centre, but the environment for creation is superior here to what I've seen in most places.

HE: And your own creative process, when you create a sound score for dance - how does this differ from creating a score that wouldn't be accompanied by performance?

DS: For dance, you of course have to co-operate and collaborate with the artist. And you have to keep the material interesting for as long as is required by the movement, as opposed to keeping it interesting for your own purposes. So I might be really happy with something...in fact, I was really happy with something in this piece that lasted about two minutes.

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In the remix, it went up to four, almost five minutes to suit the needs of the work. And that forced me to go back and recompose it and make it more interesting in musical terms to last that long. So there's a lot more of an exchange. But I think one of the pleasures of working with dance as opposed to theatre or film is there is more latitude for the composer and the musician to express themselves because the dancer responds to that. In theatre and film you've got sixteen seconds. They want a cue. They're not as interested in responding to the music where as dance is so much more integral in its connection between the movement and the music.

Heather Elton lives in London, England where she works as a freelance writer/editor/photographer. She was the editor of *Dance Connection*, Canada's magazine for contemporary dance, and *Last Issue*, an interdisciplinary arts magazine. As Editor of the Banff Centre Press, she published *Chinook Winds*, a chapbook on contemporary Aboriginal dance, and *Why Are You Telling Me This?*, an anthology of creative non-fiction. More recently, "All in the Family," her memoir documentary on adoption, was aired on CBC Radio's Ideas.