Letter from the Editor: The Resilience of Dancers, The State of Enthusiasm, and a New Initiative: Moving Visions
By Christine Jowers Published on November 10, 2020

I remember it was just February when I was sitting in a crowded cafe (aah, crowds) with Alison Clancy. We were at the Bleecker Street Le Pain Quotidien (now closed because of COVID-19). Alison was preparing to open the brand-new production of Wagner’s Der Fliegende Holländer at the Metropolitan Opera (closed till September 2021) with a dancing solo — an honor for her and a historic moment for dance in opera.

Sharing the anticipation of the premiere and indulging in a little bite to eat was a joy. How energizing, I thought. I miss talking to artists in person about their work — I have to do more of that — must get away from my darn computer.
Nothing like a global pandemic to muck up your plans.

Add political strife, racial injustice, protests, riots, and it’s a wonder we’re still standing. (Perhaps we can all breathe for a moment now that we have a new President?)

I’ve marveled at how quickly and creatively the dance world has responded to this tense time.

Even as iconic entities like the New York City Ballet and Broadway theaters shut seasons down, groups of courageous dancers, companies, studios, and presenters have continued to offer live work allowing audiences to enjoy movement from a distance or to amble through art in surprising places.
mignolo dance brings performance to Nexus Parking Systems in Metuchen, New Jersey, for a drive-in show this weekend. Troy Schumacher’s Ballet Collective is creating the first full-length ballet of the pandemic, a Covid-19 compliant, immersive *Nutcracker at The Wethersfield Estate* in Amenia, NY. Almost two-dozen dancers from New York City Ballet, where Troy also dances, will perform. Organizations like Kaatsbaan Cultural Park, Arts On Site, BAAD! in the Bronx, The Bang Group, New York Theatre Ballet, Alpha Omega Theatrical Dance Company, Bated Breath Theatre Company, and the artists and administrators of the bourgeoning collective, Dance Rising, remind us that the in-person exchange of energy from dance is healing, invigorating, and essential.

Many of us have been depressed, in fact, gutted from the upheaval, but struggling dancers seemingly never allow negativity to cancel plans. They flow, shift, and reshape to move with the times. Up pop YouTube channels, online journals, Zoom classes of all sorts, virtual matinees, dancing protests, premieres, retrospectives, panels, festivals, films, and galas.

*Jacquelyn Buglisi’s Table of Silence; photo by Terri Gold*
Jacquelyn Buglisi’s annual pageant for peace, *Table of Silence*, went from a ritual including hundreds of dancers to ten. But those ten moved with mountains of force, and artists and audiences world-wide virtually came to the Table to breathe as one on the anniversary of September 11th. Historic Jacob’s Pillow and the Kaatsbaan Cultural Park opened their bucolic spaces for companies to quarantine and choreograph. The Joyce gave its stage to Molissa Fenley and seven solo stars to revive her iconic 1988 solo to Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring,” *State of Darkness*. Kat Wildish, Alison Cook Beatty, and Cameron McKinney are among the movers who took to Central Park for classes and rehearsals — all socially distanced and responsibly masked, never allowing circumstances to get the best of their practice.

Charmaine Warren, artist and critic, created a Vodcast to celebrate contemporary Black dance stories. The Martha Graham Dance Company, Stephen Petronio Company, American Dance Guild, Gibney Dance, Clark Center NYC, Sokolow Theatre/Dance Ensemble, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (among others) have treated us to a combination of inventive online premieres, conversations, as well as dives into their archives. It’s a great time to get to know a dance company or brush up on your dance history.
As we at The Dance Enthusiast address the challenges of a pandemic, taking care of our lives and families outside of the performance world and in it, we deeply feel the need for uplift and community connection. Live dance performance gave that to us so generously. We miss it, and we miss so many of you who we are accustomed to running into before, during, and after performances and rehearsals, or in crowded cafes in our once bustling city.

Your approach to the times has inspired us. So, in the spirit of flowing, shifting, and reshaping energy, and because we miss the exhilaration of working closely with artists, The Dance Enthusiast is excited to introduce a new initiative to our site called Moving Visions. With this program, we welcome artists and enthusiasts to guide our coverage
as guest editors, asking that they share their passion, expertise, and curiosity with us while we celebrate their accomplishments and viewpoints.

This season two stellar women, both noted choreographers and community leaders — Heidi Latsky of Heidi Latsky Dance and Francesca Harper of the Francesca Harper Project, are our Moving Visions Guest Editors. Heidi, famous for her glorious dancing with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company and an influential leader in the physically integrated dance field, has with her own creations "disrupted space, dismantled normal, and redefined beauty and virtuosity" for over 20 years. Francesca, acclaimed for her work as a ballerina, concert modern dancer, triple-threat Broadway performer, recording artist, choreographer and playwright, defies genres as she deconstructs classic forms and melds them with cutting-edge music, text, film, and video.

I am looking forward to working with each of these women and to the discoveries we make.

https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/barefootnotes/view/Letter-from-The-Editor-Dance-Enthusiasm-Moving-Visions-
We are taught not to stare, not to look at someone deeply because it might offend them; that if someone "different" catches our eye we’ve objectified them. This is the life of the viewer. Alternatively, should we possess a birthmark, a glorious height, or an unknown disability, then we risk being too noticeable and often ostracized or worse. This is the life of the viewed.

In both situations, there are harsh limitations. The viewer does not often take the time to see beyond mere appearances, and the viewed often feels overwhelmingly perceived as “other.”
Can a dynamic space for both the viewer and viewed exist? Is there a place where we can approach one another with interest, curiosity, and empathy?

These ideas and questions sat at the foundation of my work in 2015 when I was invited by the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities to create **ON DISPLAY**, a series of site-specific installations in the form of live sculpture courts throughout NYC to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Since 2015, ON DISPLAY has grown to include installations around the United States and the world from Southeast Asia to South America.
But I actually began my exploration of the complex world of disability and collaboration in 2006 when I was commissioned to make a dance for the multi-talented visual artist, former gymnast, go-go dancer, and bilateral amputee, Lisa Bufano.

Lisa, who at twenty-one lost most of her fingers and both of her legs below the knee due to staphylococcus bacterial infection, was my entrée into the complex world of disability and fueled my awareness of my growing non-disabled ally-ship. Together, we made Five Open Mouths, a 25-minute solo. Our implicit contract required me to see the world through her eyes while holding on to my value system and artistic vision.
Initially, Lisa wanted me to make her a solo using her various prosthetics from her high heels to her running “Cheetah” legs. But just before our second rehearsal, I saw her moving around in the studio without prosthetics and immediately recognized the power and beauty of her own body’s movement. Although I did add a first section to *Five Open Mouths*, which utilized Lisa’s “running legs,” and although I loved her athletic prowess in this, I found that without any assistive devices I was more drawn to “her.”

Lisa’s prosthetics were her safety net and my taking them away terrified her — an admission she only made in a talk-back months after we completed our work. Some of the choreography also required her to sway and fall, which was another hurdle, as she
had spent so many years refining her ability to control her body. And when I brought in a beautiful but ironic version of “Over the Rainbow,” I was confronted with unexpected anger over the implications of that song. She thought it would portray her in a more “inspirational” way and that audiences would think she wanted to be different from who she was. We agreed for me to look for another piece of music and for her to think about why it triggered her so much. Such was the intimate nature of our collaboration and my fast track education into disability. We chose another song.

I will never forget, after the premiere at Judson Memorial Church, Lisa beaming, but visibly upset. She questioned me and my producer Jeremy Alliger, who had been curating wheelchair festivals in Boston for years. “Are they giving me a standing ovation because of my disability or because what I did was good? ”I had no idea how to answer, but Jeremy looked her in the eye and said,
Andrea Shea of WBUR Radio Boston said of our piece, “I was lucky enough to travel to New York City for Lisa’s debut in a world premiere piece choreographed just for her. Its title, *Five Open Mouths*, referred to the way she sometimes viewed the five stubs on each of her hands. Everyone in the audience was moved. She started the piece with prosthetics but eventually shed them, revealing her physical form — her lithe, beautiful,
legless body — as it truly was. I'm not sure I've ever witnessed as brave a display of vulnerability. The amputees in the audience smiled and clapped, some wept.”

Laying yourself bare, revealing yourself to others is an act of generosity, grace, and humility. It cannot be superficial or contrived. To resonate with an audience, a performer needs to be authentic. Personal truth carries universal meaning.

Lisa was inherently authentic. I had never before worked with someone who had such a strong, palpable internal life. Her ability to be both fierce and vulnerable created a new standard for my company.

“Despite my own terror and discomfort in being watched (or, maybe, because of it),” Lisa said in her artist statement, “I am finding that being in front of viewers as a performer with deformity can produce a magnetic tension that could be developed into strength.”
I wonder, now that we cannot be together physically because of COVID-19, can this “magnetic tension” be felt? Can we perform and witness each other with openness in the virtual space when we are at home? How do we create a compelling two-dimensional version of a three-dimensional experience? Will I be able to capture the complexity of each performer in ways that will truly impact the audience?

Since March, these questions have consumed me. The dance world is now intertwined with computers and the internet. The digital world is our creative lifeline should we wish to embrace it.
My perception of the viewer and the viewed has shifted, becoming simultaneously more encompassing and more blurred. My curiosity to communicate the richness and diversity of our humanity in new ways has grown.

With brand new collaborators who feed my creativity, I’ve been forced outside my comfort zone into alternative forms of expression. Working with virtual reality, volumetric videos, building an interactive art/tech experience, and a series of ten short films, I am further developing my mission to redefine beauty and virtuosity through diversity, to provoke discourse, but most importantly to evoke empathy. This incredible new trajectory has revitalized my imagination.
As I sequester in my home deeply experiencing the uncertainty and chaos of this time, I sit with the ongoing uncertainty of the outcomes of my labor. Will I be able to accomplish what I set out to? Can I capture the complexity of each performer in ways that will move the audience?

This is no different from what I have felt in the past, yet it is completely different. I miss being in the studio, but also do not miss it at all. I feel cut off but more connected because I have more time to be. It is a troubling period but also a time of great reckoning — a time to listen and question.

My work stems from questions, not answers. The creative process, for me, is the
answer. It is the most powerful tool I have to keep myself hopeful and honest when so much of the world is not.

Donald Lee, Jillian Hollis, and Meredith Fages of Heidi Latsky Dance on Accessibility, Beauty, and Disability

By Sammi Lim Published on November 23, 2020

Donald Lee, Jillian Hollis & Meredith Fages © Heidi Latsky Dance

Moving Visions Editor, Heidi Latsky
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About the Artists:
DONALD LEE was first sculpted by Heidi Latsky for ON DISPLAY - Summer Streets, 2016. He continues to morph in various iterations of DISPLAY by Heidi Latsky Dance. In 2018, Donald was in a trio with fellow HLD dancers Meredith Fages and Sabatino Verlezza for Verlezza Dance, which shares HLD's philosophy to use atypical bodies as sights/sites to address the ideas of beauty, physicality, and authenticity.

MEREDITH FAGES has performed with Karole Armitage, Alexandra Beller, Monica Bill Barnes, David Hallberg/Francesco Vezzoli, Deborah Hay, Heidi Latsky, Elisabeth Motley, Palissimo, Jimena Paz, Laura Peterson, Sarah Skaggs, Steeledance, Virginia Ballet Theatre. Graduated from Columbia University, Pre-Medical Concentration in English. Mother of Graham Sterling Proskin. Joined HLD in 2007.

JILLIAN HOLLIS is originally from Syracuse, is a Point Park University graduate who joined HLD in 2002 and is now the company’s Rehearsal Director. Her dancing has been described as "blithely irrepressible" by The NY Times. Jillian collaborates with other artists, is a burlesque performer and Miss Coney Island 2018

MORE INFO: heidilatskydance.org/company

Sammi Lim on behalf of The Dance Enthusiast: Hi, you three! My first question for everyone is this: how would you describe Heidi’s style of leadership?

**Meredith Fages, Company Dancer:** Demanding with a capital D.

**Jillian Hollis, Rehearsal Director:** Heidi’s style of leader is task-driven. She herself is relentless inside and outside of the studio and expect the same of her dancers. She is one of the hardest working women I know.

**Donald Lee, Company Dancer:** Heidi is very much a process leader with a 'beginner's mind'. There is no template on accessing movement with a diverse company like ours. We range in body types, dexterity, experience, and expertise, much like in the real world. We're also an intergenerational company, which adds to the complexity of how she communicates with each of us. Heidi has commented that she has created a company of soloists and I think that's true. Her leadership style is informed by a clash of unique bodies with integrated abilities. In that sense, her leadership is also
accommodating and collaborative because her work demands it. She can disconnect from desire and know when to let go of something that doesn't work.

**Meredith Fages, Company Dancer:** She has an extraordinary capacity to meet people where they are and then pull the best out of them, even in the moments when that feels very far from possible.

"This is the first photo I saw of myself in ON DISPLAY. It captures what I meant by being "sculpted" by Heidi," says Donald Lee

(Photograph: Heidi's daughter)
Donald Lee: Sure. For those who are unfamiliar with ON DISPLAY, the performance/exhibition opens with a human sculpture court that transforms into dance. The sculpture court is based on structured improvisation evolving into self-realized movement portraits interspersed with interconnected choreographed dance. The performance is somewhat like a Calder mobile. One movement connects with another, either choreographed and/or activated by the environment. So it's very much alive and everchanging.

When Heidi invited me to an open casting call to be in the human sculpture court, I thought that a human sculpture court was as it sounds—people holding a pose. But really it's a durational movement practice shaped and sculpted by time, space, and the environment. In that sense, I feel very much "sculpted" by Heidi.

The Dance Enthusiast: What are some feelings that surge through you when performing ON DISPLAY?

Donald Lee: For me, performing ON DISPLAY is more of an awareness of airiness or emptying of emotions. In actuality, it is getting into the core of your being. That very essence is transformative within each movement installation. Whether that manifestation be discomfort or invincibility, it’s always unknowable yet honest. Heidi has described arriving at this moment as being vulnerable. To me, it’s also honesty, revealing your true self. What’s illuminating is the infinite in-between journey as I transition from stillness to stillness.
The Dance Enthusiast: Is there a performing arts venue you would like to commend for its accessibility?

**Donald Lee:** Nothing comes to mind.

I'm in a unique position since I wear prostheses and can navigate most spaces with relative ease. That said, accessibility is not only about physical mobility. There are cognitive, intellectual, and invisible disabilities, among other types of disabilities.
Besides, accessibility at one venue versus at another is not always all inclusive. Access needs differ from person to person. What's accessible to me may not be accessible to someone else. We have to think of accessibility as an ongoing open conversation among all stakeholders. I remain teachable in a broader ideation of access and I advocate the same for all performance arts venues.

On the other hand, performing at inaccessible spaces helps expose the shortcomings of a venue for its performers and audiences. It also fosters uncomfortable but necessary conversations about inclusivity in the arts. On many occasions, Heidi Latsky Dance literally disrupts a space in order to reimagine a space for all. For instance, we performed in an old theater in Armenia that was inaccessible, to say the least. We reconfigured the theater to allow the audience to enter from the back of the stage which opens to a back alley. We also arranged seating on stage. The space is democratized where performers and audience share the same space and are on the same level. The spectators become spectacle themselves on stage. We made a space that doesn't work work for us. There are no rules to break in integrated dance so we have to make our own rules.

Overall, I hope a venue confronted with accessibility issues will begin to value the richness of disability artistry and inclusivity in the arts.

https://youtu.be/zSMoyPHq75k

The Dance Enthusiast: Hey, Meredith. I thought I recognized you from the New Yorkers For Dance campaign!

Meredith Fages: Yep, that’s me.

You quoted: “Disability Dance Artistry matters to me because it allows us to expand our artistic palette and to discover beauty in unexpected places.” In a similar vein, has there been a silver lining to Covid-19?

Meredith Fages: This has definitely been a time of seeking and uncovering beauty in unexpected places. Those necessary moments keep me going when I feel lodged in the endless and unknown (which in so many ways is life anyway!) and they remind me that the only constant is change. I prize wonder.
Meredith Fages: I successfully summited Kilimanjaro with my husband.

Jillian Hollis: My talent for Miss Coney Island was a burlesque act. I created an act inspired by the Cyclone roller coaster. It involved puppetry, hot dogs, a lot of upper body choreography and screaming!

Jillian Hollis: I was pregnant for part of it and had my first baby in July. So in a way it's been good but strange timing to slow down. However, in the beginning of the pandemic, I suggested we start teaching repertoire online through Instagram live. I wanted us to all keep moving and maybe learn something new. I was teaching a warm up and then would take a week or two to teach HLD movement, our "Signature Solo" series. That sparked other company members to teach classes online as well.

Heidi also gave me the task to film myself doing solo material in various locations. I filmed on my roof, in the streets, in my apartment and on my sisters porch. She would give me different directions with each assignment. Heidi ended up making the most beautiful film for me with all the movement filmed while I was pregnant as a gift and titled it "For Edith", my daughter. It makes me weep for so many reasons. It really captures this pause in life beautifully.
The Dance Enthusiast: What is one of your favorite works that you have performed with the company?

**Meredith Fages:** "Unfinished". Hands down the hardest evening-length dance I've ever done, and when I get the pacing right, it is incredibly gratifying. I'm going on a mammoth journey as a performer, but it's more about what the audience brings to it as they go on mammoth journeys of their own. I think it allows people to find the universal in the particular.

**Jillian Hollis:** We did an evening of work called "Triptych". It was a film we shot at Montclair State University titled "Soliloquy" and then we performed two works called "Solo Counter Solo" and "Somewhere". It was a wonderful evening of dance that really allowed the company to shine. My "Somewhere" duet was created with a vogue dancer, my shoulders have never been the same.

**Donald Lee:** A memorable venue is Lincoln Center's Reflective Pool. Heidi staged the dancers around the pool, in the center of which sits a Henry Moore statue, Reclining Figure, which looks like a meteor floating in the sky that's reflected in the pool. And the performers looked like heavenly bodies among clouds surrounding the statue. That was surreal.
The Dance Enthusiast: Thanks so much, everyone. To wrap up, please complete the prompt: “Disability is more _________ than most will ever know.”

**Donald Lee:** . . . present.

**Meredith Fages:** . . . creatively fecund.

**Jillian Hollis:** . . . powerful, beautiful, self sufficient and normal than most will ever know. People tend to either stare or look past people with disabilities. We're all human. We should take the time to learn and know one another. I've learned so much working with the members of our company and not just about disability. I've learned about life, history, travel, computers... Conversations are key.

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