

# Julia Rhoads/

Dancer, choreographer from Riverside leaps into a space where anything can happen



Photo courtesy of Lucky Plush Productions

**GIVE A GIRL A PAIR OF DANCE SHOES** and one day she'll take on the world. Founder, director and choreographer at Chicago's innovative dance-theatre company, Lucky Plush Productions, Julia Rhoads took her first dance steps at Salt Creek Ballet when it was located in Western Springs. While a scholarship took her to the prestigious San Francisco Ballet, an injury brought her home to Chicago. She graduated with a degree in history from Northwestern University, then earned an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The recipient of multiple dance and choreography honors, including the Alpert Award and a MacArthur Award, she is one of Chicago's most in-demand directors. A new production, *Tab Show*, comes to the Harris Theatre in Chicago on April 26 - 27.

Rhoads talked with *WSL* about the gravity-defying blend of dance, theatre, comedy and social commentary that make up her unique artistic style.

## ■ What led you to settle in Riverside?

**JR:** My husband and I moved here in 2004 just before our first child was born. We wanted to stay close to Chicago but also be close to their grandparents, who were

further west. We instantly fell in love with Riverside — the winding streets, green spaces, diverse architecture — and its socially engaged community.

## ■ Where did you train as a dancer?

**JR:** I started when I was nine years old in Western Springs, at a studio which is now the Salt Creek Ballet in Westmont. I graduated high school early after receiving a scholarship to San Francisco Ballet School. I became an apprentice in the company the following year. My time there was incredible — an emotional roller coaster. I had the opportunity to understudy solo roles and push myself as a dancer, but I also sustained a hip injury that took me out for the latter part of the year.

## ■ And that made you change course?

**JR:** I became increasingly conflicted about deferring college and applied to Northwestern University. I didn't have a clear sense of what to study until a professor blew me away in a survey history course. He brought every lecture to life, making connections between history, contemporary culture and other fields in a way that I had never experienced.

## ■ What took you back into dance?

**JR:** I started to perform again while I was at Northwestern — contemporary dance and theater. In my senior year, I joined the dance-theater company XSIGHT, and it had a major impact on me. Working with XSIGHT was my first collaborative devising process, and it brought together my interests in dance, theatre and performance. I went on

to receive an MFA in Performance at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. I focused on playwriting and video design.

## ■ What inspired you to start Lucky Plush?

**JR:** I had been working with XSIGHT for a few years when the artistic director took a job in Alaska and the company dissolved. I was crushed but was soon collaborating with Holly Rothschild, who was also in XSIGHT. Holly moved to Los Angeles a couple years later, which is when I formalized Lucky Plush as a nonprofit and began creating work on a regular basis.

## ■ Was there a breakthrough moment?

**JR:** Lucky Plush's growth has been fairly gradual. We had a lot of early success in Chicago. I was named in *Dance Magazine's* "25 to Watch" in 2010, and we started to gain a national presence and toured on a regular basis. The Alpert Award in Dance, which is given to one U.S. choreographer each year, was definitely a highlight. One of our biggest honors was being the only dance company to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions, a recognition of exceptional creativity and impact.

## ■ What is "dance-theatre" and why does your work stand out?

**JR:** Lucky Plush's combination of dance, theatre, humor and relatable content appeals to diverse audiences. Our "hybrid" work is distinct. The performers are foregrounded as distinct human beings and dialogue is authentic and conversational rather than poetic or presentational. Each project has its own

set of logics as to how dance and dialogue relate, how performer and character relate, and what movement vocabularies serve the work. Every aesthetic choice is made to move the work forward or to give the audience anchors in understanding content. I train the ensemble to follow impulses and shed presentational aesthetics in favor of experiences that are shared between themselves and the audience. Though rigorously composed, much of my work feels like it is generated spontaneously because in performance there is space for real-time reactions to crafted circumstances.

## ■ The *Chicago Tribune* called your work "essentially comedy improv with a social conscience." Is that the case?

**JR:** I love this quote, because it affirms some of my core values. I strive to make work that is easily humorous and beautifully human — where performers leak emotion and come up against their own limitations, and where audiences can build expectations and laugh when the unexpected is delivered. Laughter functions as an important release and offers a non-precious way to tackle difficult issues, generating excellent energy between performers and audience.

## ■ What do you want audiences to take away from your shows?

**JR:** My hope is that audiences leave the theater feeling that they engaged with the work on an intellectual level, connected with the individual performers, became invested in the narrative arc, and had a lot of fun. One of my favorite things to hear audience members say is that the show was like nothing they've ever seen before.

## ■ How do you begin an original work?

**JR:** Every project starts with an idea about the overall theme or narrative arc. Though I care deeply about movement and its power to communicate things in a way that language cannot, it rarely comes first. The choreography, dialogue, and music all grow out of the central questions that drive the work. Even though movement isn't generally the initial driver, once we get in the process, all of the component parts influence the others in unexpected ways. That is one of the biggest joys — the work reveals itself as I direct performers to manipulate the choreography, improvise, experiment and play.

## ■ How would you describe your personal style of choreography?

**JR:** Choreography is a tricky word. It encompasses the organization of bodies in space, the overall design aesthetics and staging and much more. I guess I would say that my choreography is layered, thoughtful, fun and surprising. My personal style of movement tends to be lush, textured, fluid and dynamic.

## ■ You have also directed choreography in film. How does that compare?

**JR:** There is an intimacy that you can achieve with a camera because it can get so close to the actors/dancers. The editing process is another layer of choreography. It allows the maker to direct the audience's focus in a specific way since the image is controlled within a fixed medium. By contrast — and in a great way — live performance has so many factors that make each audience member's experience distinct. For me, there's really nothing like that energy and shared experience. It's a space with endless possibilities, where anything can happen.

## ■ You are one of few successful female directors. An imbalance at the top?

**JR:** In Chicago, the small to mid-sized companies are largely run by women, yet the major institutions still prioritize male directors. This is frustrating and short-sighted from an artistic perspective, since women are directing some of the most extraordinary work. While I think that there have been small steps forward, the lack of gender equity in hiring and funding in the arts — which is felt most acutely by women of color — reflects a more pervasive problem across most fields.

## ■ What does it take to succeed in dance?

**JR:** An outstanding dancer has strong technique, but is also compelling. I am always drawn to people onstage who are present and responsive to the live circumstances of performance. These are often the people who are unafraid of taking risks or getting something 'wrong.'



## ■ What advice would you offer?

**JR:** One of the biggest mottos in my life is to fail forward. It's difficult to become a nuanced performer if you are striving to replicate an externally imposed idea of perfection. Well, unless you are going for the Rockettes!

## ■ Do you still perform?

**JR:** I've always been a performer at heart, but I find it challenging to direct a work from the inside. It's hard to find the time to maintain a rigorous physical practice with all of my responsibilities as a mother, director and educator.

## ■ What do you enjoy about the Chicago theatre scene?

**JR:** Chicago is a place where experimentation is celebrated, which fosters collaboration and innovation. There's also a scrappy spirit and a supportive community that I haven't experienced anywhere else.

## ■ Tell our readers about your next dance-theatre production, *Tab Show*.

**JR:** *Tab Show* at Harris Theatre in late April takes its name from an early 20th century short — or tabloid — version of musical comedy that might have been part of a traveling road show. It's a mix of individual stylings and group dynamics, movement and song.

## ■ Would you encourage your children to take up dance?

**JR:** I always encourage my children to follow their personal interests. Even so, the apples don't fall so far from the tree! All three kids are creative and love to throw down on a dance floor! ■

## Q&A RAPID FIRE

### ■ What do you love about dance?

It makes me feel present, and there are so many ways to do it.

### ■ Where will readers see you out and about in Riverside?

Mostly

at my kids' activities in school, the park district or community theater.

I also love the Riverside library, and

would spend much more time there if there were more hours in the day!

### ■ Favorite performance venues in the western suburbs?

College of DuPage for presented performance, Fitzgerald's for music and Theatre of Western Springs for community shows.

**Best hang outs?** Bemis Woods bike trail, Fullersburg Woods, Kuipers Family Farm and Brookfield Zoo.

### ■ Your advice for young dancers?

Dance as long as it gives you joy, while gaining experience in other areas of interest to foster versatility.

### ■ Three words that describe you?

Hard working, creative, collaborative

### ■ What do you do for fun?

Play with my kids... and dance!