Finding Indigenous futurism through dance

A Santa Fe-based Native contemporary dance company makes reciprocity and community-building part of its performances.

Tovah Strong | INTERVIEW | Aug. 19, 2020

WALKING AT THE EDGE OF WATER performance during creation residency at Santa Fe Art Institute in New Mexico.

Paulo T. Photography

Dancers dressed in shades of blue flow through undulating jumps, dives and sweeping arm movements that evoke the rapids cresting over rocks and dipping into holes in a wild river. Their choreography is at once delicate and powerful. Like many Dancing Earth performances, the soundscape of Walking at the Edge of Water includes recorded stories about water, played over music that mels guitar, traditional instruments and minimalist, at times almost-apocalyptic electronica. Their costumes, typically made from recycled materials, often feature layered fabric and masks crafted from a combination of natural and manufactured elements such as wood, wire and old tires. Dancing Earth: Indigenous Contemporary Dance Creations is the only Native contemporary dance company of its kind.
Since Rulan Tangen founded the company in 2004, Dancing Earth has collaborated with Indigenous artists and musicians around the world. The company focuses on re-Indigenizing and decolonizing theater at every level, a mission that includes forming relationships with Native communities — creating and choreographing performances by accepting, acknowledging and incorporating the input, stories and performers in local communities and finding ways to give back through shared meals and dance workshops. “This acknowledgement (of what local communities can contribute) in itself is an act of reciprocity and one of the basic ways of entering and upholding relations,” said Fabiola Torralba, a dancer in the group.

Dancing Earth engages in Indigenous futurism — art that incorporates Indigenous perspectives of what the future could look like — by embodying interconnected communities and social change in the company’s story-like performances. In turn, the performances often function as both dance productions and contemporary rituals of transformation and healing for audience and dancers alike.

Tangen is recognized as a trailblazer by dancers and dance organizations throughout the Indigenous contemporary dance world. She has danced with, choreographed for and taught at numerous dance companies, groups and universities. At 19, she began leading workshops with the goal of using her professional background to give back to Indigenous communities. Her work revolves around creating space for Native artists to envision better futures through dance.

*High Country News* spoke with Tangen about Indigenous futurism, decolonization and Dancing Earth’s vision — past, present and future. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.
**HCN**: What led you to found Dancing Earth?

“*If you go deeply into any element, you will find connections between things.*”

**Rulan Tangen**: When I was first getting started, I think (Dancing Earth) was about creating a space of welcome and inclusion for younger artists. One of the tactics of colonization is to divide and conquer. (Dancing Earth) is a way to explore an alternative system where each voice is valued. It’s not just what we do on stage; it’s how we do it, who we include, where it happens. When you touch water, there are little ripples that go out. That’s how I see the dance work, the educational work, the lecturing — it’s all related to telling stories. If you go deeply into any element, you will find connections between things. A lot of that is what I have explored with Dancing Earth and learned through my body.

**HCN**: Would you expand on the concept of learning through one’s body?

**RT**: There are things that we might know with our head, things we’ve been told. And then there’s that thing that happens when you feel it in your gut. When your skin tingles. That’s true knowledge that can never be erased; it’s something that’s embedded inside of you. And that’s something I’ve found we can move towards by investing our entire body, mind, spirit (and) emotions in the process.

**HCN**: What does Dancing Earth strive towards? What are the primary elements?

**RT**: My personal aesthetic might be very spare and stark, but when I’m creating (performance) work with community members, the work that comes out tends to be quite layered and complex. There might be a video projection, someone walking down the aisle carrying flower petals, someone dancing on stage, and an overlay of language. I feel like this reflects the complexity of the worlds being navigated as well as the complexity of an intertribal, or even globally attended, dance company. A lot of (Dancing Earth’s work) comes from (an) interpretation of telling a story from a circle — everyone’s perspective is valued. I’m interested in diversity. The movements might be at a slightly different time or look a little different from body to body, and that’s purposeful. I think we can be in unity without all being the same.

One of the things that interests me is the idea of looking at every aspect of theater and finding ways to re-Indigenize it. The audience (has) an active role of being invited in and making a commitment to witness and, in some pieces, participate. I think of performance in terms of reciprocity. Quite a number of our performances are free. Even if we’re booked at a theater somewhere, often there are spaces available at no cost for the local Native people. We bring small gifts, and we ask permission to bring our new dances to that area.
[GALLERY:1]

**HCN:** What is the relationship between contemporary and traditional dance forms? How else is storytelling incorporated?

**RT:** Songs and dances that have been here since the beginning of time are often ceremony dances for a specific people, at a specific time of year, at a specific place. In a way, our contemporary dances protect those ceremonial dances by creating new expressions that do not appropriate (ceremonial) forms. They allow them to maintain their integrity and purpose. I think one understanding of our work is that it is a hybrid of traditional dance plus other styles (like hip-hop, ballet or powwow); people enjoy and recognize different things, and it makes them feel connected. I think this idea of fusing together two existing things is a limited perspective of what this work can be. It can actually be a third, fourth or fifth entity. You could say that all theater has its roots in ritual. I feel (theater is) about taking responsibility as contemporary people to create rituals that address the issues of our times.

In some cases, we’re showing the process of recovering creation stories, whether in our body, in our memory, or in our imagination. The story (in *Indigenous Futurities*) was about young people fleeting from an apocalypse and figuring out this quest that’s up a mountain, down into a cave and across waters to access ancestral knowledge.

Sometimes, the stories seem more like metaphors, but there are deep histories — anthropological histories and geological histories — embedded in these stories. A powerful Anishinaabe writer, Leanne Simpson, said (that) in looking at these stories as having happened, we also look at them in the now. If we can understand each role within a story and how that translates into the now, we have important teachings to get us through tough times.

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**HCN:** How does futurism relate to the embodiment of dance?

**RT:** When you become (the future) with your body, it’s no longer the future. You’re actually experiencing it, and you’re giving audiences a way to experience that.

I think Indigenous performance is often a pre-vision of what will be happening in the world. A lot of our works have landed a little earlier than public opinion — or public will. Our water work was considered a bit jarring. It was, I think, six years before Standing Rock.
**HCN:** How are you adapting to the pandemic?

**RT:** Using technology to amplify Indigenous voices and demand a right to be part of a future became very, very evident (in March). We had the most robust year of paid work lined up, from January to December. It took years to build up those relationships, to get consistent bookings and to get fair wages for people of color. I was very proud and excited to move forward. The dancers were celebrated cultural artists and ambassadors that had been working for years — not only refining their craft, their skill, but also challenging themselves to be articulate teachers — and, suddenly, that got pulled away. They took on jobs as essential workers. They’re strong, so they can do the work, but they’re in pain. They’re not dancing.

There (are a lot of discussions) of what has been lost. I wanted to think about what I’m always thinking about: What is it that we have to give? So, by March 19, we had rolled out online classes. And that was huge. For us to move into that whole realm was extremely challenging technologically and creatively.


**HCN:** What might the future hold?

**RT:** If there’s a silver lining inside of this, it’s that international relationship-building is amplified. We’re able to connect, dialogue and discuss. We did (a performance) in June that brought together people in Canada, the USA and New Zealand. So we’re transcending place-based time. We called it *IF. Indigenous Futurities: Dancing Earth goes to CYBERSPACE.* It was our first step out. We’re going to probably be in a mode of online creation for a while.

So that idea of community engagement, that idea of social change through the arts, that idea of environmental, ecological dancing — that’s embedded in what we’re doing, what we’re offering the world. I hope we can bring that sense of wonder, that connection, through this portal of online communication.

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