

VDC Interview Transcript
Jefferson James
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Contemporary Dance Theater
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Key:

CF: Candace Feck
JJ: Jefferson James
JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team member)

CF: Before we talk about the development of Contemporary Dance Theater and the 44 years of its existence, let's talk about your years before CDT. What year was it when you actually relocated to Cincinnati?

JJ: That was a *long* time ago; that was 1964. I married my husband, Martin James, in June, and he was going to be a Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra musician. So we moved to Cincinnati that Fall.

CF: Was that from New York?

JJ: From New York.

CF: You met at Juilliard?

JJ: We met at Juilliard, he got his Masters, and got a job. I was still in school, and came to Cincinnati with him, obviously, and looked around for something to do (she chuckles).

CF: Well, I'd like to go back even before New York now. You had studied with Evelyn Davis in Washington DC, right?

JJ: Yes!

CF: A *remarkable* woman.

JJ: Right!

CF: I never had the pleasure to know her, but tell me about that — how you started dancing.

JJ: Evelyn Davis was a friend of my parents, who were writers — worked mostly for the government, but did some freelance writing. And I'm not sure how they knew Evelyn, but she was a friend, and

had a studio called the Dance Playhouse in Washington DC. And I apparently announced at some early age that I was going to be a dancer, even though I had never, to my knowledge, taken a dance class. They listened, and started me in a modern dance class — I don't know how they knew that that was the best choice, but they did, and so I took with Evelyn for, well, as long as I was in Washington. So I would take the hour-and-a-half, several-bus-trip into the studio and take classes a couple times a week. Then I also added ballet, so I took from the National School of Ballet.

CF: Evelyn Davis taught Virginia Tanner!

JJ: Evelyn Davis taught Virginia Tanner; Evelyn Davis also worked with Charles Weidman. And Charles Weidman came down to Washington and did some performances, and actually taught *Lynchtown*,¹ one of his pieces, and I got to perform in that. And he also did Thurber's *Fables*,² with dancers from the community. And that lasted for a couple of years. I hadn't thought about that for a long time!

CF: Something powerful must have been going on, both in you and through Evelyn or others to lead you to Juilliard...

JJ: Well, I guess I'm a stubborn person. I got into dance because I liked the physicality of it, and there's a funny story about one of my first ballet classes. Since I started in modern, I was used to dancing with bare feet, and *that's* the way you're supposed to dance! So in ballet class, you had to wear ballet slippers, and they were doing piqué turns across the floor, and I couldn't do it. So I took my shoes off, and then I could do it. But they kicked me out of class, because you wear *shoes* in ballet class. I think I relented and went back; *they* didn't relent — I still had to wear shoes, but I went back eventually. I thought "Well, I'm a little bit of a rebel, but not enough to stay out of ballet class" — because I knew it was good for me. Dance just became something I needed to do; I mean, it was taking an hour and a half, every lesson, and then an hour and a half home. And I remember fighting with my high school, because I didn't need Physical Education — what I *needed* was a study hall, because I had three hours on the busses, and I *had* my physical activity. I didn't win. I did get a study hall, and they said I didn't have to take "Home Ec," but I had to take Phys. Ed.

CF: So, from there to Juilliard was just simply that you wanted to continue?

JJ: I guess I had assumed that I would go to college — so where, where could I go? And Juilliard was the obvious choice. By that time, I had been to New York a number of times to go to the Graham School for the Christmas course or the Summer course, and I knew that I loved New York, and I wasn't afraid of it, and I could get around on the subways, and so that was the obvious choice. Bennington was in existence — but it was farther away, and I really wanted New York, so I auditioned, and I got in. It wasn't idyllic, after I was there. It was like all colleges or universities — there's a little bit of politics... But I had *wonderful* teachers. And it solidified my love of dance, not of *this* college situation but... So, I was at Juilliard for two years, and then I had a knee operation, and they were *somenhat* reluctant to have me matriculate there — they didn't actually say it, but I had the feeling that I was not going to be there *finest* graduate... But anyway, I was unhappy with the school at that point, and I left and matriculated to Columbia University for a year, going to the Merce

¹ Made by Weidman in 1936, *Lynchtown* was one of three pieces in the series called *Atavisms*.

² Weidman made *Fables for Our Time*, 1947.

Cunningham School, the Metropolitan Opera for ballet and the Graham Studio and getting more familiar with the city, and then met my husband, and left the city.

CF: You arrived in Cincinnati, then, in 1964. What did the dance landscape look like in Cincinnati at that time?

JJ: Cincinnati had a strong tradition in ballet, and then had some modern dance at some point. Not immediately, but after a little while, I met a woman named Phyllis Burke, who had been teaching classes at the Jewish Community Center. And she wasn't able to teach at that point — I don't remember exactly how we met — but anyway, we had a conversation, and she asked me to dance for her so that she could see. And I gave her my background, and then I started teaching modern dance for youngsters — creative dance, modern dance, contemporary dance. But there wasn't anything for *me*. That was good to keep me interested, and to keep me from going crazy, but it wasn't quite enough. And then the university — now I'm not going to remember the years — but we left in 1966 because my husband was drafted. He knew that was probably going to happen, so he volunteered and he went to Washington DC to be in the Army band that plays at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the festivities for the president and all of that. So I went back to DC, and first I started working so we could pay for the apartment that I had rented. Then, I discovered that a woman that I had gone to high school with but hadn't known, Jan Van Dyke, was in DC and had started a company. I went to a performance, went backstage, re-introduced myself, and started going to classes — because by then I had been out of dance for two years. So I went back to class, got into the class, got into her company and worked with Jan and the Georgetown Workshop³ for the rest of the time that we were in DC. During this time that we were out of Cincinnati — because the job had been guaranteed for my husband's return — the Conservatory⁴ had joined the University, and the Dance Department had added a modern dance component. So, when we came back in 1969 there was a program for contemporary dance. I finished my degree at the University of Cincinnati: Lucette Comer was there the first year, and the second year, I was one of the faculty — not “official” faculty, but I did some of the teaching. And the university hired Jimmy Truitte and Thelma Hill to teach classes: ten weeks, ten weeks, ten weeks. And that was marvelous — I hadn't done any Horton technique before that, so that was adding one more technique to my resume. And at that point, 1970 — that was the year I was to graduate — the university closed because of riots. During that last year, because I was choreographing for my senior project, we had developed a little company of people — Holly McCarty (Holly Schwein, at that point) and I had developed this small group of people that were doing school shows. And I called them all up and said “The dorms are going to close. Can you find a way to stay in Cincinnati?” We had these school programs to do. “I'll give you whatever money there is — I'll share it.” And six people stayed. And that was the beginning of the company — unofficially, of course. We found places to rehearse: we rehearsed in the Unitarian Church basement, and we rehearsed at the College of Mt. St. Joseph stage, when it wasn't in use. And then, we found a studio that we could rent, and in order to *pay* the rent, we had to teach classes. We hadn't been teaching before that; we'd been teaching each other warming up — that sort of

³ Jan Van Dyke and John Gamble founded the Georgetown Workshop in 1967; both dancers later became faculty at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

⁴ The Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music was formed in August 1955 from the merger of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, formed in 1867 and the College of Music of Cincinnati, which opened in 1878. CCM was later incorporated into the University of Cincinnati on August 1, 1962.

thing, and learning choreography. But that was probably 1971, before we rented the space. And then we had a home.

CF: These were all fellow-students from the university, and all equally displaced when the university closed during the riots?

JJ: Yes. The first group — and then, of course, some of them were going back to school the next year. I had graduated, Holly had graduated, but the other dancers with us were sophomores or going-to-be-juniors, or whatever. So they were going to be in town a little longer; we had to work around a college schedule, but they were willing to dance because, you know, dancers never get enough dance — until they get too much, but (laughing) generally, they don't get enough!

CF: Was this part of the Artists-in-the-Schools program?

JJ: It was totally random. We called schools...I don't even know how we *did* it — we called them: of course, we didn't have computers then. We called them, or wrote to them and suggested that we had this production — “production” is a fancy word for what we had — but we had a little demonstration of dance and we would do it for \$50.00 or something, and we would bring the dancers and the students could ask questions or they could participate. And we had, you know, five or six or seven programs. That was in the Spring and Summer — and then in the Fall, once we had a studio where we could rehearse regularly, we started planning a concert series.

CF: Were you doing all of the choreographing?

JJ: Holly was doing a little bit the first year, but I was doing most of it. And that *first* year, which I guess would have been '70/'71, we actually performed at the university at Wilson Auditorium because we had students in our group, so we could be a student organization and perform for a student price. So, I think our tickets were a dollar (she laughs). And Wilson Auditorium — which is no more — was a big, big space: I do remember the light board! In order to get a blackout, you had to use a board, and bring all of the dimmers down at the same time. You know, you didn't have a computer consul to black-out. But I learned a lot!

CF: The hard way! What prepared you to choreograph? Were you self-taught, or did you work with somebody?

JJ: At Juilliard, you take classes with, in my case, Louis Horst. So, you had done the “Primitive [study]” and I'd read Doris Humphrey's book about *The Art of Making Dance*. But it's just practice; it's putting phrases together. And if you teach, you put phrases together for your students, and then you just develop that. When I was in DC, I did do some choreography for Georgetown Workshop: I did the first couple of pieces there. But it was just... get the dancers together, try a phrase here, do this, do that, listen to the music. You know, “What do you want to dance about?” “Oh, I don't know. I have a concert — Let's see...” It was just a fun experience...

CF: In essence, what you're saying is that you moved to Cincinnati, and there wasn't anything, so you made something.

JJ: There wasn't *enough*, and there certainly wasn't much in the realm of modern dance and contemporary dance.

CF: You talked a bit about Evelyn Davis, and you said you had some great teachers at Juilliard — but who would you mention as your mentors? There were also the Graham classes...

JJ: Well, the Graham Company taught. You had five days: you had Helen McGehee for two days, you had Bertram Ross⁵ for one day, you had Mary Hinkson⁶ for one day — and then, when the Graham Company was performing, you had Donnie McKayle.⁷ Donnie McKayle would come in and teach, and those were some of the most exciting classes. You also had the Limón Company: You had Betty Jones, you had Lucas Hoving, you had José [Limón]⁸ — and Pauline Koner⁹ was there, also. You had this *amazing* group of people. And for ballet, you had Alfredo Corvino, who was the ballet teacher that made me like ballet, because he approached it that ballet was about timing; it wasn't about fabulous technique, it wasn't about line, it was about *timing* — and I could understand that! And then you also had Antony Tudor¹⁰ there, and the musicality — the unusual musicality of his phrasing was just unbelievable. I didn't have classes with Margaret Craske,¹¹ but she was there, and there was another beautiful ballet teacher, as well... And then I had also had summers at Connecticut College, and I'd worked with Merce Cunningham¹² himself — and his teachers, Carolyn Brown and Judith Dunn. And Viola Farber was there teaching, so you got these company members teaching, and one summer, even Charles Weidman was there.

CF: Did you continue going back to Connecticut College after you came to Cincinnati?

JJ: No. I think (laughing) we didn't have the money. And also in the summers, I was working with the dancers I had here, and trying to administer, trying to become a 501c3 organization, trying to get by-laws and all of that together, which took a couple of years.

CF: I think you got non-profit status in 1975 — so yes, you accomplished that pretty quickly. I don't know if you can put yourself back into the early 70s when you were forming Dance '70. You became Contemporary Dance Theater, you were trying to get non-profit status, you had a studio — one of many to come... What were you thinking you could accomplish, or what did you hope to do?

JJ: You know, I've thought about that a lot, and I think I was doing what I needed to do for myself and any other dancers that I knew. I don't think this would have happened without the other dancers being there — and most of them have gone on to do wonderful things! But because *they* were there, and *they* were eager to continue their education and their performance and their skills as dancers and were *here* at that time, I just kept sort of going and thinking “Okay, alright, what is the next thing we have to do? Well, we need to earn some money, we need to get some grants — and in order to get grants, you have to be a non-profit, and so how do I...? You know, I *wasn't* thinking long term, I wasn't thinking “I want to build this amazing legacy.” I was just thinking “I need to keep doing this because I'm *enjoying* it! *Most* of it (she laughs). Not *all* of it, but most of it! (Laughing further) I kept thinking also there would be someone else that would come!

⁵ Bertram Ross: 1920 - 2003 joined the graham Company in 1949, and left in 1973.

⁶ Mary Hinkson: 1925 - 2014 joined the Graham Company in 1950 and left in 1973.

⁷ Donald McKayle 1930 -

⁸ José Limon: 1908–1972

⁹ Pauline Koner: 1912-2001

¹⁰ Antony Tudor: 1908 –1987

¹¹ Margaret Craske: 1892- 1990

¹² Merce Cunningham: 1919- 2009

CF: But...

JJ: Not for a long time!

CF: Right. The company grew... How large was it at its largest size?

JJ: Oh, with apprentices, we probably had twelve at one point — never more than that. It was hard to schedule rehearsals; I mean, these are all young people that were either in school, or they're out of school and so they have to work. And so, you know, we tried *very* hard to do daytime rehearsals, because night time is so draining — but that required people to have day times free... But we never had more than twelve. Eight was more the usual number.

CF: I left town in 1976, so I don't know where you went from Gilbert Avenue. Do you want to walk back through that?

JJ: From Gilbert Avenue, we went to Mt. Adams — it was up on the hill. We went to the church — Immaculata Church is on the *very top* of the hill, and next to it there was a school building called Springer School, and on the third floor — we always seem to have third floor studios — on the third floor was a gym. And it wasn't being used, so we said "Well, we'll take it," and they didn't want a lot of rent, and so we had a studio that was a gym size, and there was a tiny stage at one end, and I guess in the *beginning* we did some performances on the stage, and then we decided that that really didn't work; it gave us a lot of room for the audience, but it didn't give us any room to move! So we turned the theatre around and put the audience on the stage and performed in the big, open space without lights. We did have...you can make theatrical lighting from coffee cans, and paint it black and put a bulb in there and hook it up to some home dimmers, and you have a dimmer board, and you have lights for your performance. So we built a stage — a performance area, and all the dancers got a share. That was an interesting thing, because we still didn't have any money, so you got a share for performing in each piece or as many pieces as you were in, you got a share if you designed the costumes, you got a share if you did choreography, if you did lighting — but generally the lighting was done by somebody else, not a dancer. So you could get five or six shares, and that meant you might get (she laughs) thirty dollars out of it — I don't remember how much each share became, because that depended on the box office. But we got audiences there. And Jan Van Dyke came to set a piece, and at one of those rehearsals, a representative from the Ohio Arts Council came down, saw the company in rehearsal, went back and said "Yes, they do exist," and the next grant period, we got a little money. So, that was neat. And at that same time, Judy Gregg did a piece — I guess once we had a theatre, we were inviting guest artists. And Sally Nash from Washington DC came and did a piece, and Jan came and performed. So we would ask them to come and perform with us, or on the same concert — and sometimes they stayed and set a piece. And Judy Gregg set a piece for the company. So we were there about three years, and after that, the community decided that it really wanted the space back because they wanted to play basketball in there, and we didn't want them playing basketball with our lights. So, we parted ways and we moved to 13th and Walnut, downtown — the Germania Building,¹³ which is a *beautiful* building. And again, we were on the third floor, and this time we had pillars in the space. And we couldn't perform there, so that's when we performed at Xavier [University], because Xavier had a *very* nice theatre but it wasn't used very much. I'm not sure how that first contact was made, but they were open to renting it to a dance performance as long as,

¹³ 1127 Walnut St, Cincinnati, OH 45202

you know, we were “okay,” we were discreet. So we were in the Germania Building for — it seems like it was two or three years each time on the third floor — and we moved from there to the YWCA, downtown across from the library. And there again we had a studio space that we could use — it was a parlor but there was a tiny stage at one end, and again, we reversed it and put the audience on the stage and performed in the space —and *dressed* in the front room with windows to the street; we put up curtains, though. And we were there for three years.

CF: Well, I’m *sure* that I first saw you at Xavier — and that had to be early ’73, I would say. But perhaps Xavier came and went...

JJ: You know, we may have performed at Xavier *before* we moved to Mt. Adams because after one or two performances at Wilson, we were no longer a student organization; I think our students had graduated, so we couldn’t then afford the rent that they were asking. So we might have performed at Xavier then. I remember performing at Xavier quite a bit, and they didn’t have a Marley. I don’t normally mind not dancing on Marley, but they also had splinters. So we ruined a lot of costumes and got a few splinters at Xavier. And after we finally performed the last time and left, they told me they got a dance floor!

CF: I think the next piece that I saw was at the Art Museum, and that was the Sally Love Larkin piece.

JJ: Yeah, at Contemporary Art Center. Sally was doing costumes when we were at Xavier because I remember one piece we did with levels – and those were her costumes, and I have a feeling that would have been ’76, but I’m not absolutely sure. We did several performances at Contemporary Art Center. In their old space, they had a wall that they could move — could enlarge or condense or contract one of the galleries. So, we had them open it and we could do, you know, moving sculpture, we could do a number of things in that wonderful space: it had a great wood floor, and it was just a marvelous space. And they seemed very open to having *other* than visual art on the walls; they considered us visual art, which we were— we were *moving* visual art. So we did a couple of performances there, but then — I think it was in the summer, I’m not sure — we did an installation with Sally Love Larkin designing a paper environment. And this was huge paper with slits, and one roll that we rolled out from the wall, and could make a whole carpet with, and other things hanging vertically and horizontally — it looked like a hammock that you could put your weight on. And we did that for about a week — not improvising all day, but a couple of times a day. It was great fun! And Billy Larkin composed the music; Billy Larkin is one of Sally Love Larkin’s sons. We have some tapes of it...

CF: I actually recall Jan Van Dyke having a piece in a concert that I saw — I couldn’t tell you what it was — but I liked it very much, and I went on to know her later as a colleague...

JJ: Well, one of the pieces that we did at Contemporary Arts Center was Jan’s piece, and I can’t think...I know that she did a solo for me called *Big Show*, that was sort of an excerpt from a piece that she had choreographed outside, which was called *Park Dance*. But then she also did...Oh, I know — it’s the name of my granddaughter. She had sort of a ritual piece in the space, that was called *Ella*, I think. It was an amazing piece with very unusual characters, a picnic that happens — a very monk-like atmosphere and costumes except for this little pet that is part of the picnic. It’s just a very surreal sort of piece, and a really amazing piece to dance. And wonderful in that space because

it used the large room and then it came out into the entryway, and the audience sat all around and was very close to the action.

I'm not sure I saw that, but I do remember a piece by Gail Seidel — I think it was called *Moments*, and it was a very moving piece for me. That's what I remember about guest artists during the period when I was there (1972-1976).

JJ: Right. *Moments*, I think there were three solo sections in that?

CF: Exactly.

JJ: And the music, which I can't remember, was very familiar and lush. Yeah, I guess we probably performed that there, because that would have been the right timing.

CF: I'm not sure. I feel that we were in a theatre, but I don't think it was Xavier, and it wasn't at the art museum... Maybe it was Wilson. But I do remember the piece, and I remember Seidel.

JJ: She was a dance student at UC, and one of those that started with CDT before it was CDT, when it was Dance'70. That was probably before CAC (Contemporary Art Center), because she left after she graduated — within a year or so. Well, she came back to visit — and she *did* set a piece! You're right.

CF: Memories! Well, what I'm leading to, of course, is your — and you've written about this, or it's been written about — that really you were bringing people in to enrich and inform *yourselves*, and that led to this big investment in presenting. I mean, I'm sure there's a lot that happened in there; you still had the company — was it until '93?

JJ: '94 or '95.

CF: And you had moved to the Dance Hall, of course, so I don't want to skip over that. Let's talk about the Dance Hall, and then maybe speak to the transition.

JJ: Let's see, we got to the Y, and at the Y we had this beautiful piano we could use for classes that was a Steinway, a small grand. But they were going to do some renovation at the Y, so we would not be able to stay. So I went to them and I said "Well, you know, it *wouldn't* be good for the *piano* to be in this space while you're re-plastering, and everything you're doing. So we would be happy to *keep* that for you." And they agreed. So we had that piano in the Dance Hall, which is in Coryville, just blocks from the university, for maybe four years, before they finally asked for it back, which was great.

So the Dance Hall, again, was a large gymnasium kind of building or space,¹⁴ attached to a lovely brick building in the front, and then it was kind of a shack on the exterior. But the wood floor was marvelous and it was diagonal, which a lot of dance companies had a little trouble with because they could never set *their* diagonals exactly with the floor boards... But it was *not* in very good shape

¹⁴ Originally Turner Hall, built in 1884 at 2728 Vine St. in the area of Cincinnati called Corryville, as home to the Turnverein, the oldest and largest German American society in Cincinnati. With the anti-German sentiment of WWI, the "Turners" changed the name to the North Cincinnati Gymnasium.

when we moved in; it had been used as a bingo hall most recently, and we spent probably a month cleaning bingo chips out of the cracks. One area had also been a swimming pool. Eventually, the ballet classes went into the swimming pool, because it also had a raised wood floor. But it was wonderful space and I would be there today if it still existed, but its landlord finally had to sell it, and it's been torn down.

We were there for about thirteen years, or maybe more. But, because we had this huge space and this increased rent, we had to use it as much as possible. So we added classes, we added performances, we started inviting dance companies; we had *always* invited individual artists/choreographers to come, because they could perform on the same program and then they might do a piece. And now we started inviting small *companies* that I knew —Carla Perlo, who had started in Cincinnati, had been at school and had gone to Washington DC, worked with Jan, and then developed her own company. So she came. Another former dancer from that period, Ruth Riven, had gone to some place on the West Coast in Seattle and had started a small group, and *they* came. And then, they told others, and so small companies that were just trying to get *going* started to send us information. And so we did a series of about four guest artists and four repertory concerts a year, and the companies that came sometimes left works or came back and created work. So that's how that whole presenting area started.

That experience, and that connection with Carla, who was also performing in DC, led to the National Performance Network hearing about this small organization in Cincinnati that was presenting work. David White from DTW¹⁵ called and said “We’re starting this program. Would you like to come to the meeting and see what it’s all about?” And I said, “Yeah! Yes I would!” And so we met in Minneapolis — I don’t remember what year – but we met and there were about thirteen organizations around the table discussing the idea of presenting dance, getting choreography to tour. The NEA at that point was supporting choreography, because they were giving Choreography Fellowships — but then, there wasn’t a dance touring program at that time. So the choreography happened, it got a performance, and then it was gone! So National Performance Network was intended to find places around the country where dance could be presented. And they had The Walker [Museum¹⁶], The Wexner [Museum],¹⁷ Painted Bride [Art Center],¹⁸ Dance Place in Washington DC, Links Hall — no, it wasn’t Links Hall then, but MoMing¹⁹ in Chicago — On the Boards in Seattle, a venue in Atlanta, DTW in New York, and we said “*Yeab!* We want this!” And so DTW became the national office, and got grants, which they shared with the presenters, and we started having *more* companies come; the little money before had been pretty much “share the box office,” but now we could actually give...you know, they set up a very strict formula that performers get paid such-and-such, or everyone that comes, that tours, gets paid such-and-such, and there’s a little money for miscellaneous, and there’s travel expenses — and so it became a real working wage for dancers touring. And they didn’t have to be big companies. They didn’t have to be Columbia Artist-represented, and that sort of thing.

And that’s how CDT really got into the presenting, because we could get support for four companies a year, if we did all the paperwork. We could bring people like Doug Varone, for the first

¹⁵ Dance Theatre Workshop in Manhattan

¹⁶ The Walker Museum Minneapolis, MN

¹⁷ Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH

¹⁸ Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia, PA

¹⁹ MoMing Dance and Arts Center, Chicago, IL was founded in 1974 and closed in 1990

time, out of New York. We could bring Patrice Renier — you may not have heard of — Rush Dance. Bill Evans even came from the West Coast. Bill T Jones, we brought, at one time. All these companies: Twyla [Tharp]...no, not Twyla...

CF: Sara Rudner?

JJ: No. (Twyla [Tharp] was in Graham class with me.)

CF: I recall that you brought Stephen Petronio...

JJ: Stephen Petronio, Mitchell Rose, who's in Columbus now...

CF: Parsons?

JJ: Well, David Parsons didn't come until later ---and David Dorfman. Joe Goode from San Francisco... Danny Buraczeski, JAZZDANCE. A number of companies that we couldn't *possibly* have brought, and that weren't touring in the Midwest, and nobody was seeing them. And that was amazing.

CF: I believe the NPN began in '85. So in '85, you've got a repertory company, you're in the Dance Hall, you mentioned that you were raising a daughter, and you are presenting like crazy all of a sudden! You had a lot of plates spinning; did you have to make a decision which way to go? When did you assemble a Board? Who helped you keep it all going?

JJ: The Board happened before, because you can't be a non-profit without a Board. Originally, the Board was three people that signed the document, so I had three trustees that weren't really very active, and then a woman named Dorothy Corbett; I don't remember how I knew her, but she said — or I said — to someone that "We need to have a Board." Because we were doing *Park Dance* in the middle of University of Cincinnati campus and there were people around, and you know, it was a free performance. We weren't getting paid, and they weren't paying anything, so "We need to have a board, so that we can do more." A real board that works — a larger board. And so we started working on that, and I really don't remember — at one point we had a very large board, which was not terribly helpful because there were too many people — you can't stay in touch with all of them, we weren't well-organized to meet — so that there really wasn't information to give them. We still didn't have computers, at this point. You know, we didn't have e-mail. I don't think I got a cell phone until 1995! So, it was a slow process, but before '85, so this would have been around the late '70s, I think, that we had a Board beginning.

CF: So by '85, or say, the second half of the '80s you are basically doing four of your own repertory concerts and four presented companies.

JJ: Mm-hmm. We also added — again, because we had more time in the space, we organized a project called Performance and Time Arts, or PTA — but not your mother's PTA, which was an opportunity for local artists of whatever performance discipline — film, poetry, dance, music, theatre — to present their work on the stage in Coryville for an audience. And we did four of those, I think, a year.

CF: Well, talk about the decision, if you would, about your process of choosing to let the company go, and instead focus on presenting. I mean, the Coryville space allowed it, and as you said, it just sort of organically arose, your bringing people in...

JJ: Right. It was a snowball! And that was sort of the way...the idea didn't *occur* to me to dissolve the company, but organically that's what was happening: we had dancers that had stayed for a long time, dancers that were still at the university that needed to graduate and move on, dancers that were performing with us, but were ready to start a new period in their lives, get married, have children...I was still dancing, but having an awful lot of other work to do, and it seemed like the appropriate time to sort of let that go. There was at that time another company in Cincinnati: Shawn Womack had developed — she had been one of the CDT dancers — a company, and was doing quite well.²⁰ So there *was* an outlet for dancers graduating from UC that had this potential. And I just thought, you know, "It's a repertory company, and I don't think I want to teach these dances to a whole new young company, *one* more time." This is the year — the year that the company dissolved was the year that we also established the Choreographers without Companies Concert, so that choreographers that were in Cincinnati who had had an opportunity before to choreograph for the CDT dancers still had an opportunity to perform; they would just have to apply and we would do a concert, present them. And we would hold onto *that* concert, we would keep doing that: it wasn't a company concert, they weren't exactly guest artists, but they were *sort* of guest artists. And one of the other things that I guess precipitated all of this was the fact that the Aronoff Center was going to be built and open in 1995. Cincinnati was trying to bring people back to its downtown, was trying to develop its downtown, and we had *been* downtown and I really believe in a strong downtown as an artistic center for a community. So we thought, "Well, we would probably present down there," and Coryville was becoming less and less comfortable and our rent was going higher and higher. So for the 1994/95 season, we did our last — we presented Neta Pulvermacher — a *wonderful* piece — *Beds! Five Beds/Children of the Dream* in the Dance Hall, and then finished the season down in the new space. The previous year was the last year — so the '93/'94 season, I guess, was the last year of the company. And it just seemed sort of the right time. I, of course, had no idea how much it was going to cost to move performances to the Aronoff! Because we had never...I mean, we had had to pay rent — our rent had *quadrupled* in the time we'd been in the Dance Hall, but it was still the rent that we paid for *everything* that we did there. And all of a sudden, we had *theatre* rent, and union stagehands — but we could charge more money, and we could get more people into the theatre, *and* it was downtown. So, it seemed like the thing to do.

CF: So you became a presenter, suddenly.

JJ: Suddenly we were just a presenter — although we still produce the Choreographers Without Companies Concert — which is now the Area Choreographers Concert. Some of the choreographers thought it was a negative, to be "without a company."

CF: So that's an ongoing event.

JJ: Yes. It's usually at the end of the season, yes.

CF: So maybe you could talk about some of the highs and lows — the challenges. And did you get public support, private support — how do you keep going?

²⁰ Shawn Womack Dance Projects.

JJ: We've almost always had very good public support — from foundations, and from the National Performance Network. The Ohio Arts Council has been a stalwart, the National Endowment for the Arts — once I began to apply to them— they've been supportive. Cincinnati has a marvelous organization, it used to be called the Fine Arts Fund and it's now ArtsWave, that supports its local artists in so many ways, besides money — in communication, in networking, in training and education — all of these things; they are really sort of the godfather, or godmother, whichever, that you need. And we've had reasonable individual support. We don't have large individual donors — I mean, the Otto M. Budig Foundation has been a supporter for over a dozen years — but Otto believes in the arts and supports *everybody*, and it's wonderful that he's here in the city. So that's kind of how we've survived. Money has always been very tight — *non-existent*, some times. But the highs, of course, are really the artists that have come, the marvelous work that's been presented here, companies that this area would never *know*. I mean, we might see people from Chicago, but we wouldn't see people from San Francisco, or LA. We wouldn't see the Joe Goodes, we wouldn't see Contraband — a company that no longer exists, but it was a marvelous company. Bill T [Jones] comes to Columbus, but we got him to Cincinnati — and he's been here more than once. You know, and the smaller companies that come, like Everett from Providence, Rhode Island, that does such amazing work that, you know, isn't a Paul Taylor, who is amazing and whose work should be seen — but Everett is this, you know, homegrown intelligent work that talks about social issues and has a heart. Yeah, I guess the lows are when the bills come in, and you have to tell somebody to wait.

CF: I'd like to shift the conversation — Look, you've devoted your life to contemporary dance, and to bringing a diverse array of dance for the Greater Cincinnati area audience. Can you say what it is about contemporary dance that so beckons you to keep at it?

JJ: I don't really know, except when I was a youngster learning dance, it was something about the freedom, and also the visceral action of moving in a contemporary dance vocabulary, which just spoke to me. I mean, extension, multiple turns... all of that is just *beautiful*, but it didn't have the same impact, it didn't have the same *humanity* that I felt modern dance had and still has. I saw a performance just yesterday, a rehearsal performance, of the Nutcracker *pas de deux*, and the dancers — they're not established stars — they were *very* good, and I enjoyed it. But then when they got to the more contemporary work where actually the whole spine, the whole body was involved, I start to be more involved. I could sit back and *enjoy* the one, but it didn't involve me, it didn't make me want to move or *respond* in the same way.

CF: As I recall from the early '70s, there was a lot of Graham technique in your studio — some Limón, some Horton, but you've seen dance change extraordinarily in your tenure here. Would you comment on changes in dance, or what you see happening in the field?

JJ: Well, it's sort of like athletics. You know, science has permeated everything we do: so that the technical skills for dancers, for actors, for singers, for *anyone* — for IT people — I mean, it's just a whole new realm. It's beyond what we could imagine fifty years ago. And for the most part, I think that has improved and enriched the field, but there are some times when I think it goes too far and it's just virtuosity, and no heart. There are some of the new forms that I wish didn't exist, or didn't get as much play, but in general it has created dancers that can do almost anything; they have more information, and so they can use it more wisely. I think when I was starting to dance, it was just desire; it wasn't any real knowledge. And the schools didn't know enough to know that they needed to give you this increased information, so that you stayed healthy longer, so that you lengthened

your career. They just were giving you technique, and they also didn't teach you about the history of your field, or the history of Art in connection with your field. And I think that we've gotten smarter about that!

CF: This may be a difficult question, but I'm going to take a shot: what do you think has been your biggest contribution to the city?

JJ: Well, the fact that there is an opportunity for people here to see contemporary dance from around the world. Primarily, national — we haven't presented many international companies — but to see artists and ideas that they wouldn't have, otherwise. And to give students of dance an opportunity to see also, and to work with these people, and to have an enlarged vision of what exists.

CF: What's next?

JJ: I don't *know*. I'm still here — but that's been said. I'm hoping that there would be a future for Contemporary Dance Theater after I'm retired, which won't be *that* long. There's, I think, definitely an audience and a place for it, and a *need*: it's one of the layers of the arts strata that is valuable.

CF: Agreed! Is there anything else that you'd like to say, while you have a chance, about any aspect of your work, your career, the city — anything?

JJ: Well, I guess I could say that when we first moved to Cincinnati many years ago, we thought that we probably wouldn't be here very long. You know, we had visions of going elsewhere. We didn't know anything about Cincinnati, and we've lived here many years now, long enough to know that the city is still exciting us, still managing to surprise us — sometimes in unfortunate ways, but more often in rich ways: that it's a really rich artistic community. Just in the last two weeks, I've seen four plays that were all marvelous, and will see more. There are dance performances, and our art museum — it's an amazingly rich small city.

CF: Thank you.

JJ: Thank *you*!

CF: (To the team members): Anyone want to ask anything?

JJ: I said this morning, "I don't *like* interviews!" But I got to talk about things!

CF: Well, you're a storehouse of knowledge and experience, and I think that's what's so important about this project. Ohio is an amazing state! There's a lot going on, and I'm just glad you still keeping going here — I know it's not easy. We didn't talk about your move to College Hill, but I guess it speaks for itself. It's a beautiful space.

JJ: It's a city-owned building. We pay a *dollar* a year!

CF: Wow (gasp)! Nice.

JJ: It's why we're still here. I mean, if it was the rent in Coryville, they'd quadruple, plus we were paying heat that doubled, tripled...

CF: Yeah...

JJ: Here we pay the heat, but at least they replaced the furnaces when they went out.

CF: Congratulations — what a good move. So, you came out here in '95 ...

JJ: '95 or '96.

CF: You've been here twenty years! And you still have classes going on...

JJ: Mm-hmm. And we still have PTA, and we didn't talk about Inside/Outside.

CF: Would you like to talk about that?

JJ: Oh! It's a project I would love to see continue, because it was very important for the participants, but it was also important for the artists, because it allowed them to collaborate with — and these are individual artists, who often don't get an opportunity, and have to learn how to collaborate — but they collaborated with artists from different disciplines. And it showed us — if we *needed* validation — how *much*, how valuable the arts are to those that don't have the opportunity, otherwise.

CF: This was a prison project? And Pat Graney...

JJ: Pat Graney was the impetus. I met Pat at a NPN meeting, and she had a little workshop about her prison workshop called Keeping the Faith. And I said, "Well, I would like to bring the company, but will you stay and give a workshop to my artists in Cincinnati on the prison project, because I think we could use it. At that point, my sense of Ohio's attitude toward incarcerated people was "Put 'em away. Forget 'em." So that worked out the next year. She came and we did a performance, she stayed an extra two weeks, we had artists from Columbus, from Cincinnati, from the area, come in and do workshops. And we went into the prison downtown, the River City Correctional Center, and did a quick performance series. The participants get workshops in writing, movement, acting, visual arts — generally, just those things — and create work that is then performed for the other inmates and an outside audience that is invited in. We thought it was great. We asked ArtsWave, then the Fine Arts Fund, for a collaboration grant. They give one a year — we got it. We did our first project the next year, and then started raising money so that we could do it. Our program developed into about eight or ten-weeks where we went into the prison twice a week for a three-hour period in these areas: writing, visual arts, movement theatre, sometimes music — if we had extra money, we had a musician come and do music. And we called it Inside/Outside, letting the inside people connect with the outside and letting the outside connect [with the inside]. And it was very important to have the outside people come in and experience sitting in the room with the residents. And I would *love* to have it continue. It wasn't a dance project; it wasn't a theatre project: it was a combination/collaboration, and they created masks or set designs or poetry and skits. Really, it was "therapy" but not therapy; it was therapeutic, but we were not trying to be art therapists. We were trying to allow these residents, most of whom had never had any arts experience, to participate at their level and create something, and to hear each other. It was really moving, and exciting.

CF: Powerful, it sounds like!