

VDC Interview Transcript
David Lyman
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Contemporary Dance Theater
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Key:

CF: Candace Feck
DL: David Lyman
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway

CF: How did you first become aware of Contemporary Dance Theater?

DL: You know, I don't remember exactly how or why it happened; I think it may have been because I do a lot of photography, but I was there at Jeff's very first audition. As a matter of fact, it wasn't even called Contemporary Dance Theater; it kind of morphed into that. At that time it was called Dance '70, so of course by '71, it already looked old-fashioned. But I remember it was Dance '70, and I have photos of long-ago dancers, and I remember one of those dancers that we talked about — there was so much that was wrong with her — and yet — God, she was so interesting to watch! I mean, it was really nice because I was kind of invited — or somehow offered myself — into the mix of comments. But you know, there was a good turn-out: there were people who were students at the University of Cincinnati, there were friends of friends — a couple of people nobody had ever heard of or seen before — and it was just a time when you thought “Well, anything is possible! You know, we're going to do a dance concert; somebody will show up” — *including* in that case, a bunch of dancers who were just game for anything.

CF: I'd like to go back a bit. You mentioned you may have been involved in that convergence of events because of photography — so, what were you doing in your life before that time?

DL: I was married or had been — I don't remember exactly the timing — but I was married to a dancer; I had been married to *two* dancers. And so that was how I actually met Jeff, and at one point — I'd been living in New York, I came back to Cincinnati — and as with so many choreographers and dancers, I ended up living with Jeff and Marty James for a while — before they had their daughter. It was just the two of them and a really ferocious, frightening dog! And so, I just kind of got what they call “grandfathered” in — although I wasn't a grandfather, but I got grandfathered in.

CF: What kind of work were you doing at that time?

DL: I was working in various forms of arts administration. I had been a stage manager, and I think that's what the next job was. I went through a lot of different things... you know, working in a florist shop, but a lot of stage managing, some stage directing — almost none of it involved with

dance — although I had taken a lot of dance when I was younger. I started taking dance when I was about ten years old. It was actually on TV. My mother and I were watching TV, and Sol Hurok — “S. Hurok Presents” — flashed across the TV, and there was American Ballet Theatre. One of the things that they did was *Rodeo*, and so for a ten-year old boy in 1958, it was like (sharp intake of breath) “Hoo! Cowboys! It just doesn't *get* any better” — and as coincidence would have it, within a few months, ABT was here in Cincinnati and my mom took me down to see a performance where they were doing *Rodeo*. And I just said, “Ahh! I want to *do* that!” So she signed me up for classes, and once a week I would take a couple of busses and go over to the old Conservatory of Music, which is to say before it was part of the University of Cincinnati. So, I'd go take my ballet class and then I'd get on the busses and go to baseball practice after that (he laughs about this juxtaposition)! So that's kind of how I *first* got involved, and did that for a few years, then later picked it up — I went to University of Cincinnati and started taking ballet *and* modern there — and got, actually, pretty obsessed with it. But I was more obsessed than I was talented (laughing)! So eventually I became a stage manager, and a stage director, and so I started in Cleveland — this may be more than you want here, this whole story — but I was living in Cleveland, working in an Arts Center. I was doing marketing and development for them, and I started writing about film for a chain of weekly newspapers, and at one point I said, “I'd like to make a little bit more money. I know about dance, too, so I could write about that.” And that's kind of how I backed in to dance writing. It was nice, and eventually — I'd done a really extensive interview with Paul Taylor years before — and my editor at this chain of weekly newspapers left, and I didn't know what to do with this interview, so I called Wilma Salisbury at *The Plain Dealer*, whom I knew, but not well, and I said “Hey, I've got this interview with Paul Taylor. Would you guys be interested in me writing that up for you?” And in a move that I eventually came to understand was incredibly generous — you know, most beat writers at newspapers are very jealous of their territory, and heaven forbid, say, “Oh, here's this kid whom I barely know — Yeah, come on in and write one of the big stories of the season!” She talked to her editor, and he said “Yeah, let's take a look at it.” So I did this big story for them about Paul Taylor, and from then on, I started to do a little more back-up work for Wilma. I think I came to realize later that they were either shows for which she really didn't want to make the drive, or she was thinking “Oh! This is going to be ghastly! I can't watch this again!” But I did get to see a lot of nice things, thanks to her and to *The Plain Dealer*. And that was kind of the beginning of my career as a dance writer.

CF: Can you give that a year or a period?

DL: That would have been in the early to mid-seventies. So it was after I had already been here in Cincinnati, when Jeff had her first auditions. And then later, after that, I got a call from the American Dance Festival, and someone had said, “Hey, this guy should come down for the Critics Conference.” So, I went down there, which was just fabulous — there were six of us that year — which, in turn, led to me becoming involved with the National Endowment for the Arts. So for about eight or nine years, I traveled almost constantly for them, evaluating choreographers and dancers and companies, and sometimes sitting on panels — and boy, it was just the greatest dance education because I was all *over* the place! You know, there might be months that I would see fifteen or sixteen performances and companies. It was just great.

CF: Looking back, could you ever have imagined in the 1970s, what Jefferson James would end up doing here?

DL: Oh, no! And I'm not sure she could, either. I mean, by her own admission, she really wanted to dance, and by God, the only way it was going to happen is if she started a company and began dancing with it. And so – I don't know that I ever really thought about it — but if I did think about it, it probably would have been “Yeah, she'll do this for a few years and then who knows what'll happen?” But I certainly couldn't have imagined that we'd be sitting here — whatever it is: forty-five, forty-six years later. And I actually just made a pitch to my editor today about something Jeff's bringing in: “Hey, I'd like to do a story about this!” So, yeah — I'm doing this, decades later.

CF: Have you written about Jeff and CDT more or less continuously during these decades, then?

DL: Well, I've been gone during big chunks of it. I lived in Seattle for a while, and I was in Detroit for about ten years, and I was back in New York for a few years... So, whenever I've come back, I've been fortunate enough to kind of step back into the daily paper — (he leans in, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper) *because nobody else wants to write about dance!* — so I've been fortunate enough to be able to step right back in and do it. When I first started there, Janet Light had been writing for the paper, and I did the occasional theatre thing for them. And then — I'm not sure exactly what happened, but there was a parting of the ways, and they said “Would you like to do this, David?” And I said, “Well, let me call Janet, and see how she feels about it!” And she said “Oh, you should go ahead and do it.” I think she'd *had* it with daily newspapering; I think it was — this is a discussion I've never had with her — but I suspect that it was a rhythm and a style that — she had other things that she could do where she could really share her wisdom in much deeper ways than daily newspapering usually invites...

CF: I'm interested in your perspective on the development of the company — as well as the trajectory of Contemporary Dance Theater, no *longer* a company. But as you were in and out, coming and going, sort of seeing things after a little pause, what have you noticed? Has there been a through-line for CDT?

DL: Yeah, what's the arc of this whole thing? I don't know... I mean, this is how I look at it: There's the period when they had the company, and it was a performing company, and that certainly had its own particular dynamic, because, you know, there were always *dancers* around! Day-in and day-out, you'd come in to their old home, the Dance Hall, which was up in Coryville — and it was a marvelous, if somewhat ramshackle, sort of space. But it was a great wide-open space, and you could do just about anything in there. And thanks to a very enterprising lighting designer, he managed to make it look really interesting in there. As a result of that, there were choreographers who would be around for, you know, a week, two weeks, three weeks, either setting pieces or restaging or creating new works, so it had a very different dynamic then. I must admit, I really miss that — because of that whole atmosphere of creativity... there was always somebody making something in there. And whether it was something you liked or didn't like, there was somebody who was really *working* on something. To me, that gave it a fascinating energy, and one that I found really appealing. I could sit in their studio, if they'd let me, and I could just watch a rehearsal for hours. I *still* love that. Watching somebody have nothing except a few little ideas and a few dancers and making something. I mean, how wonderful is that! I was invited to choreograph a piece once — actually for Cincinnati Ballet. It was the opening of a season, and I think it was more of a promotional thing than anything, and Victoria Morgan, who is the Artistic Director there, gave me this little piece of music by Mendelssohn, and I remember thinking “God, no! I mean with that music, there would be an *expectation* of there being something that's half decent! So I tossed her a bunch of other pieces of music, and we finally came up with something by the Ramones, where I thought the choreographic

bar would probably be a little lower... She was going to give me two dancers, and I said, again “No — that’s *hard!*” So I got ten dancers. But it was just *agonizing*, for me — a ninety second piece of choreography that was just loud, and the dancers had fun. Let alone coming in here, watching someone who’s got a group of dancers, who actually has some ability, a choreographer who’s got ideas, and just watch them shape something *coherent* out of nothing! I mean, I have the utmost respect for it — even *more* after I tried my own hand at it!

CF: I think you’ve hit the nail on the head — every dance writer should have to make a dance before they can write another word.

DL: Well, you know, at the American Dance Festival when I went there, the critics — as I’ve said, there were about a half dozen of us — we had to take class every day. And there was one critic who really refused to do that — she was adamant about it. But they were *equally* adamant! They said “If you’re not going to take class, you can just pack up your bags and go home. That’s part of what we do here. You need to know how this feels. You need to know how it feels the second and third day *after* that first class.” They really put their foot down about that, and I’m glad they did. I think it’s important. I sometimes tell young people who want to be critics — foolish people that they may be — but I say “No, don’t hang out with other critics, because we’ll just name-drop. We’ll say “Oh, when I talked to so-and-so...” You know, go talk to your local theatre group or dance company and say “Can I watch rehearsal? Can I watch how you *make* this stuff? How you start with a script and some words and come up with a play?” I still really believe that; I just have so much respect for those who *make* things like that.

As I said, there was that period when it was a dance company, and there was, I felt, a much more creative atmosphere around, more people involved with creation. Later, when I came back one time, all of a sudden the company was gone — I moved back to Cincinnati, and the company was gone, which was really sad to me, but — you know, things change. But the guest artist series was really pretty robust at that point, and at a certain point, they moved into the Jarson-Kaplan Theatre, which is the smaller theatre down at the Aronoff Center. You know, it’s a *really* nice little theatre. As much as I *adored* the Dance Hall, you know, the ceiling would leak — you’d have to make sure that you didn’t run by a certain spot too fast because, you know, you’d be on your ass! So, moving into the Jarson-Kaplan was *really* a move up. And down there, there were once again, five or six times a year, when there’d be this real sense of “Wow! Look at this, unfolding here on the stage!” Would it be *great* if companies could perform for two weeks, and do more repertory? Yeah! But they couldn’t, and they didn’t — and Jeff managed to make sure that there were lots of residencies where, you know, dancers would really mix it up — usually with college students, sometimes at the School for Creative and Performing Arts here, so there was a little intermixing of ideas, which was a good thing. I personally didn’t benefit as much from it, but you know, it’s not all here for *me!*

CF: Let’s focus on the years before the company disbanded. I realize you weren’t here for large swaths of it. Dance has changed so much since the early days of the company. What did you, as an informed observer, notice about the development of the company?

DL: Well, I wasn’t writing at that point, which is too bad, because it would have been really fun to write about, with all the different choreographers coming in here. And it was all kind of interspersed with me seeing a lot of stuff for the NEA, so my brain was taking in a lot of other influences as well. But I clearly remember one performance, and it may have been an early version of the Guest Artist Series, but I believe the company still existed. Ohad Naharin brought his company — this was

before Batsheva...I've forgotten the name of the company then, but Ohad Naharin...and it was a piece they did to Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa*¹, and the whole program — and I've got goose bumps now — the whole program was so *different*. I mean, Ohad had performed with Graham for one or two seasons, but (laughing) her influence didn't stick at all. Which is fine! But it was so...you know, kind of like *him*...I don't want to just say masculine, because there were women — but it was very muscular. And, you know, I hadn't seen much dance like that at that point. Graham is strong, you know, but I would rarely call it muscular — and certainly Judy Gregg² wasn't, and Merce Cunningham wasn't — but it was...and I'm not sure, had I been a woman, watching — remember, I'm the kid who fell in love with the cowboys in *Rodeo* — but boy, there was something very, very visceral about it. And I just found that incredibly inspiring! I even remember one moment in *Tabula Rasa*, which was not very muscular at all, really, but the women came across one by one — I don't remember where their arms were — but it was almost like the “Shades” scene in *Bayèdere*— one by one, they came out from the wings and they'd add another and another until they were all out. Maybe there were ten or twelve of them all the way across the stage and at one moment, one person stopped, as all the rest of them kept going. And it was the *moment* for me – you know, you always hear people talk about stillness being very powerful. Well, I finally got it! In that one moment, that *lack* of movement was quite overwhelming, and I remember that performance as being — you know, there may have been things like that before, but not that I'd seen. It was a sign that things were changing.

CF: Yes, so much change. Take me, then, to whatever point it is when you come back to town, and you're writing. Where do you pick up with CDT?

DL: I kind of come and go, you know? I leave, I stay here for three or four, five years. Then I go away for a decade. Right now, I've been here for eleven years — (he chuckles), so you know, time to go; I've got to get those suitcases out. Let's see...I'm going to have to begin with *this* time, because I've forgotten when I was here before... I didn't actually move here until 2006, this most recent iteration. And at that point, the company was gone, and for me it felt a little more removed. Again, some of it was because I wasn't actually sitting in a studio, you know, with lots of people making things; but it had become a presenting series, which is fine! You know, there are many great presenting series — and I don't just want to sound like one of those old guys: “Oh, back in the old days...” I liked that a *lot*; I like *this* a lot! But it was as if the arts management world had come in and said, “Okay, now you've got to have a subscription — and you've got to have this, that, and the other.” So, there was a difference. You know, there was a *difference*. The selection of companies coming in hadn't really changed that much at that point, I don't think. I mean it was, for the most part, the tastes of Jeff — you know, what Jeff likes — which is fine. I don't know that she had a committee who sat down and said “Let's look at twenty-five companies.” She *may* have! But in the end, I think that these were going to be companies that met with an aesthetic that Jeff approved of — which is great, because you know she definitely has ties to the old Graham stuff. But as a dancer, she was really strong — as people say, “She could kick your butt!” And she could! And *would*, if that were a necessity. So, there was plenty of room for lots and lots of ideas. I never really had the discussion with her about dance in the height of postmodernism, where everyone liked to joke that, “You know, we'd go out afterwards and that's when we danced” — or some variation on that line! But I sense — and this is me, only — that in her heart of hearts, that's not the kind of dance she'd

¹ Naharin originally choreographed *Tabula Rasa* for the Pittsburgh Ballet in 1986.

² Judy Gregg, who had worked with Viola Farber in the Cunningham tradition, was another dancer who taught classes in Cincinnati in the early years of CDT.

like to see. It's funny, Cincinnati Ballet just did a version of *Coppélia* a couple weeks ago — and it's choreography by Kirk Peterson. But Kirk's teacher when he was growing up was a woman in New Orleans who had danced with the Paris Opera Ballet. So she was, like, one step removed from Petipa and those guys. And this choreography was so *dense*, you almost thought he was getting paid by the step, you know? These dancers were exhausted! In modern dance, I think that's the sort of dance where I imagine Jeff going "Oh, yeah!" You know, you see a dog sleeping and it's chasing something? I imagine Jeff almost having those dreams where "I'm going to go out there and *tear* it up on that stage." And she could! She *could*, you know — and again, goose bumps remembering that. Very powerful.

CF: Talk about writing, then. Who will pay you to write about what? And then, perhaps you could also address some of the pleasures and challenges of writing about contemporary work.

DL: I really have been very fortunate in my dance-writing career. I mean, I'll never be able to afford a Mercedes; I've got rust on the side of my car right now. When I lived in Seattle, for example, there was a lot of dance. And certainly, first of all, with Wilma Salisbury and *The Plain Dealer*, I had opportunities there that just, like: Wow! How *lucky* was I? And then I came down to Cincinnati, and that was the first time that I was writing about dance — mostly about the [Cincinnati] Ballet, occasionally about the Contemporary Dance Theater. You know, there was nobody who really *wanted* to write about it, and so they said "Well, do you want to do it?" — and that was kind of in flusher days for newspapers and so, you know, I would do a lot of that — including some kind of investigative things, too, that they regarded as news. I went to Seattle, and I became a back-up writer for music, theatre, dance and film, which, again, was great — I got to see a lot of things. When I ended up going to Detroit, I was at the *Detroit Free Press*, and I was a Features writer, but then (*sotto voce*) "You know, I can write about dance" — that became, kind of the value-added thing that I could do. There were a fair amount of dance-touring at the Opera House in Detroit. But then, Ann Arbor was not far away and they have a wonderful [series] — as a matter of fact, I still do some writing for the *Free Press* — Mark Morris was just there a couple of weeks ago and I did a story about him for them. And then here in Cincinnati, they have laid off oodles and oodles of people at the paper. I'm a freelancer, which in *one* way protects me; in other ways it makes me incredibly vulnerable. But they keep letting me do things. As a matter of fact, I just sent one in this morning — a proposal for my editor, you know: "Here's what I'd like to cover this month as far as dance and theatre goes." And generally speaking, the response is "Okay, let's *do* it." So, I think that for me — I mentioned Janet Light and how she's just a remarkable scholar, whom I really admire — and I mentioned *Coppélia* and how the company really for the first time in a couple of years has looked like this *unit*; I couldn't say exactly why. Some dancers have left and others have... I put it in a baseball allusion: it's like with a sports team when you finally get the right players in the right positions at the right points in their careers. You know, things work. I like sports, but I often find that someone who is making some allusion to sports or to cooking — you know, those are things people know better. And frankly, I don't just want the dance aficionados to read what I write! I want it to be interesting enough that someone says, "Oh, what's *this*?" I don't want to dumb it down so much that people who *do* know something about dance say "Oh, God, let me turn the page." So there's that fine line; I would probably never be the person that you'd turn to for the scholarly treatise on something. But on the flip side, I think I'm kind of the right person for the daily newspaper. You know, I occasionally do some work for American Ballet Theatre for *Playbill*. They hire the writers for it, and I'm pretty sure Kevin McKenzie, the Artistic Director there, goes "Oh... (he adopts a dismissive tone)...the stories *work*..." but I'm sure he's — and I don't know this for a fact — he's always been

very kind to me, but I get the sense that I could be more...but I'm not. That's who I am. I'm happy with it, and fortunately I have a paper that keeps letting me do this — so far, so good. Very lucky.

CF: I've read some of your interviews, and earlier you mentioned the interview with Paul Taylor that launched you into Wilma Salisbury's orbit. Did you ever interview Jefferson James or any of her dancers?

DL: Oh sure, over the years, I've talked to Jeff. But I don't know that I've ever done a big, overarching piece like the Paul Taylor interview, where it was really just about her and her career. I've addressed her career, but kind of in parallel with the company's career — I think probably for their 30th or 35th — or maybe all of the above. You know, for those notable anniversaries and benefit concerts. But no, I don't think I've ever done that.

CF: It looks to me like Jefferson is trying to retire...

DL: Yep.

CF: She's got this amazing space here for \$1.00 a year...

DL: Yep.

CF: What happens to Contemporary Dance Theatre, and what happens to dance in Cincinnati in a post-Jefferson moment? What do you see happening here? Perhaps another way of asking is what is her legacy?

DL: I don't know about that one. There *is* another modern dance company here. You know, MamLuft.³ I'm getting ready to write about them, too. And they're getting ready to celebrate ten years. I must admit when they started out, I thought, "Wow. Are they going to make it?" And you know, somehow they have. Jeanne Mam-Luft, who worked here for Jeff at one point, has really made it work — and she's probably learned more about herself as a choreographer in the process. She has also involved other people within the company, choreographing. So, you know, modern dance won't disappear, by any stretch. I don't know what will happen with this, though (gesturing to the studio in which we are sitting, as if to reference all that Contemporary Dance Theatre has been). Quite honestly. Because it feels like it's been this gradual withering — I mean, in some ways I wish it had been possible — and I don't know all the circumstances — for Jeff to really step away four or five or six years ago, when perhaps things were more robust with the company itself. But I'm not inside enough to know about issues with Boards and why things happen or why they don't happen. So I worry at this point that maybe CDT as we know it could disappear. I'm also, since I teach dance history, I'm well aware that dance — I remember giving a lecture to a choreographer — back in 2008 it was, I think. He has a pretty well-established company in New York, and everyone was losing funding, and people were having to cancel performances and so on, and finally I said to him, "You know, I don't mean to be rude, but your company could go out of business tomorrow..." *Everybody's* company could go out of business! But people are not going to stop dancing! It's just what we *do*. You know, I've got videos of my son hearing music on the TV and dancing like crazy

³ MamLuft&Co.

before he could even talk — really, before he could walk very well. It's what we do. We make contact with these two legs (he moves his legs), and we move around. If CDT were to go away, it would be very sad — but I'm also not under the illusion that dance, dance performances, dance choreography would go away. *Someone* would come along — somehow. There are already some: there's a jazz/hip hop sort of company that's doing *quite* well here, and, you know, perhaps the Aronoff would come along and present it — they do, every once in awhile, present something. But, you know, *something's* going to happen. It's not just me being the optimist, it's just realistically — we *move*. We want to *look* at it, we want to *do* it, we want to *hear* it — and so, that's how I feel.

CF: A great note to end on. (Turning to film team). Anyone have a question?

MDB: You had mentioned that you had goose bumps watching one of Jeff's performances, and that she had this remarkable strength, and that she created choreography in such a way...Is there a particular piece that you'd want to highlight?

DL: It's more of her as a *performer*. You know, it's less Jeff's choreography — although there are some pieces of hers that I remember — but it's her as a *performer* that kind of sums up her tenacity, stubbornness, muscularity — all of those things. There was one — it helps that they were photographed by somebody, too, so they're kind of stuck in my memory — one, I think, is even on their website. They had a dance called *Park Dance*, and Jan Van Dyke, I think, choreographed it. They did it in various parks — you know, it was back in the time when we didn't have to have a stage and six stagehands — Boy! I am sounding like a grumpy old guy now, aren't I? But you know, you go out to a park on a Sunday, there'll be people there, and you start dancing. But they also took it downtown to Fountain Square Plaza, right in the middle of Cincinnati, you know — they danced it there. And there's this picture of Jeff (he sucks in his breath, adopting a fierce look, clenching his fists and tightening his forearms as he swings them to one side) kind of coming across — and it's like Popeye or something. (He repeats the gesture) You know, she's just got this *incredible* strength there! And I *love* that picture of her, you know? She's got a really short haircut — (laughing) a really *lousy* short haircut — and she just doesn't care. She's out there dancing and sweating and on a ground that you know is going to give her shin splints — and she just *lives to move!* That one image — that one dance — really makes me think of her. There are a lot of other things, but that one just really sums it all up. It's wonderful!

CF: It seems that power and that determination is how she's been able to keep doing what she's doing...

DL: Oh, sure. Yeah!

CF: She may not be dancing, but she's determined that the world will see contemporary dance in its many guises!

DL: You're absolutely right — it's that same — again, I'll say tenacity *and* stubbornness that really has kept this institution afloat — where, you know, by any logic, you'd say, "Well, why are they here?" (Channeling Jefferson): "Because I *want* it here. I want to see that and I want *other* people to see it." And — she does!