

VDC Interview Transcript

Judith Mikita

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Contemporary Dance Theatre

The College Hill Town Hall

1805 Larch Ave.

Cincinnati, OH 45224

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**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck

JM: Judith Mikita

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team member)

CF: Judith, it's a great pleasure to talk with another Contemporary Dance Theatre person. When did you first become involved with CDT?

JM: I was a young dancer in Chicago for almost ten years, and then we moved here in '92. Jefferson welcomed me immediately and because of her network, she knew I was coming somehow, and we talked, and she had me teaching her Contemporary Dance Theatre company class on a rotation, which was a couple of days a week before rehearsals — when there was still a company. That season was already set, but right away the next season, she asked me to choreograph for the company. And it happened to be one of my signature pieces that has been one of my strongest pieces, ever. And it was through this opportunity with Contemporary Dance Theatre. I think it was their 25<sup>th</sup> season, so it was an anniversary season.

CF: What is the piece?

JM: It's called *Mildred's Closet*. That's my mother's name, and when she died, I had these closets full of her clothes from the '60s — with these gowns and gloves and...so when we moved and she died, I couldn't deal with it right away, but I said "There's a dance in here somewhere." And there was enough distance then, by the time we moved here, and we brought out these dresses and had a structure that was like a dressing room, and just threw them around! And so it was essentially that she taught me how to dress, and I would go shopping with her and my sister — but then when she had her brain tumor and cancer, I literally dressed her. And so the piece turns around. It's a powerful piece. And some of the coats and jackets fall from the ceiling, and we rigged up things at the Dance Hall at the time. We've redone it over several seasons, too — at the Aronoff. We've reworked it. Thanks for asking.

CF: She knew *you* were coming. Did *you* know about Contemporary Dance Theatre?

JM: I did. I did. Right out of graduate school, I was looking for companies and things, and someone had told me that here was this opportunity here. It turns out that we moved to Chicago, but I

remember writing to her and asking, and she did reply — it was years before — and kind of described the company. So I *knew* that it was here. Yes, yeah.

CF: You did your graduate work at Michigan?

JM: Michigan, mm-hmm.

CF: So, having been in Michigan, then danced in Chicago for all those years, and then moved to Cincinnati, what did things *look* like, in terms of the dance landscape here?

JM: Oh! This was it, quite literally. So it was a leap of faith to move here after Chicago, but it was vital, and it was active. And not only the performing opportunities, and the choreographic opportunities, but the presenting opportunities, and the audience opportunities. There have been seasons over the last several years that I haven't even gotten *out* of town to see anything else. So the companies that she would bring in and the guest artists to work with us, to do company classes or guest classes were hugely important. To a young mother in my mid-thirties, not-sure-I-would-ever-dance-again kind of feeling, and to have this set-up, was enormous.

CF: Soon after you arrived then and were involved with the company, it dissolved, right? '95, I think.

JM: Shortly after, yes. So, I was never a company *member*, but that didn't seem to matter, somehow. There were still opportunities to perform and have my work presented. But we were sort of in charge of having our own pick-up companies. And so that's another thing I've always admired about Jefferson is that if something has worked out or not worked out, there's always "What's next?" "Okay, how about now?" "Let's just move on. What's next?" There hasn't been a lot of regret or looking back, but there's always something else that can be done. So whether it's her ideas or nurturing others' ideas, there's always a "What's next?" So whether it's the Performance and Time Art Series, the PTA, something they used to call the pick-up team or pick-up company, the Day Without Arts after the AIDS fundraisers — always December 1<sup>st</sup>, and then the Inside/Outside projects... So, there was always a new thing — whether it's presented here at the Town Hall or in a bigger venue.

CF: I wasn't aware of what Jefferson did for the Day Without Art. Could you talk about that?

JM: Hmm. As I remember it, there would be — I don't know if it was an application kind of process or just a volunteer kind of process to raise money as a fundraiser for the AIDS projects. And so we would gather at the Dance Hall at the time, and put on pieces, and the audience would pay money and we wouldn't receive anything, but we were happy to participate: the Day Without Art. Yeah.

CF: If you wouldn't mind, tell me a little bit about *your* mentors, before you arrived in Cincinnati.

JM: Oh! Well, undergraduate was Indiana University and graduate school was [University of] Michigan, and I had a solid background from Michigan in Cunningham technique and Limón technique, as well as newer things. And then when I was in Chicago, I danced with Shirley Mordine and Company, Mordine and Company [Dance Theater], which still exists. It was a very strong company at the time; it was as solid as modern dance gets. We had a nine-month contract with an exclusivity clause so that we could only perform with her for a certain amount of months, and we

taught at Columbia College Dance Center, so we were faculty there. We were paid for rehearsals as well as performances. We did some touring around the Midwest, New York, and it was an honor to be part of that. And I also performed with Bob Eisen & Dancers, and Jan Erkert & Dancers — and Jan has now become the Chair of the Dance Department at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Bob Eisen ran Links Hall; he since has sold it and moved to New York. They were both part of MoMing at the time, too; it was another performing place. Shirley Mordine was more Nikolais/Louis technique; she was friends with Murray Louis, and he would come and set works on us. We also learned a wonderful piece from Martha Clarke, who was one of the founders of Pilobolus. So those were some of the highlights, as well as it's being Shirley's work.

CF: Over the years then, it sounds like you taught, and you set works.

JM: Mm-hmm.

CF: That's been pretty much your relationship with CDT? Were you on the Board or involved in other ways?

JM: I was on the Board for a while, yes. In the late '90s/early 2000's. So yes, I did have an opportunity to be on the Board. And I'm currently on the Board for the Performance and Time Arts Series, for which we are also the presenters.

CF: Would you mind describing the Area Choreographers Festival?

JM: Yes, the Area Choreographers Festival, which used to be called Choreographers Without Companies, but we wanted a more positive name. So sometimes, whenever I have rotated out of presenting my own work or wasn't applying, I've been on the selection committee for that concert as well. So, yes, it started again at The Dance Hall, a smaller venue but an opportunity to have our work seen. And then when the Aronoff opened — we were also part of the opening of the Aronoff — Jefferson was involved with *that* — so it was an all-week or all-week-end festival to bring in people from Cincinnati, to get used to coming downtown. We, many of us, showed works there, and that has been a lifeline to us. Had I stayed in Chicago, I would never (she chokes up here) have become the accomplished choreographer that I've become. There were smaller venues there, but to be able to have such a beautiful place as the Aronoff, or to have these kinds of possibilities, wouldn't have happened.

CF: So really, what you're saying in so many words — tell me if I have this right — it sounds like when Jefferson discontinued the company, her way of continuing to honor and engage local dancers and choreographers was to retain this regular festival in which you all got to have your work adjudicated and presented.

JM: (she nods her agreement).

CF: And it's been twenty-some years, I guess...

JM: Well, another thing I have always admired about Jefferson is that it takes a certain kind of mind to run a studio, school, a company, and to be a presenter — a nationally *known* presenting house, to be part of the NPN. And to be more widely known nationally and in New York City than [she is] down the street. That's always been such a strange thing in my head of "This is Jefferson James,"

and people in New York know her, or Chicago or LA or wherever she's brought people in from. One of my favorite stories from when she was still performing with the company and I was in a piece with her called *Egress*<sup>1</sup>, and we had to do this little foot pattern, and I went over her back, and then we did this little foot pattern again and I went over her back. And I went over her back once, and she watched me and she said "Wrong foot." And (laughing) then I went over her back the other way, and so I thought "What kind of brain can be in charge of her own movement, the whole show, the choreography and her partner's foot, exactly? She just has this *gift* — before there was a term called multi-tasking — that she can hold so many things in her brain! Another friend of mine talked about when he did this kind of romantic duet with her. It was Michael McStraw, and he is now one of the managing directors of Gus Giordano Company in Chicago, and he said he did this kind of romantic duet with her, and then she went off stage, changed the gels, changed costume, and then came back out for another piece — and again, was running box office, and everything else.

So, back to the Area Choreographers Festival: *Area*, she wants it to be from Greater Cincinnati. She has reached beyond, but even if somebody is from Indianapolis, Chicago, or someplace else, they have to have some ties to Cincinnati: either they have been raised here or they trained here or they have family here...so, *Area. Choreographers*: It is somebody who does not have already a set company or a regular venue for their work — so, independent choreographers. And a *Festival*: to have it be an annual opportunity, an annual celebration that — I've always kind of used the "opportunity" word lightly, because I didn't want us to look like... oh, a pat on the head, "let's *let* them do something." For those of us who have been professionals, had we not moved to Cincinnati, we would be making work somewhere else — perhaps not to the same extent — but it is a festival where we do have men and women of great experience and talent and ability and knowledge to present works here that are either based solidly in modern dance techniques or on the cutting edge of what's happening. We do try to stay aware — even though, yes, we're in the Midwest, but we do want to stay on the edge of what we're doing. So, *Area. Choreographers. Festival*. And she's wanted to stay true to that. Whenever we've had applicants that are of other genres, for example, she [considers them] only if they also blend in contemporary work — so it's never been, you know, purely a ballet piece or purely an East Indian dance, or something else. She always wanted it to be contemporary work, and to stay true to that. And to be true to balancing those of us who are almost like *family* with new fresh voices, and to nurture *that*. I'm sure you already have the voices on these tapes of people saying she nurtured names like Bill T Jones and Doug Varone and Urban Bushwomen and, you know, people that were just starting. So she's kept that nurturing — and a real eye for ability, before we even knew we had it.

CF: How does she do it? You've been watching her for 20-some years — and up close and personal. I don't even know if there's an answer, but I know she pays a price for it, too. Would you have anything to say about the struggles and the challenges that she's faced in keeping this all going?

JM: I think taste is there. I mean, one of the main attributes she brings — whether it's a little more avant-garde or a little more traditional, there's always a level of taste in anyone she presents. And she knows Cincinnati; I think she knows not to bring in things that *she* might like, but she knows Cincinnati, and she wants to build an audience. There's also just a warmth and a nurturing, and an egoless-ness that she has — although with the company she choreographed and performed, I really do feel like it was always to benefit — I don't know which would be first, whether it would be to

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Glenn, 1983

benefit Cincinnati or to benefit her dancers, and the young dancers here, or to benefit those bringing in their work. I think it was probably always a balance. And she's been a pioneer — having that kind of energy that “We can do this!” without being so assertive/aggressive. The other thing that I've marveled about is that she has not made many enemies! And with egos and sensitivities of artists and young dancers and choreographers and their specific demands sometimes, she's very fair, very fair-minded in the face of all of that. Serving on the board of directors, there would be a lot of discussion, but the final decision we would honor as Jefferson's — and trust, because most often she was absolutely right, even though there might have been other opinions. But I really learned that, serving on the Board: Yes, she'll listen, and hear all these opinions — the Board is an active Board and a working Board, but when it gets right down to who she's presenting, she goes out and finds them. And although a lot of it is digital these days, she still — there's nothing like sitting in the audience, and seeing, and talking with the artists and seeing who's work really matches her aesthetic as well as her community.

CF: You've spoken very powerfully about what she's done for you and for the artists of this community. Talk a bit about what she's done for the city.

JM: She's still one of the first phone calls or emails that a lot of people make when they're looking for a choreographer or dancers — you know, “We're having this event. Do you know anyone?” So, she is the hub, and sends out information. That's one thing. Whenever she has had a good idea, such as the Performance and Time Arts Series, and perhaps another theatre group wants to do something similar, she's open to being interviewed, sharing ideas, sharing how she's gone about it, and they then are launched. When she's feeling like she needs to do more audience education, she's thought of different ways to do that: we've had lecture series at the public library — the day before, the people would come in and perform, and it would be open to the public. There have been, of course, lectures in the local colleges — I teach at the University of Cincinnati, and it's almost always an open door that the artists will come in and do a master class for the students there, as well as at Xavier University and NKU<sup>2</sup> and other local colleges, and high schools — The Performing Arts High School. She has been bold enough to be political, to go to town meetings, mayor's meetings, funding meetings; she'll still send me and all of us things when she hears about something going through, as far as funding for the arts in the state of Ohio or nationally, and she'll say “Make sure that you write.” She'll continue to build that kind of energy, and have us *not* be complacent — to pass this baton on to *us* as well, to say “Get involved.” We can't just be quiet artists, and assume that we'll be taken care of — we do need to have a voice. The Inside/Out project, to go into the prisons and to join theatre, visual art, dance — and to present. And something that I learned by observing, and someone said that really moved the women of the prison was that they said for them to be able to present something was such a personal step, that they had never seen *anything* to fruition, no one had ever... they'd been promised, “Oh, this will happen for you. That will happen...” And they had learned then to *not* expect. But they would put on these shows! And they would write it, and they would make the sets, and they would perform and dance — and to have that sense of accomplishment! And so, yes, Jefferson knows high art, and magnificent, beautiful technicians, and video and whatever is the newest — and yet she also knows how movement and dance can at its core be *life-giving*. So I think that regarding her involvement in Cincinnati, people know that about her, and about Contemporary Dance Theatre.

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<sup>2</sup> Northern Kentucky University

CF: It seems to me that she surely has built an audience here that wasn't here when I was here in the early '70s. So her longevity and her determination — what I'm picking up from you, I guess, is just that her spirit and generosity in building a community and giving back to the community, to the dancers, has probably been the mainstay of how she's kept going.

JM: Yes! Yeah.

CF: You just said something about passing the torch. She wants to retire — soon, I think — and she deserves to. What happens, do you think, in that eventuality? Will there be a vacuum? What will happen to contemporary dance in Cincinnati?

JM: Well, we certainly *hope* that Contemporary Dance Theatre goes on, under another Artistic Director, who might have their own vision — as a presenting house, and as a studio, as an education place. Which has also been a really important thing. Yes, perhaps the classes aren't packed, always. I mean now there are adult exercise classes, and fitness classes, and dance classes. For many years, this was *it*. Again — I mean, Cincinnati loves its children, and loves education for children, but there were very few opportunities for adult or high school and beyond — college-age, professional dance training. So I'm hoping that we'll continue as a training center, and as presenters as well, and just finding the right person and maybe finding a new structuring — and she knows more about that than I do. So, no, I'm not expecting a vacuum; I'm expecting us to go on — and maybe it's just my optimistic view, but I do. I can't imagine Cincinnati without Contemporary Dance Theatre.

CF: Nor can I. I'd like to go back to the many professional companies that come in. What is your interface with them? I don't mean you personally, but the professional community here. Is there anything in particular that transpires to connect the presenting companies with the dance community here? Is there cross-fertilization?

JM: Well, besides the post-performance talks, pre-performance talks, master classes around the community, and then oftentimes — and I think with The Seldoms, who are coming in this season — I heard from them that they will be asking community dancers to come in. So — whether a conscious decision on Jefferson's part or not — she does find companies every few years, every couple of years where there will be those opportunities. I've had the opportunity to perform with many of these companies that have come in who need extras — and that's a wonderful opportunity, certainly. Even my son — as a nine-year old — got to perform with some Hip Hop dancers that came in with Everett Dance Company, and he still remembers that. They rehearsed for a couple of weeks, and performed with the company. Perhaps that's a decision on Jefferson's part to bring in people who will, indeed, involve community people. But yeah, I think the opportunity for discussion...and (deep sigh!) it's really up to us as well, to seize these moments. And so I've taken people to the airport or picked them up; it doesn't always have to be Jefferson. And I've taken them to the YMCA — I've thought "Well, these touring dancers, they need a Jacuzzi. They need a swim, or a hot tub, or a steam." I've picked them up and taken them to go to UC to do a master class, taken them out to the health food store, because they need snacks — so, to interface with them that way, just in the car, to give them rides, to have those moments — and for them to see, to have these New Yorkers looking out the window, saying "It's so *beautiful* here!" And, "Oh! You can be a dancer or a choreographer, and you can have a *backyard*! You can have space!" They start to think about career transitions, as well. And that's, I guess, one of the reasons why I have hope for the future of CDT, because there are so many retiring dancers who would *love* to be here! Retiring choreographers

who would love to have this, already set up and available! And all they need to do is have a little gumption, and run with it. And appreciate this beautiful Midwest community that we have.

CF: I wonder if there is anything else you'd like to say that we haven't discussed — about Jefferson James, about Contemporary Dance Theatre, her legacy. I may not have asked all the right questions; if there is anything at all you'd like to add...

JM: (She takes a long pause to think about this.) Well, maybe two things. I have a son in the military, and they have an expression in the military called “tip of the spear” — meaning that they want to be out there: the first plane, the first ones to jump out of the plane, to be the tip of the spear. And that's how I feel about Jefferson in the arts, she's been the tip of the spear, to push through. And we all need that. She'd be the first one to say that she never *had* those designs. You know, as a young student from Juilliard who then finds herself here, and it was kind of out of necessity — there wasn't much here, and she wanted to build it. But there is, nevertheless, a very courageous feeling about it. And also, in the arts, we get used to having very intense relationships: we breathe on each other, and we sweat on each other and we fight and we laugh and we cry together, and we build a piece, we have this concert — and then, poof! We don't see each other for months. Because we don't have *companies*, we don't see each other. And so feelings can be fractured, but because of Jefferson James and Contemporary Dance Theatre, there has been a nest, a home, a family that we keep circling back to — and that's so rare and so rich for life in the arts, especially in dance where it can be so...flighty, so wispy — but there has been this sense of home: continuity, friendship, nurturing each other. Another thing that she has done for dance here is we have gone through the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process, to give each other feedback as well, those kinds of opportunities, so that we can support each other, and not feel like we're competitors, but that we're in this fight together. Thank you, for asking.

CF: Any questions from the team?

JC: I was just thinking about the idea of needing someone to bring together the dance community, so that it's not so territorial or competitive; I've been in cities where the fledgling dance community can't get off the ground because people are being territorial, and not supporting each other.

JM: Yeah....

JC: But really, it's dancers supporting dancers that actually gets more support; you know, the support comes back...

JM: Mm-hmm. Yeah, have you talked already about Greater Cincinnati Dance Alliance, GCDA?

CF: No, not directly...

JM: That's a newer thing in the recent five years, and is exactly that: Greater Cincinnati Dance Alliance. So, again, it was begun here to reach into dance studios, every genre of dance, to see how could we make an alliance that is supportive of each other's work — so that we have discounts for each other's performances, we have a website that advertises for these things, trading of ideas, trading, even, of teaching opportunities, performing opportunities, and to make projects *together*, with people that we might not see very often during the course of the year — because they teach on the other side of town, or they make dance for another university, or in another genre of dance — so

that has been so nice, even as a social organization. Yet another idea, in part at least, generated by Jefferson, to have this Dance Alliance.

CF: She's everywhere!

JM: Yes! Or there's always a *next*, again — there's always something else to imagine. And isn't that dance? We're problem-solvers.

CF: Definitely.