

VDC Interview Transcript
 Subject: Denison University Dance
 Informant: Sandra Mathern-Smith, Professor Emerita

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Michael D. Eisner Center for the Performing Arts
 240 West Broadway
 Granville, Ohio 43023

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

SMS: Sandra Mathern-Smith

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC film team)

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)

JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: I'm interviewing Sandy Mathern-Smith at Denison on October 14th, 2020. Congratulations again on this amazing new building¹ that we're sitting in.

SMS: Yes.

CF: I mean days old, in a way. Right?

SMS: Yes. Grand opening was Friday.

CF: Gosh. Well, as our focus is on Denison, I have to begin by saying I'm curious about your own trajectory from Portland State, to the legendary department at the University of Wisconsin, to Granville, Ohio and Denison. Yes, I'm curious about that, how that all happened, how you landed here — and at the same time, thinking about your landing here, I wonder what the dance landscape looked like when you got here.

SMS: Right. So I did my undergraduate degree in Portland, in Oregon, where I grew up, and was exposed to a lot of contemporary dance there, and ended up at Wisconsin, which was very different from my undergraduate program, you know, having that sort of heavy H'Doubler² influence which was new for me. But at the same time, it was nice to have that kind of background in terms of Education. I hadn't really thought about Dance Education, as my training had been primarily focused on performance and choreography.

And when I arrived here, I didn't really know what a small liberal arts college was, having never really been exposed to that. I mean, I thought I wanted to work in a small institution and this just

¹ The Dance Department moved into the new Michael D. Eisner Center for the Performing Arts on the Denison campus, which celebrated its grand opening on October 11, 2019.

² Margaret H'Doubler (1889 -1982). A reference to the educator who founded the first academic dance major at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1926, and who had a distinctive approach to dance education through creative movement expression and the study of anatomy.

seemed perfect, so I was happy to be here, but it was a big shock to me when I arrived. I didn't have any idea that these schools existed or the kind of student body that was here, which has dramatically changed over the years — for the good, mostly.

When I arrived, it was a standard modern dance program — ballet, modern jazz, very typical, and what they had had prior to when I came was something that was, I think, Graham-based, so it was very old-school modern, at least in my mind, at that point in time in 1988. I certainly had been exposed to Graham³, but that was the *past*, and we were moving *forward* into new, experimental works, and I was young, and that's really what I brought to the table. And I think it was a bit of a shock, I think, for some of the younger students that I taught. They just didn't know what I was *doing*, and I think they were excited, but also confused about the kinds of things that I was doing, which was site work, and improvisation, and somatic-based floor work — that kind of thing, that really wasn't part of their training up until that point.

When I first came here, for the first seven years, I was in a non-tenure track position, and I started with, "You'll teach jazz and modern." Soon, that evolved into focusing mostly on modern and postmodern forms, which was what my expertise and love was — and passion was — so I was happy to set aside the jazz, which could have been part of any college program at that point, but it was not something I really wanted to focus on.

CF: I can imagine. Who was here when you arrived in 1988?

SMS: Yes. So, Gill⁴ was here — Gill hired me, and then there was a woman who was teaching ballet, and it was a full-time position in ballet. So I was to hold the modern/jazz, and then we had the ballet, and then we had Gill who was doing more theory. I can't quite remember exactly what she was doing at that point, but more theory as she has done throughout. So it was just the three of us at that moment when I arrived, and that rapidly shifted over time.

CF: You mentioned also what I think you referred to as a dramatic change in this student profile, and I'm curious about that. Actually, from '88 until now, how would you characterize that?

SMS: Okay, so I would say first of all the range of diversity — socio-economic, racial, ethnic, religious, you name it — is *so* much broader than it was. It was a fairly narrow, white, upper middle class group of students who dressed very conservatively and mostly drove cars I could never afford. So it was a real foreign situation for me. I had a total middle-lower-class upbringing, so being dropped into this milieu was very, I don't know, I wouldn't say it was challenging — it was just fascinating. I didn't know how to really necessarily relate to the students on a personal level because my experience was so different from theirs. But I was bringing to them my artistry in contemporary dance and so I really wasn't that concerned necessarily about those personal attributes that were very different.

³ Martha Graham: (1894-1991) An American modern dancer and choreographer whose name is nearly synonymous with the early modern dance movement, and who believed that movement is the vehicle for giving outer form to inner feeling. Her style, eponymously named “the Graham technique,” reshaped American dance and is still taught worldwide. Graham danced and taught for over seventy years.

⁴ A reference to Gill Wright Miller, chair of Denison Dance. Miller is also a subject of the Denison focus within this collection.

So the student body has changed dramatically. And I mean I remember probably, maybe seven years ago, I had a guest artist in the class and afterwards she said, "My goodness. That class was so diverse." I hadn't thought about it, but I had this really huge range of students in that class in multiple kinds of ways of diversity, and I realized at that moment how far the university had come in terms of really changing the environment here.

CF: It's a credit to the university that this very white, very well-endowed university has figured a way to open the windows and I always wonder how those things happen institutionally...

SMS: Yeah...

CF: I'm thinking about your arrival in 1988, and that your tenure here is really only a few years behind Gill's. The two of you have kind of *made* this department. I have heard from Molly⁵ and from Ojeya⁶ about a change in the trajectory here over these years, but you lived them, and I wonder if you would talk about that. I mean it had to be you and Gill, pretty much. You're the mainstays of the department.

SMS: Right. Yeah, so hmm, how to begin that? Because it's been over 30 years, so how can I summarize that? But I think one of the first shifts that happened was that that ballet position went into a tenure position, and then that failed, and it was *then* changed into contemporary dance, and I applied and got tenure. So it was this moment when I had been in a non-tenured position for six, seven years and I applied for that position, and then when I got it, I immediately went up for tenure and then got tenure, so it all happened very quickly and it was dramatic. And after that, I was like, "*What* just happened?" It was kind of frightening, but it was exciting. And so it was at that juncture, I think, that a commitment towards somatics and improvisation, and contemporary dance became a little clearer, because up until that point I was just really getting contracts. Every two or three years, I was getting a contract renewal. So there was not a stability in the department and at that moment, to now have two tenured positions in the department was pretty big. That was 1995, so I think that was the moment at which we started to then really pay attention as a duet to what we were creating.

CF: That's interesting. I didn't know that you were not tenure-tracked, and I didn't know that you then "immediately" jumped into tenure. Awesome.

It seemed to me, and I don't want to make too much of it because I don't really know — this is just from the outside looking in — that that perhaps Noel Hall's⁷ presence here began something that has flowered now into Ojeya — with, of course, many steps along the way, and I wonder, is that accurate? I'm sure it's more complex than that.

⁵ A reference to Molly Shanahan, who recently joined the faculty at Denison, and is herself a subject of this Denison section of the collection.

⁶ A reference to Ojeya Cruz Banks, who recently joined the faculty at Denison, and is herself a subject of this Denison section of the collection.

⁷ Noël Hall was the first dance artist to occupy the Vail Minority Artist-in-Residence position at Denison., Hall began in Spring 1981, and remained for seven years, contributing to the study of dances of the African diaspora.

SMS: It's much more complex because, in fact, I replaced Noel Hall. I was Noel Hall's replacement, because he was here teaching. I never really met him; I don't know that I've ever met him. I may have, but it would have been very briefly. But he was loved, and he was teaching the Graham-based modern, so and he had that Caribbean jazz-oriented modern that he brought, I guess. But soon after, I can't remember exactly when, there was a position that was a Vail Minority Artist-in-Residence⁸ position, and it was funded by the Vail family, which has funded a lot of the arts at Denison in our residencies and our Vail Series. We owe a lot to that fund and that family. It's incredibly important to how the university functions, and how we can be a part of a national/international world in this small little place, and I feel like we've really benefited greatly from that. The department has been shaped, for me, around that ability. One of those things was the minority Artist-in-Residence, and the dance department *somehow* seemed to be the only department really interested in that position, so we would get it and we would have it for a while, and that's where we brought in April Berry,⁹ who stayed for another seven years, and then from there moved into thinking about well, if we can't do ... We couldn't keep her because it was one of those full-time tenure—you have to tenure someone, and a complicated, complicated situation, so she stayed for as long as we could keep her and then she had to move on.

Then, I think at that point that's when I may have had the idea of what if we took that ballet position and divided it in half? So we had part-time ballet, and the other half was this world dance—this notion of something that came in that was not part of the standard university curriculum of western-based dance. So we did that for several years, and people loved that, and we really exposed students to so many interesting forms, and I learned so much from that time.

I was influenced by that because I indeed had studied Bharatanatyam¹⁰ in graduate school, and I had studied Capoeira¹¹ as an undergraduate. Maybe not full-on courses, but I had been exposed to a lot of interesting dance forms that were not part of the concert stage, and I think that was one of the things that influenced me to be interested in bringing that to Denison. So I think that Gill and I *rapidly* agreed that that would be a really interesting thing to do, and we sustained that, I think, for ten years. But it's very hard to have a position where you have to hire every semester or every year and then also train that person to be inside academia and what we do here, and just basically, it became unsustainable in a certain kind of way.

There was a lot of disappointment when we changed that, but the periodic review recommended that we think maybe possibly of an African diasporic addition instead of the half-time ballet and

⁸ A charitable organization headquartered in Chicago, the Vail Family Foundation at Denison began with a gift from Foster and Mary McGaw in memory of Jeanne Vail '46, Mary's daughter.

⁹ Dance director, master teacher, educator, and former internationally-acclaimed dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ms. Berry currently serves as the Director of Community Engagement and Education at the Kansas City Ballet.

¹⁰ Bharatanatyam is a pre-eminent Indian classical dance form, presumably the oldest classical dance heritage of India, and is regarded as the mother of many other Indian classical dance forms. Conventionally a solo dance performed only by women, it was initiated in the Hindu temples of Tamil Nadu and eventually flourished in South India.

¹¹ Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian martial art that combines elements of dance, acrobatics, and music, developed by enslaved Africans in Brazil at the beginning of the 16th century. It is marked by its acrobatic and complex maneuvers, often involving hands on the ground and inverted kicks.

half-time world dance, like combine it to one position, tenureable, so on, and that's how we are where we are today with Ojeya. It's been a long process, but always inside of that process an intention towards forms that were not traditionally taught in the university system.

CF: So amazing to me that you've achieved that in this small town of Granville and in this, as you described it, the sort of staid institution that you saw when you first came. Congratulations. And I see how those ten years perhaps, difficult years of having to keep having searches, and hiring, and training people to be in this institution would have informed you both about the institution and about all these forms. You do maintain, as well, guest artists in addition to this hire, right? Is that the Vail family?

SMS: Yes, yes. We have some Vail funds in each fine arts department, to bring in guest artists. I think for me, the Wexner Center and OSU has been a resource that has been — because we're so close, I've been able to capitalize on bringing those artists here. Even if they're just teaching a master class, a talk-back, we would go to see their show, it really enriches the students lives. But then we've also been able to develop relationships with artists, for example, a relationship with Faye Driscoll¹² and have her here for a period. She came here for a residency, where she was making her latest work. We've had a long engagement with her, and we couldn't do that without those funds. Right? Just, sort of *expand* the world of dance. We only have me teaching the contemporary dance, so you need other people in order to expand the world of the students so they know that there's more out there than what I do.

CF: Yeah. And you have adjuncts, but somewhere along the line you picked up not only the African diasporic line, but you got Molly. She's on a line, right?

SMS: Well, Molly is replacing me. I'm retiring next year, and so we just have this one year of overlap.

CF: Darn. I knew that was too good to be true.

SMS: Yeah, I mean that would be great to have four people in the department, yeah, to have picked up another line, but in fact there's still just three people at Denison.

CF: So, let's see. For some reason, the question came up for me as you've been describing your arrival, the kind of institution you arrived in, what has happened. I'm curious about your sense of how dance as a discipline is respected by the university. Was that something you could talk about on camera?

SMS: Yes. Well, that's always been a question, right? And certainly when I went up for tenure that was a question, because I went up as a choreographer and an artist. I don't publish. I don't write. That's not my thing. I make work, and I try to produce it and get it produced, and I try to write grants, and so on. So the fact that I was able to get tenure on those grounds for me was, I guess, a real moment where it was an affirmation that the university did respect that.

¹² Based in New York, Driscoll is a Bessie Award winning performance maker, who works at the intersection of dance, theater and comedy, among other genres, and has established ties to central Ohio through her repeated visits to Denison and her residencies and performances at the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts in Columbus.

However, it's not like that was an *immediate* shift and *everybody* in the university recognized the arts in that way. It's been a gradual shift over time. You know how institutions can be...they're multifaceted and there are many parts involved, and I think being part of the intellectual community was not always accepted, also being “downhill,”¹³ there were things that make it hard for the arts here, at the beginning, to feel like we are part of the true academic environment. I think this building, this new building, and the grandeur and the weight of it, will change things and has already changed things, and the president's emphasis towards the arts and interest in the arts being integrated into students' lives in many and multiple ways. I think it's all been a gradual, incredible shift towards the arts as a legitimate academic field.

CF: The arts as a site of knowledge, yes. Well, I've always wondered about the Denison/OSU relationship. You mentioned the big Goliath in the neighborhood, OSU, and your relationship with it, with a bigger institution, but what about the consortium of smaller colleges? Could you talk about that a little bit?

SMS: Oh, I would love to. So yeah, there is a consortium called Ohio Five,¹⁴ which consists of Kenyon, Wooster, Denison, Ohio Wesleyan, and Oberlin. I guess it was seven years ago that I initiated this notion that perhaps we could get together on a regular basis and learn from each other, share, just have a moment where we get to know each other — because I was realizing, I mean, I know them, but I don't know them that well, and it would be nice to know them. So because we had this, I guess, venue for doing that with the Ohio Five consortium — they have funding and a goal of bringing the colleges together in different kinds of ways, they were *really* excited about this notion of a collaborative conference annual meeting. And so that is what we've been doing for the past five years. This will be our sixth year. We'll come back to Denison. And what it has done is made it so easy to collaborate with each other. I'll give you an example. I have been doing this work with Sri Lanka — that's a whole 'nother story — but I had an opportunity to write a grant that had to have consortial membership. So I was able to make a call to Kenyon, and Oberlin, and Ohio Wooster, and Wesleyan, and say, "Hey, would you guys be interested in doing this collaborative week-long symposium on Sri Lankan dance?" I had to do it very quickly because the grant was due, and the ease with which that happened... I mean, it only happened because we already had a relationship. We knew each other, we trusted each other, and we were excited by each other's ideas. So that has grown, I think, in the past six years, because we meet every year. We look forward to this one day where we get together. Different faculty from the colleges offer classes. All the students come. We have meals together. We have panel discussions. We share work. It's just very compact, one day, no overnight stay, just simple. I think it's really made a huge difference, and I hope it continues.

CF: I mean in that way you point to the agility of a smaller institution. I don't know how long that would take to create at OSU, places like that!

SMS: Sure.

¹³ This is a reference to the geographical placement of the arts vs. the rest of the campus buildings; At Denison, the arts are downhill and the rest of the Denison academic quad is up the hill.

¹⁴ As she goes on to articulate, five small liberal arts colleges in Ohio have formed a consortium, established in 1996, for the purposes of mutual exchange and support: in addition to Denison University, there is Kenyon College in Gambier, Oberlin College in Oberlin, College of Wooster in Wooster and Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, OH.

CF: Let's see. A big question I have concerns your enormous expertise as an improviser and your connection to other improvisers in the country and internationally. Are you suggesting, from an earlier remark, that that really began for you at Portland because of the dance community there? I'm interested in how that all happened, and then grew.

SMS: Yes, at Portland, and also I think I had teachers that were part of the Nikolais¹⁵ kind of world, so that was part of my training. But, in a way, it didn't really start until, I think it was 1990 — I'm not exactly sure of the year, I went to A C Capella¹⁶. That was the workshop in North Hampton with Nancy Stark Smith, Danny Lepkoff, Alito Alessi, Karen Nelson, Lisa Nelson, all those people, and that experience was like, "Okay, this is where I want to really spend my time." So I started committing more and more time to thinking about improvisation. And that's also when I started working with David Beadle out of OSU and we started doing work together. I started just developing what it meant to improvise in performance, and to consider the range of what that means, and also wonder what do you call that, does it matter, do people need to know, how does that inform what they see, I mean all these really interesting questions you have about performance, and improvisation, and choreography, and set work. It's not that it's not choreography, but we tend to think of choreography as being set and improvisation as not being set, so some say it's not choreography. Lots of interesting questions. So yeah, I would bring that to some of my classwork, always in my technique classes, but also in courses that were devoted specifically to improvisation.

CF: And I mean you've really built something here, in that regard. I think that Denison is known for your work in that area and I wonder about two things: I'm wondering how students have received it, assuming that most students come to Denison not knowing much about that and would be interested in anything you would want to say about that. But then I'm also curious since you're retiring, what happens to that legacy here? I know we don't get to say what happens once we leave, but what are your thoughts about that?

SMS: Well, I think improvisation is embedded, obviously, in African diaspora forms, so it lives on absolutely in those students who study that and who think about it, so I'm not afraid it's going to go away, in a holistic way. And I think Molly definitely does some improvisational work. She moved into that. I remember the day she was visiting, she went out to lunch and said, "Tell me about improvisation." She was starting to find some of the beauty that improvisers find, which is the thing you discover that you cannot discover in any other way except for by being present in the moment and listening to what you're doing as an improviser. But the students, they are frightened by it,

¹⁵ A reference to acclaimed dancer, choreographer, sound and lighting designer and company director, Alwin Nikolais (1910-1993), whose teaching and compositional methods were based in improvisational work. Originally trained as a pianist, Nikolais also became skilled in puppetry, scenic design, acting and music. Nikolais was renowned as a master teacher, and his pedagogy continues to be taught in schools and universities throughout the world. *In addition to Mathern-Smith, Nikolais has influenced many of Ohio's important dance artists and institutions, including Gladys Bailin at OU, Kim Tritt at College of Wooster, Bebe Miller at OSU, among others.*

¹⁶ A Capella Motion was a dance workshop held every year in Northampton, Massachusetts, from 1982 to 1996. It focused on Contact Improvisation, but also featured classes on other forms of improvisation and somatic work, as well as singing. The chief organizers were the late Nancy Stark Smith and Carol Swann.

though in the end I think they revel in the freedom of it. And that's students from those who've never danced before who are trying to figure out what this means, to people who come with a lot of training and suddenly find that they can let go of some of their preconceptions about what they should do and shouldn't do. It takes them a *while*, of course, but I think it really does inform the work that they end up doing in their senior research, in particular.

CF: I haven't had a chance yet to pursue this question with the others, but you have a number of dance majors, and then you also have a far-reaching impact on other students at the university, right?

SMS: Yes.

CF: So would you care to talk about that, how that is at Denison, or what that is? How many majors? How many students take classes, and what happens? How it integrates into the rest of the community? It's a big question.

SMS: It's an interesting question, because as you were asking, I was starting to think of the students that were not majors who ended up doing dance because they spent their time here and then discovered that that, in fact, was their real passion after they left. Four years is a long time in the student's life — but in the overall life of a body it's not that long. So to know how important something is to you by the time you leave, I think that happens for a lot of students, but certainly not every one, which makes total sense because they're only twenty or twenty-one when they leave, so they're very young.

So I guess one of the values that I think are benefits to students at Denison is that the department allows that you *can* become fully involved in the department, in its performance work, in coursework, *without* being a major, or a minor; without committing to that fully, you can still have this full experience. And I certainly have worked in my time with many students who continued to take my level three class, or perform in works, or who go on and who leave without a [dance] degree.

To follow up on that, we don't have that many majors. It's a small department. We couldn't probably service more than 10 students per year . . . That would be a lot for three of us. But what we do have, I think, is a nice community, a kind of family that we form of both students that are majors and those that are minors and those that just like to hang out with the dancers and be a part of the community, and we're happy to welcome them in.

CF: I wonder if you've had to go to bat for that? I imagine you've had to persuade academic stakeholders about the value of improvisation and the value of bringing in improvisers. Is that an argument you've had to have, or have you won it, or was it easy?

SMS: You know, I think one of the things that has been great about teaching at Denison is there is a lot of freedom to get to do what *you* want to do and trust in “Yeah, go ahead, do that” — and interest — so I don't feel like I really ever had to fight for improvisation as an academic topic. In fact, one of the first courses I offered in the honors program, which took a long time for them to even ask me to be part of that, was improvisation as performance, so I feel lucky in that way. I think

Denison, as a whole, has been very supportive of these more radical, I guess, approaches to thinking about movement and academics.

CF: For whatever reason, in my preparation, I wasn't thinking, "Gosh, Sandy's leaving," but of course that begs the question, looking back over your time at Denison, and then also, the "what's next" for you piece? Would you care to address those points?

SMS: Looking back, I feel like a couple of things that are *my* passions, or are the things that I feel I brought to the department and I hope will be sustained. And those are, one we've already talked about, improvisation, but the other one is collaboration. I've done a lot of collaboration with poets, and visual artists, and musicians, and music composers, and that notion of working with others to bring together a work in an interdisciplinary way, I hope that that's something that can continue to thrive here. I think it will, but it's definitely been something that's been important to me, that I've contributed. And then the other thing is more experimental work — site dance, things that... not everything's done on the stage. How can we think of movement more broadly and in the world? I think all of those hopefully will be expanded upon and developed. But in terms of the future, I hope for those, the new faculty, that they're able to be given the freedom to shape the department in the way *they* want to, sort of untethered from the past and the ideas that have shaped us up until now. There's a real potential here with the new building, and it's an exciting moment, and I'm excited to see what happens.

CF: Will you stay in the area?

SMS: Originally, I was going back to Oregon. It's harder to do that. It's easier to say that than to do it, I mean, in terms of it's just really expensive to uproot and find a new place, and to find a place that has the quality of life that Granville has. So at the moment, I will probably have my base here, and I hope to do a lot of traveling. I now have a grandson, he lives near Prague, so I'm going to have to spend time there (she laughs). So yeah, it's a new, unplanned, improvised chapter.

CF: Yes, of course it is! (To the team): Does anyone else want to ask a question?

JC: One of the things I'm most interested about is the major population shift within the wider student body and I'm curious, having experienced that, was that something that you sensed coming along or was it something that people were pulling their weight in to do? You had that moment where you said you looked around and you were like oh, your class really is diverse. Did you sense that happening?

SMS: Well, there were some key things that happened. One was this moment that was a very heroic measure that the only female president we ever had took, and that was to take the fraternities off of the campus. They had this strong hold on the social scene in a way that wasn't necessarily healthy. So that was huge, because we're talking about a shift, a cultural shift, but also challenging the alumni who might have the funding, so there's that — that's complicated. But that was huge in the way that it changed, I guess, the reputation of Denison, because I mean let's just face it, it was a party school when I arrived. It was considered a party school. I didn't know that. I found that out. So over time, that one thing shifted the intellectual rigor. And this is happening, of course, as well, with a lot of other things that are coming with each president and the kinds of things that they were interested in implementing, and strengthening the student body, and the admissions. So it wasn't one person — it

was a collective effort, and certainly the faculty was always behind that: "Let's create more diversity." Let's find new ways to bring different populations in, create more financial aid. And I can't say I know what those all were, but the impact in the classroom is gigantic. I mean, I have some great classes where now it's just a huge range of students from so many different backgrounds with different ideas that they bring, and you're rubbing shoulders against people you wouldn't as young people growing up in Middletown, Ohio, for example, may never be able to do except for when they come to a place like this. I think the idea is that Denison can somehow represent a more global community, be more representative of the world and less representative of the region.

CF: What year was that that the president distanced the Greek scene from campus?

SMS: I'm so bad with years. That was Michele Tolela Myers¹⁷ year. It was in the '90s I think. Yeah. And then we had the Posse¹⁸, which is a kind of organization that nurtures young leaders who are either minority students or they don't have the financial means to get themselves to college, but they help them figure out how to, and they're placed in different smaller liberal arts colleges, so that program diversifies immediately. You have, I don't know, ten to twenty new students each year who come in whose lives are very different, are very, very different than some of the other students' lives.

MDB: I did have a question.

CF: Please!

MDB: So, improvisation and collaboration seem to be pillars in your research, and you talked about how it was satisfying to be in a tenure-track position that didn't require you to write or to do that kind of scholarly work, but it sounds like the work in the classroom and then your concert pieces *constituted* your research.

SMS: Yep.

MDB: So I'm curious about some of the highlights in that research, if you want to speak to a particular creative process or something that bubbles up from your years here.

SMS: Yeah! I'm currently working on a piece, which is exciting, but I won't talk about that. I'll talk about the last piece that I did, which came out of some residencies that I was able to get at the Atlantic Center for the Arts¹⁹ in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, and at the CAMAC Centre²⁰ in France, Marnay-sur-Seine²¹ — a gorgeous, beautiful little place. Those allowed me to develop work in video.

¹⁷ Tolela Myers served as president of Denison University from 1989 until 1998.

¹⁸ The Posse Foundation is a national U.S. nonprofit organization that identifies, recruits, interviews and trains high school seniors to form diverse teams of leaders.

¹⁹ Founded in 1977, Atlantic Center for the Arts (ACA) is a nonprofit, interdisciplinary artists' community and arts education facility providing artists an opportunity to work and collaborate with contemporary artists in the fields of composing, visual, literary, and performing arts.

²⁰ CAMAC (Centre d'Art Marnay Art Centre) is a creative center offering international residency programs for artists, scientists and technologists working with new media

²¹ a small community located about 72 miles southeast of Paris

That's another thing that I became interested in, so I learned Isadora²² and started to incorporate live and prerecorded video imagery into the full-on production of the work, which is a lot of work, but really fun to do and adds another component that you just can't do with just movement alone because you have this imagery that's, even if it's an abstract imagery, it's light and form and color and points to a kind of idea or a sensation. So that work that I developed with a couple of artists that I met in Marfa, Texas, at the March to Marfa²³ — this is the Lower Left Ensemble²⁴ with Nina Martin²⁵ and the ensemble work that they were designing. I went there because I'm like, "I need some more ideas about improvisation. This looks interesting. What do you have to offer?" and started learning some of their ensemble thinking work and met some artists that I collaborated with. It was a work that I made that had a solo that had some trio parts in it, some duets. It was a highly-structured improvisational work with the Isadora video imagery. And the process was fun because we were able to do it both in residence and also in France, and at various places where we could meet, because we were all over the country. Then we ended up taking that to Burkina Faso²⁶ with Olivier's²⁷ festival that he produces there at Ouagadougou²⁸. That was an amazing highlight moment for me to really see that world, but also have contemporary dance be such an important part of *that* culture, and of the people there, and the center there, the choreographic center was amazing. So that was a really fun piece that ... I can't remember if I ever performed it here at Denison though. I feel like that is one of the harder things to do, and the students really *appreciate* it, but you forget that they even care about what you do as a professional — because you're a teacher, you know? But when they do see your work, things click. "Oh, that's what you mean!" That's what improvisation is, or that's how you're conceptualizing. So those kinds of moments are really great when you can perform for your students in your home environment.

²² First released in 2002, Isadora is a graphic programming environment for Mac OS X and Microsoft Windows, with emphasis on real-time manipulation of digital video.

²³ Marfa, a small desert city in west Texas, has become an arts hub that arose around the work of sculptor Donald Judd, many of whose large scale works are located in the area around Marfa.

²⁴ Co-founded by Nina Martin along with a group of performance artists located in the San Diego area, Lower Left Ensemble is now based in Marfa, Texas as a global collective of dance and performance artists committed to artistic innovation, ensemble building and collective art-making.

²⁵ Nina Martin, PhD, MFA is a choreographer and master teacher, co-founder of Lower Left Ensemble and current board president of Marfa Live Arts. Martin is an independent artist and assistant professor at TCU School for Classical & Contemporary Dance.

²⁶ A country in western Africa, Burkina Faso is referenced here in its capacity as one of the main locations for the Baker-Tarpaga Dance Project (Esther Tarpaga-Baker and Olivier Tarpaga) that hosts an annual three-week Dance and Drum program in Ouagadougou. Tarpaga, a master drummer and award-winning musician and choreographer, who hails from Burkina Faso and serves as the Director of the African Music Ensemble at Princeton University.

²⁷ Olivier Tarpaga is the co-founder, along with his wife, Esther Tarpaga-Baker, of the Baker-Tarpaga Dance Project (BTDP). Esther currently serves as an adjunct faculty member at Temple University in Philadelphia, and Olivier serves as the Director of the African Music Ensemble at Princeton University. He is also the Artistic Director of the Nomad Express International Multi-Arts Festival, a traveling arts festival that has been staged in various countries, including Burkina-Faso.

²⁸ The capital and largest town in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou is the site of the annual Dance and Drum project directed by artists Esther Tarpaga-Baker and Olivier Tarpaga.

CF: I think that cycling back of faculty research and work is essential to the life of the student body, but it's easier said than done sometimes.

SMS: Yes.

CF: What was the name of that piece?

SMS: That piece was called *Swimming in Green*.²⁹ It had a lot of names, because I would do the solo here and so on, but yeah, *Swimming in Green*.

CF: Well, Jane has let me know that we're finished. (To the team): I bet you both have follow-ups ,and we'll just have to hope that we capture you somewhere else some other day.

SMS: Well, thank you!

CF: Thank you so much, and good luck to you. My gosh, what an accomplishment.

SMS: Yeah.

CF: You're at that moment and I had no idea. You look way too young to be a grandmother.

SMS: Oh, thank you.

CF: Best wishes to you.

SMS: Thank you.

CF: And I hope you get to at least enjoy the fruits of your labors in this space for one year.

SMS: Yeah, I mean this building was my life for three years, so just it was a lot of work.

CF: I remember, because we just did it.

SMS: I imagine! Yes, and so it's like I've got to have at *least* a year to ...

CF: ...enjoy it and use it.

SMS: ... enjoy it, and use it, and see what it's like.

²⁹ *Swimming in Green in Three Parts* is a performance work partially developed during Mathern-Smith's residency at CAMAC in 2012 and at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in 2010.

CF: And who knows? Maybe you'll come back and do things here, too.

SMS: Yeah, I hope so. You know one thing I didn't mention was how important OhioDance was.

JD: And I was about to say something, because I was thinking that the first time...

SMS: I mean, it was so important!

JD: Twenty years ago, the first class that I took was your class through OhioDance, and it was an improv, and it was a gentleman that you were working with, and I remember...

SMS: It was probably David Beadle.

JD: ... and I remember I had little babies, and I was just getting back into dance...

SMS: Oh my gosh!

JD: ... and this guy came up and just picked me up in the air. I was like, "No, no, no, don't do that." I just went with it.

SMS: Oh my God!

JD: You were the first intro back into dance for me.

SMS: Wow. I *didn't* know that. I feel *honored*.

JD: I know. I don't think I've ever said that to you.

SMS: I feel honored.

JD: All of the sudden it came to me, just a minute ago.

SMS: It was so important because I didn't know *anybody* here, and it became a real place of networking, and I met a lot of people through OhioDance³⁰ in those early days when we would do performances together. I know you're still doing that, but it was really important. I met Susan Van

³⁰ The statewide organization that inclusively supports the diverse and vibrant practice of dance, and the host of the Virtual Dance Collection, which not only is the genesis for this series of Denison interviews, but also for a focus on interviews about OhioDance itself.

Pelt Petry³¹, I met Shawn Womack³² through that, and we continue to have a long relationship. She's out in Colorado now. But it was so important, so thank you, OhioDance.

CF: Perfect. Thank you for that, and for your time and all of your accomplishments here.

SMS: You're generous!

A conversation ensues as we wrap up, and someone compliments SMS on her dress, which is green, and leads to many affirmations of the color— to which MDB remarks, "Swimming in Green!"

SMS: There is actually a good story on the name of that title. When I was in France — I mean, I didn't think to bring a costume...no, it was when I was in Florida, I didn't think to bring a costume. I ended up doing *all* this video, and that's not what I thought I was going to be doing, but it was more interesting than working in the studio. So I didn't really have a costume, but I had a green bathing suit. And it was really *hot* — I mean *really* hot! So I was like, "Okay, that's what I'm wearing." Then all of this video was of me in this green bathing suit, so I just ended up calling it *Swimming in Green*.

³¹ Professor and former Chair of the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University, Van Pelt Petry worked in many earlier capacities in Ohio, including her years directing VanPelt Dance and a faculty position at Ohio University in Athens, OH, and a stint as Board President, 1995-1999 of OhioDance!

³² Currently Chair of the Theater and Dance Department at Colorado College, Womack worked as an artist and director of Shawn Womack Dance Projects in Cincinnati, which would have put her within the auspices of OhioDance during those years.