

VDC Interview Transcript

Subject: Denison University Dance

Informant: Molly Shanahan, former student and current faculty

10.14.19

Total Time: 21:52

Michael D. Eisner Center for the Performing Arts

240 West Broadway

Granville, Ohio 43023

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

MS: Molly Shanahan

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC film team)

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)

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

CF: It's October 14th, 2019, and I'm talking to Molly Shanahan at Denison University. I'm Candace Feck.

Gosh, Molly, I guess my opening question to you is, given your multifaceted, multi-*institutional* path, and your intertwining relationship to Denison, starting as a student here, I'm curious about that trajectory. I'd love it if you could talk about how you arrived at Denison as an undergrad and what you found in the dance world here at that time.

MS: Sure thing. I visited Denison as a junior or senior in high school and at that point I was a competitive cheerleader and knew that I wanted dance to be part of my future, but I didn't feel equipped, or trained in the traditional sense. So I arrived here, I fell in love with the campus, I visited a dance class and was intrigued and loved the studio over at Doane [Hall].¹

And when I got to Denison as a freshman, Gill Miller² was my advisor, so that was an immediate introduction. But like a lot of Denison students, I'm learning, I took a little bit of time to get really involved in the dance department. I think I took my first class my second semester. It was a class with Noel Hall,³ whom I just absolutely adored and then it wasn't until my sophomore year that I declared the major. At that point I was *totally all in*; I just immersed myself completely. Classes were at that point across a really diverse range. We had a class called Ethnic Jazz that Noel taught that

¹ The former home of the Department of Dance at Denison, which has just moved to the new Eisner Center for the Performing Arts.

² Current and longstanding chair of the Department of Dance at Denison. Miller is also featured as an informant for the VDC Denison Collection.

³ Noel Hall was the first to occupy Denison's World Dance/Africanist position at length. His arrival at Denison was as an Artist-in-Residence for 7 weeks in Spring 1981, but he stayed at Denison for seven years.

was an African/Caribbean class combined with elements of, I think, half a semester in Graham technique⁴, which was really unique kind of split for the semester.

We had traditional jazz classes, ballet, and then modern, and Sandy Mathern-Smith⁵ arrived when I was a junior, so that was a big development in the department, because then modern became a really big focus. But I was kind of a “jazzarina.” Maybe I shouldn't use the “rina” part of that because I was never really a ballet dancer, but I was super into jazz and really just wanted to dance and choreograph, and I was really lucky enough my junior year to choreograph a piece for the faculty student concert. And then that really started me on a choreographic path, which became an immediate passion, and it coincided with when I realized that I could have a career in dance. I didn't really understand that until I came to Denison. And I remember Bebe Miller⁶ came — it might've been my sophomore year — and did the piece *Rain*⁷ and I was operating sound, which at that point I think was still on the giant reels. And, you know, I remember being so nervous about pressing play for that piece, but also transported, and *suddenly* realized that there was a whole dance *world* and not just dancing, but a dance field and a dance world. And that's when I started to think about long-term.

CF: Amazing. Did you come here from Chicago?

MS: No, I came from Detroit. Yeah, I'm Canadian by birth and both my parents are Detroiters. We lived in Detroit during my middle school and high school years, so I came to Denison from Detroit.

CF: I'm curious about Noel Hall's time here, and I'm so glad to know that it was a kind of big moment for you...

MS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

CF: ... because it feels like those years that he was here were very important. He was New York-based, right? It seems, from what I can glean from reading, that his presence here made such an impact, and that then slowly but surely the wheels of the department started turning towards Africanist movement.

MS: I think that's true. It was a *huge* factor in my education and he was only here two years of my four. I just saw him a couple of weeks ago. We just caught up because he came back for the Black Student Union's 50th anniversary. But yeah, you know, I think in terms of training, ballet hurt my body. That was just my reality. I have very tight fascia, which now I know, but at the time I just thought ballet didn't feel good and taking a rigorous, quite serious historically relevant dance technique with Noel that also included rhythm and voice and undulations, especially, I think that was key for me in beginning to have an understanding that dance didn't have to be about a kind of

⁴ (1894-1991) An American modern dancer and choreographer whose name is nearly synonymous with the early modern dance movement, Martha Graham's codified system of training, eponymously named “the Graham technique,” is still taught worldwide.

⁵ By now a longtime faculty member, Mathern-Smith, now on the brink of retirement, is separately featured as an informant for the VDC Denison Collection.

⁶ Miller is an internationally recognized dancer, choreographer, Artistic Director and teacher, now retired from the faculty at The Ohio State University, who maintains her eponymous company.

⁷ A solo Miller made for herself in 1989, *Rain* is often restaged for other performers.

uprightness. That there was — I mean, Noel was an incredibly rigorous teacher, but he introduced me to this sense of flow and that allowed me to kind of turn my adrenaline to something that was also just really joyous for me and that felt good in my body. And I had a long journey with injuries that were related to all kinds of things, but that introduction to dance that has *flow* was incredibly important to me and has influenced me my entire life.

CF: And I think again, it looks like it was the seed for something that has now really matured in this department.

MS: I think so too. And I was at Temple⁸... I think this is right: I had just started... I might be wrong about the history of this, so apologies, but I feel like I was at Temple just starting my PhD when I learned about the decision of this department to really embrace African-rooted movement as the complementary core with contemporary and modern, really, as opposed to ballet. It felt to me like a really powerful statement in the field. I was really proud to be affiliated with Denison, making that choice, knowing that some students would struggle with that, and the demands that that would place on the department in terms of framing the curriculum and reaching students. I still felt like it was — it was a leadership move in my opinion, in the field, and I was really excited about it. And the statement that it made, that that decision makes and made around what it is to be a human body moving in a rigorous and intentional and aesthetic sense. Really expanding some of the limited ideas about body that I felt critical about in the dance field and still do to some extent. Yeah.

CF: How large of a department was Denison when you were an undergrad? Maybe it has stayed the same... I don't really know that.

MS: That's a great question and I think I'm contemplating that a lot now as a new tenure-track faculty member. The department was both small in terms of majors — so there was a ton of individual attention — but it was *large* in terms of the students that it served. In terms of faculty, it was about the same size that it is now, I think, with the added capacity for bringing guest artists in. I'd like to see the program grow quite a bit in terms of majors. I think that now is a really important moment for dance and certainly for dance at Denison with this new building and new space and new faculty members coming in. But it was small. I mean, I was one of two majors my senior year, two senior majors. There were other majors coming up in the other classes, but I was one of two senior majors and there were a couple of minors and now, having been affiliated with several institutions, there's a part of me that looks at that as being very small, and a little bit worrisome.

But when I think back to my experience as a student, it was so important to have that home and to have the relationships that I had with faculty, and the ability to come and go from the department with a sense of agency and authority and independence, and to feel like I could grow as an artist, as a senior in college and already kind of own an artistic voice. It was really, really a unique thing. So I would like for the department to continue to offer that kind of close mentorship and at the same time broaden to reach more students here at Denison.

CF: Yes, that sounds like a good recipe! What are you charged with bringing to the department now as a new tenure track faculty member?

⁸ Temple University in Philadelphia has a well-regarded dance program, offering undergraduate, graduate and the PhD degree in dance.

MS: Oh. Well, okay, so let's see. Having now been choreographing and living independently mostly from — well certainly from — a tenure-track position for 25 years or more, it is only slowly dawning on me what it means to have a tenure-track position. I get now that it is a very special thing. I got the job offer here a few days before I defended my dissertation and a few days before I got an offer to do a Bogliasco Fellowship⁹ in Italy. So there was this confluence of things happening for me that were all about transition and change. And I'm 50, I'm middle-aged. I'm not 38 entering this position. So I feel like I'm already starting to think what my legacy is in the field.

So to get to your question, I am experiencing a kind of new relationship to myself and my capacity in this role and in this department. And I think I'm being given the freedom to define what that is and that the folks who hired me have an understanding that I know what that is. But I've been in a moment of real...I've been in an enclave of change, writing this dissertation that was really, really challenging and personal and in many ways dredged up a lot of challenging things to write about and think about in terms of my relationship to dance.

And so, having this home, which has also *been* a home is kind of a profound moment of change for me in terms of laying some of my own foundation in dance and where I want to go in terms of legacy, being able to kind of build that on this foundation.

So I guess the reason I said all of that is because I got this position at a time of professional and creative and personal vulnerability. And I am just now in the first semester beginning to understand the strengths of being here and to reclaim some of my strengths as an artist. Completing a dissertation is not really a time of feeling galvanized in one's strengths (she laughs). So I'm coming out of that mode and realizing that indeed I have skills for teaching dance and creating dance that does expand ideas about how human bodies see each other, how human beings see each other in an embodied way. And now, as opposed to maybe 10 years ago, more directly cutting through the kinds of judgments and critique and ingrained yet underlying hatred of body or fear of body. And so I think I'm able to bring that more openly to the students, and they're really responding to it, which is so, so, so, so exciting and also heartbreaking because of how tender we are as human beings in terms of being seen.

And then I have some goals around how to articulate the movement that I teach in a slightly more formalized sense, and that's brewing here. I'm not sure what form that will take yet, though. I have some ideas about that. People have asked me for a long time if I would codify how I teach or what I teach and I don't love that word, but I do want to be able to communicate it within a framework that leaves younger dancers feeling empowered through that work. And that's been a real shift for me coming to Denison and leaving the PhD [program].

CF: That's wonderful. And I'm curious about, I mean, you've had a kind of threaded relationship with Denison for a very long time. Maybe starting soon after you graduated. Is that true?

MS: Yeah. I think I came back as a guest artist maybe five years after I graduated for my first residency. Yeah, Denison has been a touchstone. I mean, *incredibly*, for 25 years. And we've done some incredible residencies here without any thought, during a phase when I had no thought of

⁹ A coveted one-month award from the Bogliasco Foundation, an American nonprofit with a program near Genoa, Italy. Bogliasco Fellowships are awarded to individuals of all ages and nationalities who have made significant contributions in the arts and humanities.

being on a faculty somewhere and was just doing some independent teaching and building my company. We did a residency that involved me coming here, the whole company coming here, and then a group of about six students coming to Chicago for a week — and that, within one academic year, totally integrated involving the students in the creation of work, viewing work, taking class with the company and then producing the company's work. So that's just one example of so many ways that Denison has been really creative about bringing artists in and I've been fortunate to be that artist several times. So, for someone as kind of nomadic and lone-wolfish as me, it's hard to call something a home — but Denison really has been a home.

A brief discussion between CF and JD about time remaining as Ojeya Banks enters for her interview

CF: Does Mad Shak¹⁰ come with you?

MS: Yes, incredibly. Yes. The university has initiated support for the company to come in periodically as part of my relationship here. And I hope that that can continue well into the future. So that's also an amazing thing. The company has rehearsed here in this space a couple of weekends already and taught classes with me and held some workshops with my classes. And that is amazing, because at this point some of the artists I work with, or one I should say — I think he's 24 — and then I'm working with peers who are in their early fifties. So the expanse just in that group of five people is pretty broad. And that expanse includes a couple of really mature artists who are teaching at universities and bringing such an incredible wealth of knowledge that it *broadens* my sense of being not just a teacher or an artist, but a student of the environments I'm in. And now Denison is one of those environments, so that's pretty amazing.

CF: I wonder how you see Denison, having been out and about and in other institutions — Temple, Northwestern, Bogliasco, all the places you've been and all of the experiences you've had. How do you think Denison is situated in the world of dance?

MS: Yeah, I've been giving that some thought the last couple of years. I think Denison is a really *unique* program in a position to play an important role as a small school with an incredibly keen kind of scholarly and aesthetic vision around what dance can be and especially cutting through the boundaries of scholar/artist, and really wanting to embrace that scholarship is happening when we're moving in the studio and artistry is happening when we're talking about texts and concepts. And then, just to return to this point — I think the claiming of a space for African-based movement is profound, in terms of the school's role in the field. And I hope that that can continue to grow while retaining the closeness and intimacy of learning that happens here. Yeah.

CF: (to the VDC team) Anybody have a quick question, since we're out of time already? Oh, Jane, is Ojeya here?

JD: Yes, she is.

CF: Okay. I can't see behind myself, unfortunately. (To MS): Do you have anything you'd like to say about Denison that I didn't get to ask you in our brief 25 minutes?

MDB: You didn't specifically touch on Denison being part of the landscape in Ohio, but...

¹⁰ The company founded by Shanahan in 1994, based in Chicago.

MS: Well, I can just say one quick thing that I was thinking about today walking here is that I have spent and still have relationships with these major cities, especially Chicago. And after leaving here as a student, I came to understand myself as an urban artist and was always uncomfortable with that because I am someone who craves quiet — and *truly* a landscape. So being back here and living — I live about a mile outside of town, and I walk in— and I walked through the woods to get here. And then this small town — it is really... I'm experiencing a resurgence of some early life inspiration that connects me to the inspiration I felt here as a student that really does have to do with open space and the change of light and trees and the change of season and the sound of crickets and a kind of quiet that isn't always celebrated in the driven world of dance production in urban environments. I hope that my work can reflect that kind of quotidian rural inspiration because I think it's such a huge part of how human beings experience life.

CF: Well, I have no doubt that it will, and I'm very excited to hear all this and to see where it ends up.

MS: Thank you.

CF: I hope we get a chance to talk off campus someday.

MS: Yeah, me too, Candace. Okay, sounds good.

CF: Thank you so much.

MS: Thank you so much. Yeah, thanks.

21:52 – 23:40: *There is an interval of conversation among team members as Ojeya Banks enters for the next interview...*