

VDC Interview Transcript
 Elaine Valois
 Kathy Okuley

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Ohio Northern University
 525 South Main Street
 Ada, OH 45810
 television studio

Key:

CF: Candace Feck
 KO: Kathy Okuley
 MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)
 JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: Kathy, maybe we could start at the beginning — how you first came to know Elaine Valois.

KO: I was a teenager in the '70s, and I knew that if I didn't do something to keep me out of trouble, I'd get into trouble (she laughs). So I took it upon myself to find a little dance studio and I started taking classes, and it turns out that my next door neighbor was a counselor for the University of Toledo. So when I started talking about going to college, she said, "Well, you like to dance. I think you'd love to meet this new... relatively new cool professor that we have in Dance. You should take one of her classes." And that was the beginning of a most magical journey of almost twenty years. Yeah...she was actually on sabbatical the first year that I went to the university, and she had a substitute in the dance department. So I took a few classes and it was sweet, and it was interesting being around. And then I think we did a choreographer showcase at the end of that first year, and that's when Elaine returned, and she was at the show, so that's when I met her. It was pretty much history from there. They had, I think, auditions for the dance company the following year, and I auditioned and made it in the dance company, and worked with her in the company — I don't know — through college, like four years, when you have time to do that sort of thing as a student.

But then as I had to begin to be a wage earner and more serious in my life. I left. I had gotten a degree in Dance Therapy, the program I was in, so I spent lots and lots of time with Elaine, and with the dance company. And then I continued with a degree in Health Education and also Social Work. So that's the work I do now. As I was changing from being a college student to being a professional, I also had a baby. She approached me and she said, "Well, I'm in an interesting position right now where I have two part-time positions that could make a full time position if you're interested in coming back." So there was a part-time instructor position and also the business manager of the dance company. There was an opening, and I had a baby. She was a year old and I was like, "I don't know. I should be home; I should go." And she said, "Your daughter will learn much more about what it is to be a human being if you're engaged in work that you love than if you're sitting home with her (laughing) — and you may bring her." So that's what I did, and I spent about ten years in that *really* close working relationship with Elaine. I performed some, but I did a lot more of the teaching, and helping her with performances, and I was just looking at Laurie's [Laurie

Bell] Master's thesis¹ and going through pages and pages of budgets, and administrative stuff, and programs for concerts that I put together.

I was her right hand girl for many years, and that was a very special place to be.

CF: Can I ask you to go back to that moment when you're finishing up your freshman year at University of Toledo, she comes back from sabbatical, and you meet her at the concert. Can you recall your first impressions?

KO: *Amazing*, just a spitfire! She's a *tiny* person. She's a very... but her essence — it fills a room, it fills a space. So there's just this uncanny sense of, *visually*, a little person, but energetically this *huge* presence. Yeah, it was very amazing, just amazing.

CF: So, you danced with the company for those years then?

KO: Yeah, for a number of years.

CF: And what was she like as a choreographer/director?

KO: Wonderful. And I have some of my favorite pieces that I did of hers. One was *Biography*, and it was this incredible piece about the history of women, the story of women — our internal yearnings, our fears, our sorrows, our joys. And it was done with these huge capes and we just wore little slips underneath them. And the capes became our babies, they became our lovers, they covered us up. They became something that was ... our anger, you know, the object of our anger. It was so *profound*. We were actually invited to perform it at a Unitarian church service about grief. It was just a really, really cool piece. I think Meredith Monk was the music, and so she's really out there. *The Tao of Love* was another one. There was lots of theater in her, lots of... she really looked at art as transformational. So, of course, dance is pretty, and it's fun, and it can be light and rhythmic... but she wanted people to be *changed*. She wanted not only the audience to be changed, but the dancers to be changed. So her dance often was — her choreography was — what I would call transformational. So *The Tao of Love* was another one, and both of those pieces that she choreographed that I was in, I mean, never got through them without sobbing. You were moved in the process of the feelings and the emotions, and *The Tao of Love* was this incredible, once again, a story about love between a man and a woman, and how that just is so challenging and so beautiful at times, and that you can take respite with each other, but how there's always this energetic pulling, and pushing, and...it was profound once again, and yeah, I never got through that piece without crying (she laughs, remembering).

CF: Was this the late '60s for you when you started with her?

KO: Late '70s.

CF: Okay. I was thinking she started at university around the late '60s...

¹ Bell, Laurie. "The History of the Development of the Valois Company of Dancers at the University of Toledo under the Direction of Elaine Valois, 1966-1991." University of Toledo, 1997.

KO: I think her first year was '71, and I graduated from high school in '76. So I was there in '77.

CF: So you weren't around for *Tommy*,² then?

KO: No.

CF: Okay. That's what I was trying to figure out.

KO: Yeah, I was after *Tommy*. And it's funny, because once again in Laurie's book, she has the people that she interviewed, and she has a cross-section with highlighted years that people were in Elaine's life. I had no idea that mine spanned the longest — a really, really long number of years. So it's funny because Kerri³ is a different generation, but we always talk about that — like Elaine's different “generations of children.” So I was like maybe the third generation of her children at the university.

CF: Yes. Kerri said that you were *her* first teacher at the university.

KO: Yeah.

CF: How long were you in the company?

KO: Well, I think through all of the years I did *some* pieces, but you know, it's tough once you... I was working other jobs because I had degrees, and I had a baby, but I would... performing is a lot of *work*! It's a lot of *time*. And it's hard to do if you've got kids at home, so I started to do it less and less.

CF: I asked Laurie, and then I asked Kerri, and I'm curious now to hear from you. If you had to choose three adjectives to characterize Elaine, what comes up for you? Like, the essence of Elaine. What would they be? What are the things that come to the top of your consciousness to tell somebody like me who didn't know her?

KO: Oh my goodness. She is — it sounds so trite, but she's so profound. And very *human* — and also *hilarious*! (She laughs) She's also very funny! I have a little clip — I went to Hawaii last year and visited with a couple of my dancer friends, Elaine's “children,” and we stayed for a week and just had the most wonderful time. And I got some great film of her talking — and you know, I wanted to get that ...whenever she told a story... That's why she was such a wonderful lecturer in her classes — just *fabulous* because she would have utter silence in the room. You'd be on the edge of your seat. She was a *marvelous* storyteller. She still is, I shouldn't keep speaking in the past. She's a wonderful storyteller; she'll just have you riveted as she tells these stories about Feldenkrais, and World War II, and the Nazis —and, you know, how movement is — you know —whatever it is, she *weaves* it into the story, and then she *weaves* it into your life, and she weaves it into how it affects all of humanity, and how we can be so much *more* than we could be if we would do... And you're just like... once

² Valois produced and directed the world premiere of Peter Townshend's *Tommy* in 1971 in collaboration with the Department of Theatre at the University of Toledo. See transcript of Valois interview for details about this accomplishment.

³ Kerri Wilde, another student of both Elaine's and Kathy's, nominated Elaine Valois for inclusion in the OhioDance VDC. See her interview on the website for further details of her association with Valois.

again, you're just a changed person: you're a changed person when she speaks, when she choreographs. She's just — what a *gift* to have spent so much time with someone like that.

CF: I'm curious because you *have* spent so much time with her, of your own sense of... how did she *get* that way? This profundity and deep humanity that you characterize, where did it come from? Do you have any sense?

KO: A whole variety — it's a lifetime of experiences, I'm sure. First of all, she's open, and she sees things. You know? I mean, a lot of people have all kinds of wonderful things that come to them, but they just don't get it (big laugh). They pass it by — but she doesn't pass it by.

So, she grew up in Napoleon, Ohio, which is kind of like Ada — it's a pretty small place. And I guess her parents just really let her do creative things, and she had a wonderful childhood that she was able to explore, and she was given opportunities, and she trained with some great dancers, and she was a tomboy, and loved the outside and the natural world, and playing. And she just loved — she had a sense of adventure and enthusiasm for life and for play. She traveled. She started, when she was designing the curriculum — because it was *her* dance department — there wasn't a dance department at the university before Elaine. And as she designed the curriculum for it, she started to add classes like the History of Dance. And so she traveled to places like Bali and had a chance to see how in different cultures dance is so intimately a part of their whole life, not something that's separate. So that's something that she internalized, and she brought back, and she shared with people, and she lived it. And then she started to study with people like Shirley MacLaine, and Jean Houston, and Robert Masters, and the Human Potential Movement.⁴ Once again, she embodied what she was learning about how we could be so much *more*. Because she really is a teacher — she's a teacher through and through: with every word she utters, she wants you to learn and grow and change, and know more and experience more. So her words are important, and the way that she expresses herself is important, so that she can do that.

CF: You said that you visited her in Hawaii. What is she doing there?

KO: Everything (more laughter)! She has done some workshops. She's met...like, there are just really interesting people on Kauai. She was able to... I don't know the right word, a shaman? A woman — if it's the same gendered name — but she introduced us because we wanted to learn Hula while we were there. And so we met at this very sacred place at sunrise so that we could learn the story of Hula. And then because we were apt students, and because of Elaine's relationship with this teacher, we were able to go to their rehearsal later in the day and actually do Hula with them. So she's doing stuff like that. She's *very* politically involved, *very* politically involved with every U.S. industrial new idea for whatever they're doing at the time, digging oil, or moving things, or fishing, or creating. She's always on top of all of the environmental movement stuff in that area, so she's really involved. There's a movement on Kauai to reinstate the King of the Island to change the way that it's governed. And so she's part of that movement as well. So she stays real busy.

CF: How would you characterize the big accomplishments of Elaine or the big challenges that she experienced? Anything that that you might mention in terms of her trajectory and her legacy...

⁴ Jean Houston is an American author involved in the "Human Potential Movement." Along with her husband, Robert Masters, she co-founded The Foundation for Mind Research.

KO: Well, I mean as far as her art and her work go, because what I was close to was the development of the curriculum and the program for the Dance Department. That was huge. And then there were also like three majors that she designed, so that was all really huge. And then the work we did with artists in the schools, so we were able to touch the lives of young people in the schools with art, which just isn't happening anymore. We worked with The Symphony, and with the Jazz Quartet, and we integrated movement and dance, and taught kids how they're connected, or how they don't have to be connected – about rhythmicity and just really fun, good stuff. The Dance Therapy program was fabulous. I loved it. In order to do that work, you kind of had to go onto a master's program, which I wasn't able to do, but a number of her students did, and are working in that field using movement as a Healing Art. So those are all really big things.

She also had a couple of... I don't know if you've talked about her family much...

CF: A little bit.

KO: She's had some great loss, and that's really affected her, too. And not necessarily in a grieving, “sad forever” kind of way, but in a “you have to keep going kind of way,” and life goes on, and what that continuum of life is, and how we move through periods of our life and... *Always*, like I said, she's always *profound*. Always. But she lost her daughter when her daughter was in, I think, her 20s. She died of cancer, and it was just heartbreaking. Her son got on a horse when he was in high school and started riding towards the West and never came back. Is that wild?

CF: She doesn't know where he is?

KO: Oh, no, they're in touch now, but he's a cowboy and he doesn't leave where he lives, so she goes and sees him once a year. And I guess they're closer than they've ever been, but that was tough. And then her husband, he died. They had been separated, but it was... She found him, and that was really tough. I was with her through those years.

CF: You've seen her at some of her highs and lows...

KO: Yeah.

CF: And that's what I was wondering about— that kind of intimate knowledge of her, and how she has handled the experiences that she's encountered.

KO: Yeah...And that's, I think, something else that I just have taken from her because we all experience loss and that becomes I think... it's just part of our lives, it's just what happens, but just how did she... I remember asking her once, because at 18, 19, 20 — those are really formative years. And I remember because she's always so profound, and what I was getting at is that whole idea of attachment, and how we are bogged down by our attachments, and how you have to be able to just let go and be free and not hang on. I learned that that was part of Buddhist teaching, and so I asked her at one time, probably when I was, like, nineteen or something, "So what *is* your religion?" (She laughs.) And I think she felt like that wasn't really her place to have that conversation with her students, you know? We would now, but I haven't needed to ask her now. I needed to ask her then, but I'm sure that some of those things were important to her. That's what got her through, whatever those beliefs were.

CF: Was it during your time of working with her that she did this work with Jean Houston, Robert Masters and Shirley MacLaine?

KO: Yeah.

CF: What did she share with you about that? What was she discovering? What was the takeaway for her, if that's a question?

KO: Well, part of it was just how human potential is just so untapped, and how we only use a small percentage of our brain, and in her mind, what was a great *untapper* of that potential is movement. So that was, for her, the connection. She also studied Feldenkrais and Alexander Techniques right around that same time. So she was using their movement techniques with the theory of the human potential movement. And so she would do things, like in some of her workshops... Really, it'd be weird, you're a dancer and you're expected to see somebody doing technique at the bar. We'd all be laying on the floor *imagining* that we were moving. You know what I mean?

CF: That's that "Imaginal Body" work...

KO: Yeah. And so she... exactly what it looks like is that you would, for instance, do a movement a few times and get a sense of that movement memory. And then you would close your eyes and you would imagine your body moving, and then you would do the movement again and you could alter... the awareness would alter how far you could go, how much mobility you had, or whatever. And then we would have conversations even about, like, motor memory for amputees, and how that could inform that field with the body, the human body and reconnecting. So, all over the place. We were all over the place, and we always were talking about writing books, or doing different things, which we never got to, but we did a lot of really good stuff.

CF: Sounds like it. And you've continued to be a part of her life since she retired.

KO: She's one of my dearest friends, yeah.

CF: And she, I understand, comes back every October.

KO: Yeah. And I always get... I don't tell anybody, but I was like, she sees me more than anybody. I'll tell you one more. This is a great story; I love this story. My birthday is May 24th, so by the end of the year, it was the end of the school year. It was always — the final concert of the year was Memorial Day weekend, my birthday weekend... like, for years of my life I gave up my birthday. So she usually would get me a gift because I was working, and I got to choose what I wanted her to make for the cast party. And most of those years I wanted her hot chicken salad, which was like the best thing I'd ever tasted in my life, but she never told me until a couple of years ago that that made her so mad because she said, "Do you know in the midst of that end of the year concert, and this show, and these four days of doing these shows, there was the hardest... I cooked all of this chicken, fresh chicken — and you had take it off the bone." She said, "It took *hours* to make this dish for you, and that's how much I love you is I made that for you almost every year for, like, ten years or whatever." So in Hawaii last year, we were going to go... oh, she does a movie night. — she has all these wonderful social things she does with people. So they do a movie night, I think, once a week, and it's different kinds movies. She had a couple of dance movies that she wanted us to see when we

were there. And she invites people over, and they bring food and wine, and so on. So we went in and she was like, "Kathy, I want you to see what the main course is." And she made the chicken salad, after years and years and years.

CF: Wow.

KO: It's very sweet.

CF: So she's just full of energy even as she's approaching 90?

KO: Oh my God! Oh, yeah. I remember maybe five years ago — because when she comes, we usually get together a couple of times and walk in the parks. That's what we like to do. Well, once she did have a hip replacement — because she was climbing a rock face in Hawaii, and fell. Yeah. That's why she had to have a hip replacement. It wasn't because she's now almost 90; it's because she fell. We were walking in the park like we usually do and she, for the first time *ever*, said, "I need to slow down a little bit." And I thought, "Wow." I think she sped back up after that — it was just a brief respite. (She laughs)

CF: One *second*!

KO: Yeah.

CF: She was human like the rest of us for one second...

KO: Right, one second (she laughs)!

CF: Was Elaine an only child?

KO: You know, I was trying to think, because she has told stories of her childhood... I want to say she had a couple of brothers. I don't think she had any sisters. I think she was a big tomboy with her brothers.

CF: What's next for her? I understand she's always looking for the next thing...

KO: She is. She's very busy right now. I just spoke with her. She's busy with planning her 90th birthday party in Kauai. They're going to do a huge celebration, and they're going to do a show, and she's got two or three routines that she's doing. Yeah. So she's practicing, she's choreographed and she's doing a comedy act, so she's getting ready for that. And then in October, she'll be here and hopefully we'll have another party and some wonderful things that will happen. She will be involved in this process for *this* project, and what else does she have going on? I'm not sure, but she's *always* busy. She will be entertaining people that are going to visit for her birthday. As I said last year, two other of our dancer buddies and I went there — we just didn't want to wait. And I think we got her all to ourselves too, so it's going to be kind of crazy this year. She also goes to Ojai, which is the... What does it stand for? It's a like a spa retreat in California. It'll come to me what it stands for, but she goes there oftentimes on her way here, and one year I met her there and spent a week — or two weeks, I guess, and that was fabulous. And it's all... you do morning meditation with a group, it's all specific routines that you do, and there's lots of classes, but it's all raw eating, lots of exercise, you do colon cleanses — it's just incredibly healthy, good living and a beautiful, beautiful place. I was so

happy to be able to do that with her one time, but she does that, usually annually, which is probably... She does some interesting health experiences that have probably kept her living healthily so long.

CF: I'm curious, I don't know how any of us could answer a question like this, but imagine your life had you not ever met her. What difference did she make to you? What did she give you, would you say? How did she transform you?

KO: You know, I say to people so often that I was blessed with this incredible sense of joy — but I don't really think that was inherent, I think that really was trained. I really think that came from Elaine. Yeah... There's not much that gets me down about anything. Everything is always an opportunity. You know? And I guess like that it's that sense of attachment — I didn't have to study Buddhism — I just studied *Elaine* to know that things just change and happen, and that it's okay to let go, and it's okay to cry, and it's okay to be where you are right where you are, and to move on. And so there's just this sense of being really, really, really alive. I notice everything — like I'm the first one to see the new green in the trees in the spring — that it's coming, that there's possibility there. And that makes me so excited and so happy. And I really think that those things are things that... they're traits that I developed because I had that special relationship with her, and that time with her. Yeah. And I love her for that, because ... because it makes me a happy person.

CF: It doesn't get better than that, I don't think.

KO: No.

CF: Do your children know her?

KO: Yeah, my daughter does. Not as well as I wish she did, but... I danced when I was pregnant, and Elaine was always very attuned to the unborn child. And then, as I said, when she invited me to come back to work, I was able to bring Kristina to the studio, which was, Oh my God! Is that fabulous? Yeah. So Kristina got to know the studio and Elaine, and that part of my life. I wish she would've known her better, but yeah.

CF: You mentioned before we started today that you sat down at McDonald's this morning and did some thinking about this, and made some notes. Did anything come up then that you haven't had a chance to say and would like to add?

KO: No, I don't think so.

CF: No?

KO: Yeah. I think just a wonderful, yeah, wonderful memories.

CF: What an extraordinary woman! I can't wait to meet her.

KO: Yeah, she is. She's just lovely. Just lovely.

CF: Oh, I did want to ask you a very mundane, specific question. When you said that she started three degree programs in the department at University of Toledo, there was Dance Therapy, but what were the other degree programs or tracks or whatever you called them?

KO: I should probably know that because I said it, but I think there was just like a Performing Arts, and then maybe Dance Education.

CF: And Dance Therapy.

KO: Yeah. I think maybe.

CF: And I understand that program hasn't really continued since Elaine retired...

KO: Oh no. No, they cut all the funding. Yeah. She built it up and then it kind of petered out. But it also was, I mean, it was a reflection of her and her enthusiasm and her skill and her talent and her work and all that — and her effort, but *really*, it's the funding. It mirrors how we've funded the arts, so it's not that surprising.

CF: (To the team): Do you have anything you want to ask? (They shake their heads.) You're good?

KO: (To the team): You're good with the faces, too. You both have gotten real good at that, right? Facial feedback.

CF: Dance faces.

KO: Yeah.

CF: Moving parts. It's been great to talk to you and learn more about Elaine Valois.

KO: You, too.

CF: It's funny, because our first interview today was with Laurie Bell, who knew her at a younger point, and then Kerri, who nominated her but studied with you. You were *her* entry, and now we're hearing *your* version. We're filling out some dimensions, but we need to meet her.

Can I ask you a last question, which is whether you have a sense... I know you have a deep *personal* sense of what she meant to yourself and to other dancers, but do you have a sense of what she did for this community or for the community of Toledo? Or dance-wise, the impact she's had in the state or beyond? I mean, obviously, she started a program and a lot of people went through it and now it's over. But I don't know, do you think she's gotten her due? Do you think people understand what she did?

KO: (Shaking her head). No...that's why this is so wonderful, and I don't know how to make it happen or how much this is going to be expanded or whatever, but one of my dreams, what I would love to do, is to have a Toledo story on PBS about her... Because I think modern dance anyways is like... it's not traditional. And so people are not really... our friends and our parents and some people would come to the shows, and so you got your fans, but I'm not sure that it was as known or accepted as it could have been *because* it's non traditional. And then Elaine was kind of non-traditional, too. People, when they would come to the shows, they would like them — but I think that she did so much, and it'd be nice if she could get more recognition for those years and what she contributed.

CF: Maybe this will be the beginning.

KO: That would be wonderful!

CF: I hope so.

KO: And what a great legacy for her 90th birthday!

CF: Yeah. That's right. Good timing!

KO: That *is* good timing.

CF: Thank you so much.

KO: You, too. This was fun.

CF: If something else comes up, please email us!

KO: Okay.

CF: ... a story, little vignette — I don't know, anything that captures her. And hopefully we'll get to meet her ourselves.

KO: Perfect.

CF: Cool. Thank you so much.