

VDC Interview Transcript  
Diane McIntyre  
GroundWorks Dance Theater  
Choreographer

7.31.18  
Total Time: 37:58

Cleveland State University  
Middough Building  
1901 E. 13th Street  
Room 255  
Cleveland, OH

**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck  
DM: Dianne McIntyre  
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)  
JD: Jane D'Angelo: (OhioDance Director)

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking with Dianne McIntyre on July 31, 2018 at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, OH and we're talking about David Shimotakahara and your work with him.

DI: Mm-hmm.

CF: I've had the pleasure of talking with David and with his general manager, Beth Rutkowski, about a month ago. But it will be interesting to hear from a fellow artist working in the same area. And I'm trying to remember the timing of when exactly you returned to Cleveland from New York...

DI: Okay. I came back from New York in 2003.

CF: Okay. So GroundWorks was already established.

DM: Mm-hmm.

CF: Of course I want to talk about the work that you made for the company, but I was wondering first if you could tell me, just as another artist in this area, how do you see the contribution of GroundWorks?

DM: I feel the contribution of GroundWorks to this area is the eclectic collection of work he does with his company. It's basically a repertory company. When I first saw it, more of the works were by David. Now, he always has works in the company; however, he also has works of various choreographers. And they're what I would call cutting-edge works. They are all works that push the boundary in terms of choreographic intent and style, and that is something very important for this region to see. Cleveland was always supportive of ballet; for many years, there was a ballet company here in Cleveland. I wasn't in Cleveland during that period, although I know it was a very popular

company, Cleveland Ballet. Most of the things they did were in a more traditional vein. So David's work, even related to contemporary or modern dance, is always pushing the envelope. Whatever you see is going to be something that's full of surprises, full of a way of exploring dance that you haven't thought of before. And the other very — I guess a *signature*, I would say, of his company — is that his dancers are extremely capable of moving from one particular style to another. If the choreographer has great athleticism in her or his work, the dancers can go there; if the people do little, minimal type of gestures, they can go there; if they have to be extremely technical in terms of traditional, I would say, modern dance technique, they can go there. If they have to be actors, if they have to be kind of dramatic, they can go there. So that is something that is very special about the company and about the dancers and about David's choice of dancers and his choice of choreographers.

But the thing is about Cleveland — because I grew up in Cleveland — Cleveland is kind of an incubator for avant-garde type of work. People wouldn't necessarily think that, if you're looking at Cleveland from the outside. When I grew up in Cleveland, it was not strange to want to be an artist. When I moved to New York, I met so many people who had to struggle with that when they were growing up: they wanted to be a dancer or a musician, or a visual artist. And the community was not supporting that. In Cleveland, you get that support: if you want to go and be an artist, people don't think you're weird; it's okay. Also, the Cleveland audience will go for new ideas in dance, in theatre, in music. So I just wanted to mention that — that it's not, like, out of the blue that this particular type of work would be happening in Cleveland. It's just that David emphasizes it, and he continues to cultivate that very daring work in his company.

CF: Fascinating, especially considering the various people we've talked to so far in Cleveland. It also seems worth mentioning that not only was it the Cleveland Ballet, but David himself came from Ohio Ballet first.

DM: Yes.

CF: And in a sense, Cleveland/Akron is getting to be almost one big city...

DI: No, it's really not. Cleveland and Akron are close in proximity, but there's not that much collaboration, I don't feel, that goes on between the two. For David, it does, because he was with Ohio Ballet; for David, there's a connection. He was in the company in which Heinz Poll<sup>1</sup> was the Artistic Director — the late Heinz Poll, so that company was based in Akron. David had that Akron connection and he's based in Cleveland/Cleveland Heights, so the two cities merge together for him. He always does work in Akron, because when he came to this country, I guess that's where he first developed his connection. And then, Cleveland is a bigger metropolitan connection, so he has his company based here and for him, the two merge — which is really great. And I guess the two merge

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<sup>1</sup> 1926 – 2006: Choreographer and co-founder, with lighting director Tom Skelton, of the Ohio Ballet. Poll was born in Oberhausen im Rheinland, Germany, where he studied acting and dance at the Folkwang School in Essen-Werden. He joined the National Ballet of Chile, performing from 1951 to 1961, when he moved to Ohio. At first using his students from the University of Akron, Poll formed the Chamber Ballet and then the professional company, Ohio Ballet. He retired as artistic director in 1999.

in terms of basketball, because that's where LeBron James was from; now, he's from Akron, and in the world of sports, the people do think of the two of them as one. So, for certain individuals, that connection exists. The thing about the company that David was in, Ohio Ballet, I used to see that company in New York when I lived in New York; I never saw them perform in Ohio. I knew they were from Ohio, but I would see them perform in various venues in New York City. The thing is, that company was very cutting-edge. Would the people dance on pointe? Not all the time. However, as a choreographer, Heinz Poll was extremely — I guess you would call him an “avant-garde” ballet choreographer. Whatever he did, it was not usually in a more traditional vein. So I guess David came from that; even though it was a ballet company, it was not what you would think of as the “run-of-the-mill” ballet company. So David already came from advanced thinking as a choreographer, as a dancer — so I think his background speaks to that.

CF: I see a lot of those connections that you've pointed out between Ohio Ballet and GroundWorks, including the fact that Ohio Ballet was also kind of a chamber company.<sup>2</sup>

DM: Yes.

CF: — and David has kept that intimate, chamber feeling in the company — although I think he might like to grow it a bit now.

Did you know David before you came back to Cleveland?

DM: No, I didn't know David before. I don't remember when I met him, but I saw his company before I actually met him. When I first returned to Cleveland, I explored and saw a lot of dance events around town. And I saw the company...I guess it could have been late 2003, but I think it was 2004. I can't remember the venue; it was some kind of intimate place, and I was very struck by the level of expertise of the dancers — just the level of the dancers, and their capabilities — and also the beauty of the work. The work was just unique. Every work on the program (she corrects herself)...no, David did not choreograph every work — because I remember there was a work by — it was a woman and I can't remember the name of the choreographer, but it had little houses on the stage, and they repeated that work about two years ago, and I was like “Wow! This company is going *beyond* the expected work of modern dance. I didn't even know what they called themselves — if they called it contemporary ballet, contemporary dance...I was very impressed by the company. And also, it was one of the first companies I had seen in Cleveland since maybe in the 80s or something, so I was also impressed that the dancers were at a level with dancers I would have seen anywhere. So I was very excited, because this was my hometown. I was like, “Alright, Cleveland! You've got some great dance here!” I saw that in GroundWorks.

CF: I wonder if that work you saw was by Gina Gibney<sup>3</sup>...

DM: No, her name had a Cornell in it...

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<sup>2</sup> Originally consisting of Mr. Poll's students at the University of Akron, where he taught ballet for many years, the company began in 1968 and was first called the Chamber Ballet. It turned professional in 1974, and was later called the Ohio Ballet.

<sup>3</sup> An Ohioan and graduate of Case Western Reserve University, Gibney formed her eponymous company in 1991 and has become a highly acclaimed choreographer and artistic director, combining social action with artistic practice.

CF: Beth Corning?

DM: Yes! Beth Corning!

CF: A fellow OSU grad.

DM: Yes.

CF: (Looking through a list of GroundWorks dances): I see it! *At Once there was a House?*<sup>4</sup>

DM: Yes! And there was a house in it. Yeah, they had props and houses in it — and in this one, they were quite character-driven, and there were some very heavy parts — heavy, and, I think family dynamics...I can't remember everything. But they revived that piece about two years ago. Very strong work.

CF: You're very busy, so how exactly did it happen that you came to be making a work for GroundWorks?

DM: Well, what it was...the way I formally met David, was through Kathryn Karipides. I've known Kathy Karipides since back in the late 1960s. I met her through the Karamu Dancers. She danced with Karamu even though she was already with Case Western Reserve, the Head of that department. I call her the "key matriarch of dance in Cleveland." So I had known Kathy for many years, I met with her when I returned here, and she said, "You know, I think you should do something for David "Shimo's" company, GroundWorks. And I said, "Oh, the company is wonderful!" So there was a reason she thought about it, because he liked using live music and I work with music. So she was the person who actually introduced us, though I had seen his company a couple of times by then. We had a couple of meetings and he didn't really know...I knew more about him than he knew about me. I knew more about him just because I had seen his company. So we had a couple of meetings over at Shaker Square, and then he invited me to do something with the company. And because he knew I liked to work with live music, he said "Was there a composer I would like to work with?" And I said "The composer I've worked with most over the last twenty years is named Olu Dara,"<sup>5</sup> and he said "Okay. So they'll have a fee for the composer, and one for the choreography." What happened was that since Olu is known particularly in the blues/jazz/folk area, David expected that he was going to have a blues band or something, but Olu and I spoke about what the piece would be like, and he said he wanted two guitarists — that was it. Two guitarists. And one or both of them were from Oberlin, these two young men. I saw one of them just a few weeks ago and since then — it's not necessarily just because of this work — he has just sky-rocketed in his career; I think he was on his way to Europe when I saw him. Or Japan. So we just made that connection, and then I started working on the piece.

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<sup>4</sup> Originally choreographed by Beth Corning for GroundWorks dance Theatre in 2004, the piece was reprised in 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Born Charles Jones III in 1941 in Natchez, Mississippi, Olu Dara Jones is an American cornetist, guitarist, and singer. He is the father of rapper Nas. Dara and Dianne McIntyre began working together in the early 1980s, and have continued through the present.

CF: What do you — I don't know if you can dig back there — it was 2009...

DM: Oh, it was? I couldn't remember what year...

CF: It may have premiered in 2010, possibly in January, but the date of the piece is listed as 2009.

DM: You could tell Jane I have a couple of pictures of the work on my website.

CF: Yes, she'll be interested in those.

DM: Yeah, you could probably lift them off. My website has a section called "Gallery," and in the gallery there is one section — he probably has formal photos of it, but these are photos from rehearsal.

CF: And It was called *Just Yesterday*.<sup>6</sup>

DM: Yes.

CF: So if you don't mind, tell me about your initial meetings with David. I understand that you decided to work with Olu, and that Olu wanted guitarists. But did David give you any parameters that you had to work within for the piece?

DM: No.

CF: He gave you free reign?

DM: Yes. He said whatever I wanted to do. Mm-hmm. He gave me free reign of whatever I wanted to do. Some Artistic Directors do have something in mind. However, David said "whatever." Just "something that reflects the type of work" that I do.

*There is a brief interruption/consultation among the staff.*

Some Artistic Directors have very specific ideas of what they ask me to do. But David said ... it was just free and open — whatever I had in mind. Do you want me to tell you a little bit about what I did?

CF: I'd love it.

DM: Okay, so what I asked the dancers to do on the first day was: "I'm going to ask you some questions, and then if you don't mind, I'm going to record what you say." And I put some kind of recorder — I can't remember, it was 2009 — if it was a phone or ... it was *not* a video. It was some kind of recording device. I posed the question to them; Olu had helped me develop the question. And the question was "Tell me a story or something about your parent or grandparent, as a child." And so I gave them about three minutes to think about it. The whole company was there, sitting in a circle in the studio. So they thought about it and we went around the circle and each of them told a

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<sup>6</sup> The piece, a collaboration between Dara and McIntyre with the GroundWorks dancers, premiered in January of 2010 at the Breen Theatre in Cleveland.

story about their grandparents or their parents. Sometimes they had to give a little background about maybe the history of the family, where they came from, and then they would just dive in. All of them were very fine story-tellers. They didn't know when they walked in the door that they were going to go there, and that was good. I didn't want them to pre-plan whatever they were going to talk about. And David was in the circle, too. I particularly wanted David to tell a story. Sometimes he talks to people, he says: "Dianne is the one – she made me dance!" (She laughs.) "She made me dance!" In that period, it was more rare that he was performing. Even though it was 2009. He was in *some* works, maybe those that had been choreographed in the past, but he was pulling out more or less and being more the choreographer. In *this* one, you know, he told the story, too. The next day, we did it again, because I wanted to know if there was anything they wanted to add, and many of them had called somebody to get some more background. They had called the parent to get more details. It was very beautiful. One of the dancers told me about, I think, more her father's side of the family, but she told me more the *backgrounds* of her mother's side. But her father, when he was...back in the day, he really loved motorcycles, and he was from that New York area: I could see the whole thing — the leather jackets, tadada, it was like he was probably in that James Dean era. And one person told the story about being with his father as a child, and the father took him — I think it was in Columbus — the father took him to a slaughter house, and the effect of him seeing what that was is something that always stayed with him. And let me see...one person told the story of her grandmother, and her grandmother on the porch —it was very delicate, and the piece we made related to that. Her grandmother...sometimes they discovered something about their parent or grandparent — they discovered something about what must have been going on for them inside, emotionally, though they had not thought about that before. So some of those things came out. And One lady talked about games that one of her parents played — very energetic. It was really fun. David's work, his story, was about his mother, who was in the internment camp in the western part of this country. I can't remember if it was here or in Canada; the people in the eastern part of this country and in Canada were not affected. So his mother was a teenager at the time, or she may have been like, 12, and he told the story of her father, his grandfather, coming to this country from Japan. I don't know, he had like \$20.00 or something? And how he had built from nothing, how he had built a business that was first based on lumber, and the demand became, actually, international. And during that internment era, all that was gone. All that. So he spoke about the story of the grandfather and his journey and the house and the everything — I guess it was, you know, the American — or the North American — dream, and they lived it. And he knew these stories from his mother, and maybe his grandfather, too. So, that was quite startling and unique, because you don't meet a person everyday, who has had that experience. And in recent weeks, people have — like, today is July 31, 2018 — in recent weeks, people have brought up that particular internment. Some people are using another word: they are like: "No, we shouldn't be calling this, where the little children from immigrants and somebody on the radio said, "No, we should just be calling this incarceration. Basically, that's what it is," and they said that's what it was back in the 1940s, with the people who were from Japan, or of Japanese descent. So then the next day, he came in with more details, because he had called his mother. And David's mother, she's at *every* concert — his mother and his sister. They come from Toronto. That's where he's from.

CF: I think maybe Montreal...

DM: Montreal. Okay, let me go back. So his mother and his sister — I've seen them at every concert, and they come from Canada to be here and support the company. It's really, you know, it's really great. The other thing, just in the history and all that, the people — like his people — they didn't carry a bitterness about it. They didn't. You know, that was what happened and they didn't carry that.

So then what I did, I developed those stories into dance. The narrative of the stories were told in different ways; sometimes it wasn't actually the person whose story it was who was telling it, and sometimes it was choral, and sometimes I had to take maybe little phrases. I always used their exact words; — I didn't make up anything in the script. They were their exact words, which we placed in different juxtapositions for the whole work. And of course there were the musicians, and Olu, he was here in person and he developed the music as we were developing the dance. So I was influenced by what he was doing in the music and he was influenced by what I was doing in the dance. We even put the musicians in the piece at one time: they had to get up off their chairs. They had to take their shoes off, and (she laughs) they were like “Oh my goodness, we have to take our shoes off!” It was a lot of fun. It was very different for their audience; it was very different from the other works that they had in their repertoire at that time.

CF: Thank you. What vivid memories of things that happened almost ten years ago!

DM: Yes.

CF: I was wondering if you would back up a step. When you and Olu were talking prior to you meeting the dancers, what were your working ideas? What prompted you to bring in the request for stories from the grandparents or the parents?

DM: Well, because this was some type of work that I already do. I love to work that I call Dance Theatre, Choreo Drama, and the thing is that back in the day, I thought that I had made this up, and then, reading — I get American Theatre magazine, and they call this devised theatre. I'm like, “I've been doing this for a long time!” And it did not have a name when I started, so back in the 90s when I started, the first one was based on stories of the people in the Carolinas, in the Gullah tradition; I had visited there, I had stories from there, and I also had a book from there, so I collaborated then with a playwright, OyamO<sup>7</sup>, and he developed a script that had a lot of opening in the script. So then I developed a lot of dance, but I had dance, theatre, vocalist — and some people did some things better than the other. So that was the first work I did. I called it *In Living Color: A Gullah Story*<sup>8</sup>. I was just going to call it *In Living Color*,<sup>9</sup> however, there was a TV show at the same by that name. And when I put it in my bio and people would say, “Oh, you worked on that show?” So I had to make a subtitle for it. Then the next works I made — I've done three more works like that, and that one was performed both in a dance setting in New York, and in a theater setting. I was connected with a theatre called Theater of the First Amendment<sup>10</sup>. It was based at George Mason University, and it closed about four years ago. It was a professional theatre like at Yale, or in Boston where there is a professional theatre company within the university and all professionals come — an equity theatre.

So I've done a couple of things there. It first started in a modern dance setting, I think at Tribeca. We did it first, and then it had a run there. It had a set, and it was like “Oh, this is fantastic!” So then

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<sup>7</sup> Born Charles F. Gordon in Elyria, Ohio in 1943, OyamO is an American playwright and professor. He is currently a writer-in-residence at the University of Michigan.

<sup>8</sup> Choreographed in 1988, the piece premiered at the War Memorial Building, Trenton, NJ

<sup>9</sup> An American sketch comedy television series that originally ran five seasons from 1990 to 1994.

<sup>10</sup> A theatre company founded at George Mason University in 1990, closing in 2012.

I did another work that I started there — they were stories of my father, growing up in Cleveland. I had been interviewing my parents for years, then I formally interviewed my father, and we did a piece called *I Could Stop on a Dime, and Get Ten Cents Change*.<sup>11</sup> I started it there at Theater of the First Amendment, then it came to Cleveland, performed at Cleveland Playhouse,<sup>12</sup> which was like, “Oh!” So it was the same thing: I interviewed my father and then I translated it into dance and theatre. I make movement commentaries on the actual storytelling. So [it was the] same — I did that with the works for David’s company. They’re telling me stories, but I imagine what must be behind the story — and that part, the emotional part, comes through in the movement. The most recent one I’ve done is called *Open the Door, Virginia*.<sup>13</sup> It’s about the Civil Rights experiences and legislation in Virginia. I interviewed people about that, and I did that at Theatre of the First Amendment, and still need to explore how to have it done some more. So, I already had that tradition, and Olu has done the music for some of those. So I said, “What am I going to do with them? I want something different from what their work is usually like.” And so he talked about “Well, you can interview the people,” and I said, “What question am I going to ask them?” See, the other things that I did, like my father, it was just his life — he just told me stuff. Even *Open the Door, Virginia* was very specific. There were school closings, and I asked people what that was like for them: there were specifics. All I had to say was “Tell me. What were you doing back in 1951, about the school?” For this, I had to come up with a specific question. I said, “What am I going to ask them about?” And he said, “Well, ask them about ...” Olu had the answer. I said ask them something about when they were children or something. He said, “Ask them about their parents or grandparents *as* children, and see what they come up with.”

CF: I read an interview with Olu recently, and he said that his ideas — his work — is usually based on family, children and food.

DM: It is! He likes to put food in his music, yes! (Laughing) It’s funny! It’s true. Yes...

CG: I believe I also read that this piece came together in a three-week residency. Is that right?

DM: Mm-hmm. Yes.

CF: So, you and Olu, three weeks...full days with the dancers?

DM: Mm-hmm. Usually we rehearsed from 12:00 to 5:00, Monday through Friday, our rehearsal period. I think they had class earlier, but then I would give them a warm-up, even though they’d had class, so they would get into my style. Yeah, so it worked out. The thing is that over time, they only could do the work so long because there were people in the company that changed. At first, when one young man changed, we continued the work by transferring it to another person — we asked the permission of the young man who was gone — if his work could still be continued. He said, “Oh, sure.” So, for that one, it was just like you have a new dancer in the company and they learn

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<sup>11</sup> The piece premiered at Cleveland Playhouse in 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Playhouse Square, located in downtown Cleveland, Ohio, is the “world’s largest theater restoration project,” and the country’s largest performing arts center outside New York City (eclipsed only by Lincoln Center), as well as Northeast Ohio’s home for touring Broadway shows, concerts, comedy, opera, dance and children’s programming. Playhouse Square, founded in 1921, currently draws more than 1 million people annually to its ten performance spaces.

<sup>13</sup> Premiered in 2005 at Theater of the First Amendment at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA.



the moves. For this, it was the same; he just learned some of the words. But after that, there were a number of changes happening, so we didn't continue with the work after that. So that's something to think about when you have... And these other pieces I've done, they've been in theatre settings, so it runs for a month or a month and a half with the same company. Though when I did the piece *I Could Stop on a Dime*, I did it in three theatres, and each time the cast was a bit different, but you know, there was time, mm-hmm, to do that. But these are the people's actual stories; you don't want to get too far away from where it's their actual story.

CF: It's like a built-in limitation, or...

DM: Yeah (laughing), it's a built-in limitation!

CF: ... of devised work.

DM: Yes. Yes.

CF: That's all very helpful, thank you. Wasn't there also a master class? You did a Master Class for the public as part of the GroundWorks outreach?

DM: Well, maybe I did, but I don't remember. (She laughs.)

CF: I thought I read that... That's okay — you've probably done so many, they run together. I'm aware that our time is up... Is there anything else that maybe you'd like to say or add about GroundWorks in Cleveland, or about your work with David, for example?

DM: Well, one thing I would like to say is that even when David and I are not working together, we're colleagues. We always keep up with each other. We always keep up with each other about what's happening, about what new thing he's working on, what's the new thing I'm working on. I've been at his home; his wife, Pandora,<sup>14</sup> is a *wonderful* theatre artist, and we're always talking — and sometimes we're not even talking about our *own* work, but about this and that, and this and that. So we're not only colleagues — we're friends. And I really appreciate that. That's one of the things that's helped, really, me being in this community, having a friend like David, another artist-friend.

CF: Wonderful. Thank you!

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<sup>14</sup> Pandora Robertson currently co-directs the Ohio City Theater Project and works as a database applications developer and administrator at Case University. A former dancer, Robertson met Shimotakahara as a dance student and migrated with him to Ohio Ballet where they were both chosen as company members under the late Heinz Poll.