

VDC Interview Transcript
Beth Rutkowski
GroundWorks Dance Theater
General Manager

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Key:

CF: Candace Feck
BR: Beth Rutkowski
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)
JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking with Beth Rutkowski at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, OH on June 18, 2018.

From exported audio film footage:

CF: It's a pleasure to meet you, and having just spoken with David Shimotakahara, I wondered if your relationship came out of the Cleveland Foundation think tank.¹

BR: No, but for me, that experience happened almost immediately at the time that GroundWorks hired me. So GroundWorks had already been selected to be in that cohort of organizations, but the work hadn't begun yet. And I came on board in, I think, July of 2011, and the process began in August, or something like that — so I had to catch up quickly on what it was going to be, but for the most part, it was just the *opportunity* for us to engage with other organizations that were some similar [ones], some not so similar, in kind of thinking about *our* organization as it went into the future. So from “day one,” it was a part of my work, which was really advantageous for us; you know, as I would imagine, for other organizations, it would be something that you would have to add in to your day-to-day operations, and since mine were just beginning, it was a part of that — it was already baked in from the beginning. So we spent four years going to monthly sessions, workshops, meetings — sometimes they were half-day, sometimes they were all-day. The Cleveland Foundation brought in a number of different experts, and then we got consultation, specifically for our organization, along with all of this work.

¹ A reference to the program called *Engaging the Future*, a Cleveland Foundation program that ran from 2011 to 2013, to help local organizations better adapt to quickly changing demographics and technologies and competing entertainment opportunities. Program funding allowed participating local organizations the flexibility to pursue innovative strategies to become relevant for more people.

CF: Amazing!

BR: Yeah, so rarely are you given, or do you take the time, especially as a small organization, to stop working, think about what the future holds, think about what you envision for the organization — and it's so critically important! So they gave us that time. Yes, it was a requirement that we attend these things, but for us it made us stop everything else and made us go in and focus on the future. And it was extremely beneficial.

CF: I bet! And what was the name of that program?

BR: “Engaging the Future,” which we lovingly called ETF — and still do. But it really shaped so much of how we think of ourselves as an organization. For *me*, it was all new — it was about becoming part of GroundWorks, and helping GroundWorks get where it wanted to go. For David, though, it really was a time for him to *shift* his thinking and to *rethink* where they had been for thirteen years, and where he wanted to be for the next generation. So it was really beneficial for him to be able to *stop* and just say “I want to rethink about how my organization engages with and impacts this community that we’re in.” As you can imagine, if you’re the founding artistic director of an organization, it can get going and it can just flow along on what it is and what’s working, without really stopping to think “Okay, where do we actually want to be?” So that’s what it did for him, and he began to see the organization in really a different light — I think primarily for him, and he may have talked a little bit about this — he was really focused on the artistic product, and really *that* being the highest quality. And he was able to shift that thinking, “We’ve got that, we’ve developed that artistic product that we’re proud of — we know how to do that — how can we bring others *into* that in a way that we haven’t been able to do?” And then having me onboard full-time to help implement the things that he wanted to do, added to the whole process and made it really possible.

CF: So you had been hired right before ETF...

BR: Mm-hmm.

CF: But how did *that* come about? I know you were with the Tri-C Jazz Festival² — you had experiences with really large organizations.

BR: Yes, I did.

CF: Can you talk about coming into a smaller operation? And also how that happened.

BR: So, David and I had known each other in the arts community as arts leaders for a number of years, mostly just as acquaintances, really — I knew about his organization, and he knew a little about me and the work that I’d done. We had just started serving on an executive committee of the

² Founded in 1980 by Dr. Thom Horning and Reginald Buckner, the 41st annual Tri-C JazzFest Cleveland will take place at Playhouse Square June 25-27, 2020, featuring nearly 500 artists who will perform indoors and outdoors for three nights and two days playing world-class jazz and other genres.

Cleveland Arts Education Consortium,³ which is basically a networking organization of about seventy-five/eighty different arts organizations — the executive committee is made up of about 8-10. I had been on it for a number of years, and he had just come on that committee. So we got to know each other a little bit better through that, and I found out that he was looking for a General Manager — he was looking for another senior-staff level person who could take over the administration part of things and could really oversee everything but the art of it. I had been with the Tri-C Jazz Fest for seven years, and prior to that I was with Beck Center for the Arts⁴ for about five years. And my family was starting to get a little older — my girls were in second and fourth grade, and my husband and I decided that we wanted someone to be home a little bit more. And the Tri-C Jazz Fest was a great organization, but it didn't offer me that opportunity — the schedule was a little more rigid. Working within the institution of a college also requires a lot of structure and a lot of time — and there's a culture there that just doesn't... have a lot of flexibility. So, even though it kind of sounds like “Oh, you run a *Jazz* Fest. Things are loose and easy all the time.” It really isn't, it really wasn't. So we decided that one of us needed to be home a little bit more as the girls were getting older, so I was starting to look. And I was starting to do some interviews, and look around... I was thinking that maybe something part-time in my field if it were available could really work out well, because then I didn't have to leave my field that I had been in, but I could still.... So I heard that David had been looking for about a year, and had not found...and he had kind of a conundrum for himself, because he really needed someone with experience, who had a *range* of experience, but he didn't have a whole lot of funds to be able to find that experienced person. So we talked, and I said “I'm looking for more flexibility, and I'm willing to take, you know, less pay than what I have had, and work full-time as long as I can build some flexibility into it, and he said, “Well, your level of experience is what I'm looking for.” So...we worked it out. You know, sometimes things happen like that: you can look at applications or you can fill out applications and you can look at job descriptions, and you can get all of these things worked out in kind of the process, but sometimes when you just sit down and talk to somebody that you know and you just sort of build that trust — I think he also thought that my work in the Jazz Fest was much more involved in the artistic planning of it, and it wasn't at all. I had done all of the outside administration stuff, so budgets and grant-writing and finance and scheduling and things like that — and he was interested in that.

CF: Could you be specific about some of the take-away from that *Engaging the Future* experience that you have really brought into your work — the big learning outcomes...

³ The Cleveland Arts Education Consortium (CAEC) was established in 1999, and has been in-residence at Cleveland State University since 2008. Membership is open to all Cuyahoga County 501(c)(3) organizations engaged in arts education activities within the county and Northeast Ohio for a minimum of two years. Its mission is to work as a partnership to promote and strengthen art education in Northeast Ohio and to advocate on behalf of arts learning for people of all ages and circumstances.

⁴ Founded in 1929, Beck Center for the Arts in Lakewood, Ohio, is a non-profit performing arts and arts education organization. It is the largest theater and arts center on Cleveland's West Shore, educating and entertaining over 65,000 people per year. On its 3½ acre campus, Beck Center houses two stages producing live theater for children, teens and adults; two gallery spaces, and over thirty classrooms for educational programming for children and adults. It offers classes in visual arts, music, theater and dance, and hosts the longest running youth theater program in the United States, running for nearly sixty years.

BR: So, I think the biggest the thing, the shift in our thinking was about how we could use the creative process that the company had developed over the thirteen years of its existence, that process that they would bring into the studio to make new dance, with David or with an outside choreographer or with each other — that creative process: how could we use that to actually tap into the creative thinking of the general public? Is there a way to use that to really encourage and even in some ways *curate* the creative thinking of other people, whether it be children in K-12 schools or whether it be senior adults. We've done a lot of work with college students — maybe dance, maybe non-dance — because the *creative* process is something that we had felt over the years had translated to a lot of different populations. So, how could we actually use that? Not *abandon* it in any way to try and grow an organization that has a bigger impact on the community, but actually take that, which was at the core of what GroundWorks was, and use that to reach out and draw people in. So, we just started looking at everything through that lens, and it really has developed in a number of ways with different types of programming that we have tried out in the community, and it just is a kind of lens through which we examine everything.

CF: Could you offer an example of that?

BR: A couple of really great examples, but they're very different. We have a program that we've instituted in the last four or five years called Action/Reaction, which specifically connects with some kind of population that is in *some* creative pursuit, but not dance. We started working with college students with this — we'd go into the classroom — obviously with the blessing of the professor — and we'd do a movement workshop with them, and maybe it was a Poetry class, or a Drawing class, and they would have to kind of get out of their own minds, get out of themselves, and *move*, in a way — but what we were *teaching* them was how to tap into creativity in the way that we do. Then, the second part of that is that they would come and they would watch a rehearsal, and watch our creative process in practice, and then they would have the chance to ask questions and to interact with the dancers, and maybe with the choreographer, whoever is there— or if it's David. And then they see a performance, so they see our final product of our final process. And the final piece is their *reaction*, and is *their* creative product, their final product that has been inspired and informed by what they've learned through this process. And invariably, practically 100% of the people who have participated in that have come away with a new understanding of their own creativity. Most go into it thinking that there is no connection between what they do and dance. They don't see that. And when they come out of it, they realize that there *is* a connection, and that there is something to be learned by expanding their knowledge about how creativity works — expanding the way that they look at their own creative pursuits. So that's an example — and one of the reasons why I love that one so much is because it has crossed over so many different types of groups and populations. It's a small project, so we will work with fifteen, maybe twenty people at a time... but it has a deep impact. And I think that's one of the things that GroundWorks really believes in; we're not as much interested in having kind of a shallow impact on thousands and thousands of people... What we *really* like, what we really appreciate — and this, again, harkens back to *our* creative process in the studio — we like going deep with just a few people, and we find that it makes a long-lasting impact, and really can be transformational.

The second example I was going to mention that puts this practice into life is our Benefit. We have an annual Benefit; it's called "It Takes Two," and it is at *completely* the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of the types of activities, because it's very high-end: it takes place at the Cleveland Museum of Art, a very high-priced ticket — but what we do — it's put together kind of like *Dancing with the*

Stars.⁵ We select celebrities from the area, and we pair them up with one of our dancers, just like they do on *Dancing with the Stars*, and they go through this process of actually creating a dance or theatrical performance, and in the process, they are also raising money for us because they're getting people to support *them* — because it's a contest. But what happens that's so unique about this — because on the surface it's fun and it's light and it raises a lot of money — but when you go a little deeper to what these folks are experiencing, the celebrities, once they come in and work with our dancers — they only have about five or six rehearsals with the dancers, so they don't spend lots of time, but they have to come *out* of themselves. Whatever it is that they do in life — and oftentimes they're coming straight *from* whatever it is they do in their lives, so their coming from the office, or maybe they come and they do this before they go in to their office — and these are fairly influential, kind of “high rollers” in the community — and it completely takes them out of themselves and connects them through movement into something that they hadn't tapped into — maybe ever, or maybe not in a while. And it can be utterly transformational for them. And through the experience, we're able to continue staying connected with them because they've been moved and changed in a way that all of a sudden there's a new aspect to their lives that they didn't realize was there. Many of them have come on to our board as board directors; in fact, right now we have five out of seventeen directors on our board who were prior celebrity dancers. And when they come onto our Board, they're making a big commitment at that point in time. You know, they've made sort of a small commitment, but it's transformed them in a way that was meaningful, and then they decide to stay connected with GroundWorks because they believe in what we do.

CF: I know that right now you're trying to hire someone to work with you — is it an Education and Outreach position?

BR: Right. So, we have a couple of positions that we are looking to fill right now. We've had an Education Outreach Coordinator almost from the beginning of our organization... David developed our methodology and our philosophy. A dancer who danced with the company for a number of years retired, but stayed connected and came on into that role, and had been doing it with GroundWorks as the dancers are participants in all of our education and outreach, so he moved into that role. It was seamless, it was easy — and he stayed with it for all of these years. He moved with his family in January, so now the position became open, and it allowed us to kind of rethink it a little bit and how we may take it forward in the future, how it might ultimately become a full-time position as we are working to make a greater impact, a larger impact in the community. So we're working to fill that position, and the title of it is now Education and Community Engagement Coordinator, and it will start off part-time but we hope it will eventually work into something that's a little bit more full-time. And then we also have had a Development Director position, which we did fill for a while and then the position became vacant again, so we're looking to refill that position, and all of this is happening somewhat at the same time. So we have to pace ourselves, and we have to be really honest about that; as much as we would like to absolutely fill things in right away and hit the ground running, that's not realistic — and what will happen is we won't find the right fit. You know, David's personality, both as a person, an artist and as an organizational leader — he has a

⁵ Now in its 29th season, *DWTS* is an American dance competition television series that premiered in 2005. The format of the show consists of a celebrity paired with a professional dancer. Each couple performs predetermined dances and competes against the others for judges' points and audience votes. The couple receiving the lowest combined total of judges' points and audience votes is eliminated each week until only the champion dance pair remains.

very thoughtful process, so he takes a lot of time to make sure that it's the right combination of whatever is involved, and so we spend a lot of time thinking through, and not jumping in to things too quickly. And I am appreciative of that, because in the end, it makes for a stronger — you know, whatever it is that we're trying to do, it makes it a stronger part of the organization. So, those are a couple of positions that we hope by the end of the calendar year will be filled with people ready to be a part of GroundWorks in a major way.

CF: You've described how it is that you and David came to an agreement that you would have this more flexible position and you would transfer your skills to this smaller organization. What's it been like for you? What have you learned? What is it that you find compelling about this work?

BR: So many things! The main thing is that I just really believe very strongly in what the organization is about. It's about creating new work, and it's about creating work that is of the highest caliber and it's done right here in northeast Ohio. And I think that has somewhat of a unique aspect to it and we believe — and I completely agree with this — that work made here has its own voice. So it could be the same choreographer that works out of New York or works out of LA or something like that, but when they come here and they're in *our* setting, they have a different voice with our dancers. David works with choreographers who come in and they need to take time to learn our company members to get to know them before they can really get started creating a piece, so it really grows so organically out of whatever it is that they're bringing to the studio. And I think that mirrors the organization itself: over the years, it has just grown organically as things have been added, as we've been able to support them, as they've been needed, and in a way that is aligned with the overall philosophy, and the overall methodology that GroundWorks takes into everything that it does. I just find as an administrator, when something is put together that is that well-aligned, at least in thought and in philosophy, you can really grab hold of it, and you can make it work in a way that has a very strong future. Too many times, organizations — and I've been a part of organizations like this, and I certainly have seen it from the outside — spend their time kind of chasing after whatever is next, chasing after the closest opportunity, chasing after the money — whatever it is. And I can completely understand that. It's very easy to get caught up in that. But this organization really holds strong to its tenets from the beginning — its core beliefs and philosophies and strategies, even. So, for me as an administrator and as someone who is coming in to an organization, that's critically important, and being in alignment is of the most importance for an organization: you can't build a capacity if you don't know where you're headed and why you're headed there. So the same thing is true as we look at board members, as we try to reach out to audiences, as we create new programming and then as the artistic product continues to develop and grow.

CF: I'm thinking about the word "strategies," and wondering if you could make it concrete. Could you give an example of a strategy that applies to the create process in the studio but also serves as this kind of through-line through your organization?

BR: Let me think...

CF: What you're suggesting is that it's like one grand piece of fabric here, with multiple threads, but they all come back to core principles, beliefs, strategies...

BR: So I'm going to try to do that without rambling. One strategy that is based in the core principles of GroundWorks is that any time that we are looking to bring in new board members or new staff members — and in my role, I spend a lot of time working with the board, and of course any

administrative staff that we have, even if they're outside contractors — but the strategy that we are seeking with folks — and the same strategy applies when David is looking for new dancers — is an openness of spirit to bring in their own creative gifts, whatever they are. So, if it's a board member, we may be looking for someone with an accounting background, we need a CPA on the board, but we're also looking for the person who has somewhere along the line tapped into their own creativity, and they have interest beyond, and that way they're able to connect with GroundWorks not just in their area of expertise, but in understanding and appreciating artistically what we're trying to do. It makes for such a more solid relationship because they're able to see the organization as a whole. We need them to keep track of what their expertise is, we bring them on to help us stay on track with whatever that might be, but we want them to see the organization as a whole and really help us think creatively about where we want to be and where we want to go. Even with staff members: I have an office assistant now who came with some general clerical work but is also a visual artist and so she looks at the things we do in the office through a creative lens, so we problem-solve, creatively —and again, this is just an essential way, especially with a small organization. You know, we don't have departments, we don't have a staff that's large enough to even be divided into departments, so we have to all wear a lot of hats just like a lot of organizations do, and we have to kind of move agilely from one thing to the next. So it really requires creative problem-solving and thinking about not just how to solve *this* problem or how to attack this particular thing that's coming up, but looking at it across the board and how can it connect to something else in the organization that may again help solve the problem, and maybe just look at it from a different angle and try to really see things as a whole so that we're not just isolating something. So if this is an area that we want to go into, what do we have in another part of the organization that can help us get there that can connect us in a way that affects the whole organization, and not just something in isolation. It's the same thing when David hires a dancer to come into the studio: we've had the luxury of having long-lasting relationships with professional dancers. A couple just retired who'd been with us for fifteen and seventeen years — which is kind of unheard of in the field these days. So over the last five to seven years, we've hired more dancers. We've had more come in and stay for a couple of years — maybe five years. So David is looking for dancers who have the highest level of training and the highest level of technical skill in dance; there's a standard that he can't go below — but at the *same* time, he really needs dancers who have an open mind, who can go into the studio with nothing. Maybe he gives them a phrase, a word phrase, or some kind of a movement motif. He needs folks who are comfortable with starting from nothing and building something — and every dancer is not built that way. So he's looking for a very special type of person. That's the same type of person that we're looking for in everything that we do. So when we're looking for an Education Director, we're not looking for someone who just has this dance education background and who knows how to teach or who knows how to administratively lead an education program. We need someone who comes at it with an open mind, who's willing to start from nothing, who's willing to start and build something that grows up naturally. Again, with a board member, you know, we want them to be willing to come in to something and bring their gifts, but go into it with us from nothing, and help us to build it, to build whatever it is that we're doing — whether it's our Benefit or it's a new project — or anything! You know, build it up with an open mind and with a sense of creativity.

CF: Interesting. Could you talk a little bit about highlights, major landmark accomplishments or exciting developments? It could be in the seven years that you've been with the company, or it could be over the company's whole existence — what you know of it. Could you point to certain key events or developments or works, and so on?

BR: Yes. So one of the other core principles of GroundWorks is collaboration. The creative process in the studio is based in collaboration. Some of the things that have been really exciting that have happened over the years are when we've looked to collaborate with other organizations. And we take with us into a collaboration the same sense of openness and looking for what might develop out of it, versus going into it with kind of a set plan. There was a work that David created about four years ago — between three and four years. It was the better part of a year in process, but we were connected with a string quartet through...we had been at a conference and had met their agent, who connected us with them: a young group of players who were actually in residence at Juilliard at the time. And David started talking with them about collaborating on some kind of work, and so then the next step was to bring in a composer, so we selected a composer that the quartet had worked with. So then the idea was to do something around the 150th anniversary of the Civil War; that was going to be the high theme somewhere along the way. The composer and David did some research into some photographs at the Library of Congress, and these were actual photographs of people during that period, and they focused in on the people. And so they created a new work, new music — the composer's name is Stephen Snowdon.⁶ David created choreography that went with it, and these things were created simultaneously. The quartet — the Aeolus Quartet⁷ — was a part of the building of this piece. We brought them into Cleveland for quite a length of time, and we also added a video component — an installation there in the work — that could highlight some of these photographs, and there were some other video aspects of it, too, but it could at least give a sense of some of these photographs. So, it was an amazing piece in that it had so many different elements to it. And the video installation was shown on — our set builder built a screen, but it was on the frame of a house, a house frame, with a sheet over it — and in the course of the piece toward the end, with almost a kind of a marionette mechanism, the house started collapsing. So that by the end of the piece, the house has fallen, the video is down, whatever dancers are left on stage, and the quartet is still there. It was really such a moving piece. And the way that it all came together wasn't easy. It was challenging! The Quartet was in New York, the composer was in Texas, our company is here in Cleveland, and the video artist was also located in New York. So it was a lot to coordinate, but the end result was something that was so moving and spectacular, and it was very, very unique. I know there are dance companies that do things with multi-media presentations, but the way that this was done with live musicians on stage and video and new music, it was really quite an accomplishment to have brought all of that together.

CF: This seems a moment for you as a company, with departing dancers who have been with you almost from the beginning — even, as you said, the departing education person — lots of new people coming in...it's exciting, but it must be a bit daunting. Could you talk about hopes and dreams, or characterize this new moment? What are you hoping to accomplish, going forward?

BR: Well, it did kind of converge. It wasn't something that we were expecting, or planned. So while it could be daunting, we also see it as an opportunity. As I said, we have a strong sense of understanding our own principles, so whether it's about collaboration, risk-taking, new thought, new creation — all of these things are at the heart of what we do. And sometimes it can be refreshing and fun to bring someone brand new into something that feels very strong and very well-developed,

⁶ a freelance composer currently based in Boston, Snowdon is, among other things, the co-founder/director of the Fast Forward Austin Music Festival.

⁷ Formed in 2008, the Quartet is comprised of violinists Nicholas Tavani and Rachel Shapiro, violist Caitlin Lynch, and cellist Alan Richardson.

and to see how they fit into that and what they bring to it. So I look at this also as an opportunity for us to have a fresh and new look. The dancers that we brought in are young, they're diverse, and they're very, very excited to be here and be a part of what they see as a strong, fairly well-organized organization. And I really enjoy helping them find their place in the organization. I want the dancers — whom I don't see on a day-to-day basis — they're in the studio working hard — but I want them to feel like they're a part of who we are as a whole. Again, when we're small like this, it takes everybody; it takes everybody to work together and, you know, go at it from a singular kind of mindset. So I find it really refreshing, exciting — yes, you have to stop, and you have to rethink, and you have to be open to new possibilities, so you may have to do things differently than you've done before. But I really find that exciting; I pride myself on being able to adapt quickly to things, and so it really doesn't throw me off. I think communication is absolutely key in the midst of all of this — that we are communicating with the people that we're talking to about coming into this organization, or are thinking about, we're communicating with our board members so that they know exactly what's going on. And, you know, if you looked at it from the outside, you might say "Everything is falling apart!" Everyone is leaving!" But it's not that way at all, you know — so keeping in mind the big picture. I think communication really helps us do that successfully.

CF: I think toward the end of our conversation, David alluded to the possibilities of perhaps moving to a new home for the company. (There is a burst of noise in the hallway outside our door.) I thought that he was gesturing towards the consideration of a free-standing building as a new home for the company. Of course, that's a huge undertaking, so I was just wondering ... in a sense, my meta-question has to do with big challenges ahead, or projects that you're working toward, and that one came up because I didn't get to pursue it further with David.

BR: I mean, it does seem like that is the next logical step for this organization. There's a certain advantage to being spread out in multiple places, kind of using or renting other people's spaces: it keeps us light, it keeps us lean, we have very low overhead, and so those are the things that are the upside of that, for sure. On the other hand, the downside is that we don't have a home. And we don't have one location where we can come together, convene — see each other, even. So when you talk about what *our* needs are as an organization — could we — and I know we *could* be — a more cohesive organization if we were all kind of, at least, coming to the same place every day, even just in the same space. The other side of that — and I think a lot of it is about what we see for ourselves in the future — we want to continue to stay this very dynamic, new work-based artistic organization. And we recognize that what we do on stage *may* not have an enormous mass appeal — although I never find people who on some level don't really appreciate what is happening on the stage — but we're looking at "What is it that we can be for the northeastern Ohio community, as an organization?" In terms of even *beyond* the arts. Can we be a community resource? Can we be a convener? In some of our work with the Cleveland Foundation's Engaging the Future project, we did some experimenting with that. Could we be a convener of conversations, could we be a thought-leader in the [community]. And it turned out that we really could! We were able to kind of cast our line very far out from what we do on a day-to-day basis, and just experiment. This program opened that up for us. So then we spent time trying to connect that back in to what we *do* on a day-to-day basis. And we think that this idea of creation and collaboration...there's a very strong need in this community for a place to do those things. Not just dance — it's what *we* do, but what about music? What about theatre? There are a number of places in the community that open themselves up as laboratories for visual arts, so that seems to be working pretty well. But there isn't that kind of incubator-space, or laboratory space, for the performing arts — not one, at least, that's affordable.

So we wonder if — and again this goes back to taking our creative process and philosophy, and making an impact in the community — can we provide space for other creators to come in and make new work? Could we provide a space that even has technological outfitting so that they can really do what they need to do? We've done some research, we've done some survey work, and there definitely is the need, but the challenge of that is that what we're talking about is doing something beyond what GroundWorks is doing right now. It totally changes the business model, and it changes in a lot of ways who we are as an organization. It wouldn't change who we are as an artistic organization or as the creator of an artistic product, but it would change who we are in the community. And I think that's very attractive to us — challenging, absolutely — but the idea of being that leader, that community resource, and helping the creative community have a place to work, we believe what that would do for all of northeast Ohio could be really transformational. When artists come here and they relocate to Cleveland — and we find this to be true because most of the dancers that we hire are not originally from here, so they're relocating into our community and they're with us, you know, at least twenty hours a week — so we're giving them this, and then they say, "Okay, what else? What else is there for me?" And so we want to try to help find that: "What is there?" And not just for dancers, but for musicians, as well. There are a lot of makers in this community, and there are a lot of people who are interested in what's new and what's coming and what is original. So if we can help kind of open that up and give people a place to think about doing that, we think it does great things for the community. And we think we're the organization that can actually make that happen.

CF: Exciting! Where do you think you are on that trajectory?

BR: Well, we've looked at buildings, and we've looked at spaces inside of buildings that we would, you know, share space, and we have talked with some of the major funders, who are encouraging and supporting of the concept. As I said, we take things slowly and thoughtfully — because the last thing we want to do is put the organization at risk or in jeopardy by jumping into something that isn't ready to happen. So, we've identified what we find to be an interesting space/location because of where it is in the area, and what neighborhood it is in.... So I think right now it is about partnerships — strategic partnerships, and we've started to build those, and we're continuing to build those. We're still kind of making the case — and I just want to be really honest about that. We're making the case *for* the concept and for GroundWorks being the organization to carry out the concept. And again, we're taking time to do that. You know, I can talk about it and explain it and kind of give my — but if we can really put it on paper, and get it thoroughly articulated in a way that makes a lot of sense to the people who would be affected.... For instance, if we're talking about being a convener and being a place to provide collaboration, we need to make sure that our case statement speaks to those people who might use the space, who might support others who use the space. If we want to be a neighborhood resource for the neighborhood that we're in, we need to make sure that it speaks to that community and to that population, as well. So that when we state the case, it is easy for someone from the outside to read it and say "Oh, okay. This is not just about GroundWorks getting a new studio to rehearse in," because if we're not careful, that's what people will see immediately. They'll go "I know GroundWorks, I know what GroundWorks needs." So we need to get out of that, and we feel like the best way to do that will be to really make a strong case that crosses all of the concepts that we're considering. So that's where we are: we're building the case and we're starting to identify partners that might be a part of this with us.

CF: How many locations are you actually in right now? It's not just here at CSU...where else are you?

BR: We also rent studio space in Shaker Square from a community dance school. And during the Fall — we're able to be at CSU in the summer, full-time — during the Fall and Spring, because of the CSU's Dance Department's class schedule, we're here three days a week, and then we're at this space that we rent two days a week. Our performances are in various locations all over, so we find ourselves there, you know, the week before a performance — and that will never change, even if we are to get our own space and have our own building that we use and others use — it wouldn't become a performance space, at least for us. We're still very interested in being out in the community, and putting performances in places, in neighborhoods where people are. And we have office space that is also located in the Shaker Square area, so it's in the same block with the space that we rent during the Fall and Spring. So that has a connection there. When the company is there in rehearsal, I can pop over and say hi, and you know, get papers signed and things like that. So those are the places where we are. Our board meetings happen at two different locations of board members' offices, and so we kind of bounce around there as well. But again, the upside of that is that it keeps us agile...

CF: I would say agility seems to be the through-line for everything that you do!

BR: Yes!

CF: I meant to ask David about this, but we didn't have time to get to it. The emphasis on new creation, which is so important to GroundWorks: does that mean that you don't keep an active repertoire of works? Do you bring works back, along with new ones? What's the balance there?

BR: Right. So we do have rep that we bring back occasionally — and the balance typically is always one new work on any program — and most oftentimes, two new works — and then something that we've brought back from rep. And that's generally the way our programming works. We have, on occasion, depending on the size of the new work, and maybe the amount of rehearsal that it's going to take, we might bring in a couple of pieces from rep. However, with new company members, it might be rep, but it's new to *them*, so it's still new work — and it looks different on different company members. Sometimes, what we will do is, if a choreographer has created new work on the company in the past, we will bring them back in to restage it on a new company. We do that quite often, actually. We bring them in for a week, or maybe it's something that only takes a few days, but *because* they spent their time, and their creative energy went toward the dancers who were in the room at that moment, we want to be able to give them the opportunity to do that again. Not to recreate it, but to restage it and rework it on a different set of dancers. And that takes a lot of time in the studio. We spend a lot of time in the studio. And that's the only way that it gets done. That's how it happens.

CF: Sure!

(To Megan David Bushway): Do you have anything you'd like to ask?

MDB: I'm just curious...I'm sure you see a lot of dance in Cleveland. Just as someone sitting in the audience, what do you see that's different about GroundWorks and the kind of performances it gives? How do you see your distinct vision come through? You just had a *great* way of describing that Civil War piece, so I was curious what else kind of sits with you as an audience member?

BR: I tell people that if you come to a GroundWorks performance, you will see the widest variety of dance in ninety minutes that you could if you attended dance performances all year-round. One of the things again — again, it's about hiring dancers with the highest level of technique; they all come from ballet training, because that's the basis of what they do, but they have the ability and the skills to bring in other styles — and I think that also, one of the things that David looks for in guest choreographers is people who kind of merge these styles together. So while it's fresh, it's contemporary, you'll see — depending on who the choreographer is — you might see jazz vocabulary, ballet vocabulary — it won't be just strictly modern. The other thing that I think is unique to GroundWorks — and *appealing* — is the sense of theatre — and that's part of why the name is what it is: it's GroundWorks Dance *Theatre*. Our dancers are actors, and they are playing characters a lot of the time, whether or not it's kind of a linear story line, which is pretty rare for us — it happens from time to time but it's still pretty rare — they still have created a character, or maybe multiple characters throughout the course of a piece, but they are really telling a story and there's a sense of theatre in much of what we do. The other thing that I think is important about what GroundWorks does on the stage is working with musicians, working with live musicians. We do that as often as we can. It tends to be an expensive prospect; those are the facts, and that's what you deal with — but it's a priority for us. So we find ways to get the funds to do that, or we partner with an organization that is an instrumental organization or group, because that feeling of live music and dancing happening at the same time, it is instantaneous — there is something that happens in the moment, and it won't ever happen that way again. When you dance to recorded music, which we do much of the time, that part of it never changes, so while the dance may slightly shift, that part of it never changes. So when you have live musicians and live dancers, the combination — the kind of energy that it sends out, to have that many performers on the stage actually working with each other, watching each other — they have to watch each other, and that's really an exciting thing to watch. As an audience member, I find those [works] the most compelling. They absolutely draw me in to see these performers connecting with each other on stage in a way that it's in that moment, and it's *only* in that moment.

CF: In this era of ready-to-hand entertainment and education with remote channels and the proliferation of digital possibilities, how do you feel dance in northeastern Ohio and GroundWorks in particular, is faring in terms of audience development? And what do you see as the challenge? How do you see the future?

BR: Well, you know it *is* a challenge. And when you look at audience development, and audience development in the Arts, it's a somewhat narrow gap. Then when you look at audience development for the field of Dance, it narrows further. And then when you look at audience development for contemporary dance, it narrows even further. But I think the thing that never changes, regardless of how technically-oriented our society is, people are moved by a sense of *humanity*. And if they can capture that from a live performance, and if they can have that feeling of other humans in the same space with them, that will never be replaced by technology. Technology has a wonderful place — I mean, look at how far we've come with all of the developments and how many resources we now have because of technology updates and inventions. So it's a positive thing, but when humans connect with humans, that's never going to change. And I think that that's true across the board, so when I see teenagers attending our performances and college students, whom I know because I live with them — and their technological comfort is unbelievable; they have no fear. They have no worries about anything that has anything [technological]... even if they don't figure themselves to be a strong technology person — it's still there. It's just innate in who they are. But I watch them in our performances and I watch the way that even my own daughters — the way that they *think* about

what's happening on stage — and they can get *out* of that technology mindset in a way that when we're sitting around watching television, they can't. And they won't. But when they're seeing live people give of themselves and open themselves up to an audience, expose who they are as human beings through their art, that'll never change. I don't think that will ever go away. Yes, it's a challenge because we're competing with things that we never used to compete with. But I think that is enough to maintain it and to sustain it as an artform – forever.

CF: I certainly agree. I have no doubt about the excitement and the power of live performance. It's getting the live people to commit to a ticket to the live performance when it's happening— I don't need to tell you that!

BR: That is the biggest challenge.