

VDC Interview Transcript
 Subject: Inlet Dance Theatre
 Informant: Libby Koba, Managing Director

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Key:

CF: Candace Feck

LK: Libby Koba

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking with Libby Koba at Inlet Dance Theatre on September 4, 2019. Libby, the first thing to ask you is just how you first came into contact with Bill Wade and/or Inlet Dance Theatre?

LK: Actually, I mean, I found Inlet, or rather Inlet found me, by chance. I danced all throughout childhood and into college but I found my true skills on the administrative side. And after having my first child, we moved from New York City to Cleveland to be close to family, but I had no professional connections in this town. I reached out to Pam Young¹ from DANCECleveland² and she was kind enough to meet with me and introduce me to the dance scene in Cleveland and talk about everything. And then out of the blue, a month later, Bill Wade contacted me after having spoken with Pam, and he needed some administrative help. So then we just connected, and I saw my first Inlet performance and met Bill and the dancers at MetroHealth Hospital,³ where they were performing right in the Atrium, right near the ER as a part of the Arts and Medicine Series.⁴ And it was just astonishing to me to see such an amazing, intriguing company performing in such a unique location and giving so much passion in that performance that you would typically see in a concert setting. And then, after their performance, Bill and I had coffee in the hospital cafeteria and the entire company joined us for what I thought was my interview. And it just felt like a perfect fit! The family atmosphere that they had, and talking to everybody — I knew that I had found the right place.

¹ Pam Young, executive director of DANCECleveland, is the subject of a VDC feature on those organizations.

² Formerly Cleveland Modern Dance Association, DANCECleveland is a major presenting organization in northeast Ohio, and is the subject of a VDC feature on those organizations.

³ a nationally ranked non-profit, public health care system located in Cleveland, Ohio. Founded in 1837 as City Hospital, The MetroHealth System serves the residents of the city of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County, providing care at four hospitals, more than 20 health centers and 40 additional sites throughout Cuyahoga County. Inlet was hired to perform in the Atrium near the ER Entrance at the main hospital location (2500 Metrohealth Dr, Cleveland, OH 44109) almost annually for several years, including the years of 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018.

⁴ A program of MetroHealth to embed visual, performing and therapeutic arts throughout The MetroHealth System to promote healing, wellness, and increased engagement among patients, families, caregivers, and the greater community. Launched in 2015, MetroHealth's Arts in Medicine is a cooperative effort to promote healing and create community through both the visual and performing arts.

CF: You mentioned that you had family here. Did you grow up in Cleveland?

LK: No, I did not. My parents had actually moved here to follow other family — my brother and his wife.

CF: What was your previous dance experience in New York?

LK: I got a BFA in undergrad, but I realized that I, myself, really wasn't going to make a career out of being a professional dancer, so I started into the administrative side and started interning at a dance company in Philadelphia. A couple of years later, I decided to go back to graduate school at NYU and do Performing Arts Management.⁵ And then I worked for some dance companies in New York and The Joyce Theater,⁶ and kind of got some experience that way — firsthand experience. And then we decided it was time to move to Cleveland.

CF: Was that around 2015 or 2016 when you came?

LK: Yeah, 2015, we came to Cleveland.

CF: Okay. I'm jumping now, but what about the differences between working for an organization like The Joyce and working for a smaller company in terms of your job expectations?

LK: Yeah, I think all my past professional experiences really have laid the foundation for me to be working with Inlet. What I love so much is that we kind of all learn and grow together. It's a constantly evolving and growing organization so we're kind of figuring things out together and there's a lot of room for growth and mistakes and for the happy accidents, and all of that.

CF: Let's see. Looking at the amazing Cleveland arts landscape, what do you see as Inlet's contribution? What place does it hold here in Cleveland?

LK: Hmm. I think the work is so specific and so unique and it's unlike a lot of other contemporary work that I've seen before, even in New York. The Pilobolus⁷ influence is very strong, but when it's presented with such a strong Erick Hawkins⁸ technical base, it's so intriguing to see on stage. Even if

⁵The New York University (NYU) Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development (commonly referred to as Steinhardt) is the secondary liberal arts and education school of New York University. The MA in Performing Arts Administration at NYU (New York University) is a two-year program through Steinhardt.

⁶The Joyce, a 472-seat performance venue dedicated to dance located in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City is a leading presenter of dance in NYC and nationally. The building opened in 1941 as the Elgin Theater, a defunct movie house, and was renovated and reconfigured in 1981-82 to reopen as the Joyce Theater.

⁷A reference to the distinctive physicality of Pilobolus Dance Theatre, co-founded by a group of Dartmouth College students in 1971. The signature style of the work comes out of a group creative process, and is marked by strength, athleticism and gymnastic dexterity that often emphasizes exaggerations or distortions of human and non-human life forms.

⁸Erick Hawkins (1909-1994) was a major figure in the American modern dance movement) who studied and performed with such notable and varied organizations as the School of American Ballet, Ballet Caravan and the Martha Graham Dance Company before forming his own eponymous company in 1957. In breaking away from the aesthetics of his previous associations, he developed a fluid, effortless style of movement.

I've seen an Inlet piece numerous times, I often find myself holding my breath in anticipation while they're performing. I think the skill and the artistry of the dancers is just something I'm constantly in awe of. It's just a blessing to work with such dedicated and passionate and caring and appreciative people, which is... the company culture is very unlike ones that I had experienced in the past.

CF: Can you say more about that? How is it different? What is it that makes the culture here distinct, in your view?

LK: I think that we're just very open and very much a family culture. And I think that, as I said before, we learn and grow together and there's a lot of room to make mistakes and to learn from them. A lot of new challenges keep presenting themselves and we all kind of figure them out together. I think that that makes for our kind of DNA in the organization.

CF: Would you mind describing the kinds of things that you do as Managing Director? Could you talk about what that encompasses?

LK: It's kind of a Jack-of-all-Trades role. I'm kind of on the financial side of it: I'm creating budgets and our annual operating budget, processing payroll each week; I have a hand in the marketing side and making sure all the communication is going out; personnel side and being a place for the dancers to come to with any needs outside the studio; connecting with donors and connecting the foundations and our board of trustees. And so the exciting part is that it kind of touches on everything, so I get to do a little bit of everything every day, really.

CF: No day is the same, then!

LK: Exactly.

CF: And you're here every day, full-time?

LK: I'm full-time, but I have a very flexible schedule, which is such a blessing. You know, having a child and having a flexible schedule that we could work around is wonderful.

CF: Well, it seems that you have come at such an exciting moment for the company, moving into a brand new home-base.

LK: Yeah!

CF: Was that already in the works when you got here? Did you make that happen?

LK: It was not quite in the works when I joined. We've kind of made do with a very nomadic experience for so many years in the company, with the administrative offices being in a different part of town than the company is rehearsing, and I actually rarely get to see the company — usually only once a week during our company meetings. So we've had a very nomadic experience around town and having lost our permanent rehearsal space a couple of years ago, we kind of fast-tracked the search to find a permanent home for all of us. And this new building, I think with the renovation to come over the next year, it'll just be such a powerful experience for all of us connected

to the organization when we can *all* be in a home together and have all of our operations under one roof — having the administrative offices, the rehearsal space, costuming, storage, all of that in one location is going to be such a powerful experience. Just realizing all of the hard work and time that has come before to make that happen — but I think also reflecting back on all the individuals that have been a part of moving the organization forward over the past nineteen years. And this building, I think, is in honor of all of them and all the hard work that they've put in in the years before.

CF: How did it come about that you have gone from being nomads for eighteen years and now there is a new building? How did that happen?

LK: That's a great question. I mean, it's been a dream of Bill's to actually be in a space that's surrounded by other artistic folks to share in that collaborative spirit in one building. So that's always been a dream. We never want to be in a home that's “silo'd” off so that it's just us doing our thing. I think being in a collaborative type of space has always been a dream and when we met the developer that owns this and heard about his vision in that neighborhood but also the other artists that he had been talking to, then Bill was able to bring some of his artistic friends from other mediums into the conversation as well. It's a really exciting venture to have this space, and we really want to open the doors up for the community to have access to this space. There will be visual arts and dance and music and a lot of other services all under one roof, which is really exciting.

CF: Is there a major donor? I'm curious how it has all become suddenly possible.

LK: I would not say *suddenly*. (She laughs.) It has been a *long* process. We've actually been talking to the developer for, I think, almost three years now. So he's been working on his end and getting the finances together and getting loans and tax credits and all those things to make it happen. And then each individual organization is kind of working on the fundraising for their portion of the build-out and the renovation. But the exciting part is that the developer also wants each artist to have ownership in our space and to be able to, several years down the road, to be able to own our portion of the building, which I think is quite unique. Typically, artists go into some neighborhoods and then they gentrify and then the artists are priced out of the neighborhood, eventually. So, I think to be able to have a stake in the neighborhood and the people there and kind of have ownership there is really important.

CF: Wonderful. I mean, that sounds like a very enlightened developer! So how would you, I mean, we've talked to Pam Young, DANCECleveland and people who were originally part of Cleveland Modern Dance Association. We've talked to Elaine Gibbs,⁹ who taught a lot of the black children of this city for many, many, many years, including Dianne McIntyre.¹⁰ Of course, Dianne McIntyre is

⁹ Elaine Gibbs taught dance in Cleveland for many years, influencing such students as Dianne McIntyre. *She is the subject of a separate feature in the VDC.*

¹⁰ Dancer, choreographer, director, teacher and recipient of numerous awards, McIntyre founded the company *Sounds in Motion* in Manhattan which she directed from in 1972 to 1988. Later, she choreographed for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Dallas Black Dance, and numerous college dance groups. McIntyre's choreography has also appeared on the large and small screen. She returned to her native Cleveland in 2002, where she now resides and works as her base of operations. *McIntyre is featured in the Dancing Wheels, Elaine Gibbs and GroundWorks DanceTheater sections of the VDC.*

here, GroundWorks¹¹ is here, Tom Evert¹² is here. There's a lot going on! I'm curious how you see Inlet having something particular to offer in that mix. What is it that Inlet brings, that Cleveland needs or is getting that they're not getting from these other institutions?

LK: Right. I think the Inlet repertory that you see on stage is often a very good entry point for a lot of audiences that may be unfamiliar or unsure about seeing dance. I think that it's also the work really speaks to people in such a way, there is such an artistry to it, and it speaks a lot about human life issues, which everybody can relate to, but kind of speaking more than what *is* to what *can* be. So I think that seeing that on stage is quite unique and the range of aesthetic of the company is very different than I've seen in other professional companies. Another unique part of the company is our event services that we do. We have a lot of strong relationships with various organizations across the city, even corporate partners, other cultural institutions where we repackage our concert work and put it in very unique settings. I'm often doing corporate parties or cultural events, galas and benefits. We've kind of repackaged that concert work and put some beautiful artistic experiences in very unique and often unexpected environments.

CF: Like the hospital where you first encountered the company.

LK: Exactly, yeah.

CF: You mention this sort of life-giving part as the driving force of the company — to talk about what *can* be, not just what is — and I wonder about that. Where does that come from and how does that happen?

LK: Yeah, I think it really stems from the motto of the company of “using dance to further people.” And I think that goes way beyond the dancers in the company and the students that we work with. I think that it definitely applies to the audiences, as well, that see the work. And I think that using this powerful artistic tool to speak about certain issues and topics furthers the audience members and broadens their horizons, and they ask questions about these things.

CF: I was wondering, is it your job, in a way, to find out how to build that audience or find that audience? I ask because that seems to be one of the biggest challenges for modern dance. You said a lot of people don't know about it, they don't know how to do it, they don't know if they *should* do it. *Is it scary?* What's going to happen? I mean is that part of your effort as the managing director?

LK: Yeah, I think everybody in the company really has a stake in that, in trying to expand our audiences. But as I said, the event services realm is actually a really unique and interesting way that

¹¹ GroundWorks DanceTheater is yet another Cleveland company, founded by David Shimotakahara in 1998 to challenge existing preconceptions about dance. *GroundWorks is the subject of a separate feature on the VDC.*

¹² A native of Cleveland, Tom Evert is a dancer and painter who danced with The Murray Louis, Alwin Nikolais and Phyllis Lamhut Dance Companies, eventually joining the Paul Taylor Dance Company in New York City (1977-85). In 1986 he returned to Cleveland and founded the Tom Evert Dance Company, later the Tom and Susana Evert Dance Theatre, creating a major body of work which has been honored with numerous awards and fellowships. The company, now called *DANCEVERT*, presents a home season and has toured extensively and is dedicated to outreach and collaborative community projects.

we reach new audiences. So people will find out about us, not realizing they might have seen us at corporate party and then say, "What is that that I'm seeing?" And then they ask somebody, "Who are those performers there?" And then they actually come to a concert and see that. So our audience development is actually unique. And I think we have some opportunities to kind of expand into audiences that wouldn't typically come to dance.

CF: Do you find that there are challenges for dancers dancing in spaces that are not meant for dance? I'm thinking of floors. How do you tackle that?

LK: The physical challenges of these unique spaces are definitely something that the dancers are aware of, but they're so good at tackling those challenges and they've had a lot of experience doing these event services so they've come across a lot of these unique challenges. We, of course, take safety for the dancers very seriously, so we would never agree to an event that we felt was unsafe for our dancers. And then we take that into consideration with what they're actually performing. If the flooring is not really appropriate for a dance, then we wouldn't have them do a certain type of work on that type of flooring.

CF: I'm not sure about this, but what sort of consortium is there for dance in the area? I mentioned some of those companies, but is there a way that Inlet engages with other dance organizations in town in any kind of organized manner? Or is it more informal?

LK: I would say it's probably more on an informal basis. We used to sublet space from Dancing Wheels¹³ as that is where we were in rehearsal space for several years before. So we had very strong connections to that company. But we often are performing at a lot of same events with Cleveland Public Theater,¹⁴ we're often on the same series that Verb Ballets¹⁵ is in and there is the Arts in August¹⁶ at Tremont series, where we're performing at the same time. So, yeah, it's on more of an informal basis with the other companies.

CF: So you're moving into this great new space that will open a whole new chapter for you. The company is also celebrating 20 years in the same year, right?

LK: Yes. Probably by the time we move into the space, we will be on our 20th season.

CF: So I wonder about the vision for 2020 for the company, but also the vision going forward for the company. It's a big step getting a new space. So it means you've got a long vision. You're looking at the long view for the company.

¹³ Dancing Wheels Company and School, founded in 1980 by Mary Verdi-Fletcher, is the first physically integrated dance company in the world. *It is highlighted as a separate feature in the VDC.*

¹⁴ Founded in 1981 by James Levin, a graduate of Shaker Heights High School and Case Western Reserve University law school, CPT has become a leading stage Cleveland for experimental theater, achieving national stature in the process.

¹⁵ Under the leadership of Dr. Margaret Carlson and Richard Dickinson, MFA, Verb Ballets is a contemporary ballet company, established in 1987.

¹⁶ The Arts in August program is sponsored by Experience Tremont, a cultural institution seeking to promote the Tremont Cleveland neighborhood of the city, located near downtown.

LK: Yeah, we're definitely looking — because we're not doing all this hard work to raise a lot of money just to think in the short term. So, I think the vision is kind of evolving still. And I think we want to get into the space, figure out how it works, connect more with the local community, understand from them what they need and what they want in this “arts hub” building, what kind of services we could provide to the community and the children there and then sort of build our programming around that and around what they're looking for. You know, we want to start a formal school of Inlet Dance Theatre in the space once we get established there.

We're always growing our training and apprentice program. That's a pre-professional program for students coming out of undergraduate or out of high school to come to us and train with the company. And so we definitely want to grow that program as we then will have a space to house them in.

CF: Yes! As I read your materials, I was intrigued and I'll talk to Dominic and also Bill about this, but I just want to know about the social conscience of the company and the social mission that seems not to be a peripheral issue... Can you address that at all?

LK: I think you will get a better answer from Bill. I mean yeah, we don't just make art about *anything* and just for our own ego. He's always kind of thinking about the topics that are relevant and topics may even come from people we're working with and they want it, they've asked to see something on stage, so that might be how it develops — or through a commission or something. But yeah, the work is always very thought-provoking, and touching on important issues.

CF: Well, it just seems to me that there is his work with at-risk youth... and I think there's something with elderly people that... you seem to be reaching out in a lot of different directions.

LK: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

CF: And that must be part of your mission.

LK: Yeah. I think it's using our art form and the talent that the company members and Bill have in dance and using it to further other people's lives whether that's from young children up to the elderly. It's giving them an opportunity to express through movement — so yeah, there are no boundaries in that.

CF: You mentioned commissions. I had the idea that most of the company's work comes from this collaborative, choreographic process of the people in the room. Do you ever do repertory? Do you do somebody else's work, do you commission an artist to come in?

LK: Not another artist. No. Commissions might be coming from a presenter or actually a playwright or somebody that has a story or idea. They might be asking the company to create a work based on a topic or an idea or something. So no, we don't typically bring in other choreographers but all the work is created collaboratively with Bill and the company members in the studio.

CF: And you're getting ready to embark on more touring, too. Can you speak to that?

LK: Yeah, well the upcoming tour actually came from a commission from Playhouse Square.¹⁷ They were looking for a work for young audiences that was based on a book. That was kind of the open theme that they gave us. And Bill came across this book *What Do You Do With An Idea?*¹⁸ at a bookstore and he just knew that “This is the book that I need to put on stage.” It had such a beautiful message that spoke to adults as well as the children. So that is then how it became our stage production and we’ve actually become very close with the author and he has seen the work, which was really exciting for him seeing his book come to life on stage. So that will be embarking on a national tour coming up this spring.

CF: You have quite a full agenda for the coming year! I don't need to tell *you* that! I'm wondering what the company did without you before! I mean, there was no managing director, right?

LK: No. He had other administrative help in the past — but no.

CF: Amazing that they kept moving forward and that they were able to. Does anyone in the room have a question that I didn't ask or that came up?

JC: Is it silly to ask where the title Inlet comes from?

CF: I had that same question for Bill!

LK: It's a good... but yeah, Bill can explain it much better.

CF: No, please! You explain!

LK: Right. Inlet is just... a place of entry to let people in. And so I think it's an open space to let people in and learn from the art and through our audiences, through our education programming, through the dancers that are in the company, so yeah...

CF: Yes, it's nice. Is there something you'd like to say about the company, working with Bill, the Cleveland dance scene, anything that I haven't asked?

LK: I think we've covered a lot.

CF: (Teasing): You just want to get out of the chair, don't you?

MDB: I think what I'm curious about is just whether you could identify a spark that you have in your job — and you might have already touched on it, as you were talking — but something that

¹⁷ Playhouse Square is a theater district in downtown Cleveland, Ohio — the largest performing arts center in the US outside of New York City as well as Northeast Ohio's home for touring Broadway shows, concerts, comedy, opera, dance and children's programming. According to a Cleveland State University 2004 study, Playhouse Square draws more than one million people annually to its eleven performance spaces while contributing in excess of \$43 million in local economic impact every year exclusively from its performing arts activity.

¹⁸ A New York Times Best Seller and award-winning book by Kobi Yamada and Mae Besom, published in 2014.

really elevates you when you're working or if there's a certain part in the season that you're excited about or some specific rewards from all the hard work.

LK: Yeah, goodness! I think what brings me joy in doing my work is actually the people that I work with — the dancers, and working with Bill. It's just such a fun experience and I honestly feel how appreciative they are of my work and so I think getting to work with some really amazing artists but really wonderful human beings is what makes my day!

JD: I remember the company pre-Libby. It was just... I mean, I'd be pulling my hair out: "I need information and nobody is giving it to me!" Then I told Bill, when you started — I was like, "Bill, thank God. She's amazing."

CF: Do you have an archive that you're keeping? Is there... is that... (She grimaces.) Okay, sorry. I touched a nerve there. Is that something that is on your horizon?

LK: It's definitely a goal, for sure. I think especially as we're approaching our 20th season, it's something that we are very aware of and also Bill's history prior to Inlet. You know there is a lot of history there, and we want to be doing that history and the people that were a part of it — we want to do it justice in a proper archive. So we're really looking forward to that. We're trying to take as much in as we can about *how* to do archiving right and it's a daunting undertaking for sure, but it is definitely something that we're working towards in our 20th season, so...

CF: Great! And congratulations on your 20th anniversary. Well, thank you and I hope it hasn't been too, too painful. You did a great job — you're a natural! (To the team): Get a photo of her fanning herself, and we'll put that right up. (laughter all around.)