

VDC Interview Transcript
 Bebe Miller (OSU).2
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Key:

CF: Candace Feck

BM: Bebe Miller

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team member)

CF: Thank you again for your willingness to come in again to address some of the sound problems we had in the first capture.

If you could just talk a little bit about coming here as a student and what you found? What *was* the dance department at that time? What was it like to meet Helen Alkire in those days, and so on?

BM: Well, I came here from New York City and Columbus was ...different. It was kind of like moving to America — but in the department I felt both the newness and something about a new whole where I really understood the focus — or I really realized that this is the focus that I wanted. The faculty, Helen Alkire, my peers, my fellow grad students — *and* undergrads: it was a vibrant, vibrant community, and I think you — maybe students feel this all the time when they enter in — but you kind of think, like “Oh! I’m *starting* something!” — But I was really entering a process that had already been in place, and I felt welcomed, I felt really curious about how to navigate, we were back in a weird back-corner of the campus — so it was isolated and special and *ours*. At the end of my two years of grad school, I stayed on and helped the department move over to Sullivant Hall, where we are now, and so just seeing that transition from two small studios in our own little private building into what feels like a collegiate academic Hall was pretty impressive. I was glad to be able to kind of have both worlds.

CF: What do you remember, Bebe, of Helen Alkire at that time, and what sense did you have as a student of the vision — *her* vision or the vision of the department?

BM: Perhaps it's just that, you know, you kind of come into a new place and everything is just like “Whoa!” (vibrating both palms, near her face) — and you’re just *charged*, but my earliest memories of Helen were kind of... *removed*. I felt her presence — I don't think I even saw her every day, but she was the guiding hand behind everything that we did. So, and you know, I was fine — kind of keeping in my corner with my classes, and the work that I was doing. But I think she showed up, really, in looking at the work that people were making, particularly the undergraduates, who were really there for a longer time — it was really a particularly rich class of choreographers and performers, and we were also working with Expanded Arts. So there was a lot — a *lot* of creativity going on. So I felt more of her guiding presence, than, say, like an everyday encounter.

CF: You had spoken a bit about the sense you had of OSU in the field, during the time you were away in New York.

BM: Mm-hmmm.

CF: ... and we'd also discussed whether there is any sort of validity in this idea of an "OSU dancer," and, if so, what was/is that? And those might be two different questions...

BM: When I left here in 1975, by the following year — year and a half — I was in New York again, dancing — *with* people that I had met here at OSU, *for* people that I had met here at OSU, and kind of wedged in a *community* that was... I mean, we know that New York is a big community — and so any bits of connection that could help with finding a job, finding a place to live — but also *dancing* together, *dancing* together. I worked with Nina Weiner, who had been a guest artist here — we worked with at least two other OSU grads in the five years or so that we worked together. There was a *network*. But I *do* want to say that — and maybe this is sort of a generational feeling — I look at our undergrads today and particularly, there are several over the years who've come from New York — and so I see the New York teachers who were OSU grads, kind of *in their bodies*? I see it in their attention to action, to movement to weight — maybe that's our signature gift, particularly to the field. And there's a physical dynamic presence in motion that has always been valued here, and it really shows up.

CF: Great. There was a question I had asked you about connecting your own early days here with the days you see here now.

BM: Hmhhh (nodding her head).

CF: — and maybe, you know, maybe all the way through to this sort of thing you were just talking about recognizing in New York, but we ended up calling it the "OSU spine" — *Is* there one? What *is* it? Perhaps you have addressed it with the issue of weight already... Anything to say about that? And if not, we'll move on.

BM: Mmhmm (thinking)... You know, I think one of the things that we learn here, and hopefully that maybe means that we *teach* here as well, is that there is a mix of idiosyncratic and old *signatures* of moving, but that there is a really clear base — a *physical* base that it emerges from. And I wonder if that's our emphasis on Laban — could be — maybe the dynamics have come out of that work. But there is a *spine* to our signature, I think, that you feel... you really *feel* that the bodies are carved and dynamic and that it's not just a conceptual *idea* of what motion is — but that it's actually *moving* — in *space* — with an *intention*. And that, I feel, is what we do here.

CF: Great.

BM: (to the film crew): It's true. Yeah.

CF: Anything that you would like to say — just kind of riffing, really, on Helen's vision, Helen's leadership, Helen's legacy...

BM: Mm-hmmm... well. As I sit here, I'm on the cusp of retiring from this department — and it's a great seat; it's a good place to look forward and also to look back. And to think yes, of course. of my time here as a student, my time as faculty — but also, I've been inside of *more* than an institution, but a way of thinking about dance that has affected the field, that has affected all of us. You know, we love it; this is what we *do*. But I've been here long enough to really get a sense that this did not

happen on its own — this is not just some organic sprouting — but there was a sense of direction that came from Helen Alkire. That her decisions in making this part of the College of the *Arts*, that this is an *art form* that should be supported, and respected and challenged — and it becomes, it became its own *magnet* for people. So, I think that that ... (she explains what she is doing): my hands are shaping something round and soft — but that we're all inside of (laughing) and it's not — it's not so cozy, necessarily — but there is *care* and *support* for what we do, and when this field can do, and I think it's directly a result of Helen's vision. (Nodding): Yeah.

CF: You know, I didn't ask you this before — but in reviewing all of the interviews from that (original) day, something that came up through Karen Bell's conversation and through Susan Hadley's... I wonder if you'd like to comment on — or not — is that part of Helen's vision that distinguishes it from other departments of the time, and that's continued to grow here, is the broad-based education...

BM: Mmmmm!

CF: The fact that the curriculum by design goes way beyond a kind of conservatory type of training...

BM: Mmmm!

CF: Would you like to talk about that?

BM: Sure! Yep. I think that the broad-based education is one really good way of thinking about what Helen created here, and kind of the force — the grounding force — behind the vision. When I was here in grad school, I felt that I knew dance, I knew *how* to dance, I *loved* moving — but I felt that what the gift of this department was — and *is* — is *context* — that there is a lineage, that there are arterial fingers in so many directions... into technologies now, into film, choreography, performance, of course, but theories of the body — that all this gives a new grounded education in the *potential* for dance. And I think, particularly as we move forward into the field — and difficult *times* for the field — I mean, venues — we have fewer of them — it's maybe more of a challenge... But I feel that creative spark is continuing, and finding new outlets that we didn't even *expect*, so how do we prepare ourselves for that? How do we prepare to be available to the Medical School, embodied practices, neuroscience? And all of this comes from that *broad*-based education about what dance as an art form — and as a life form — can provide.

CF: Well, you segued right into the final point that I wanted to return to, which is that when you were talking last time you spoke — *repeatedly*, actually — about *context and community*, *context and community* as being takeaways for you as a young student — and perhaps *still* for our students. And I'll just add one more thing: that you described your learning here as a student as a kind of “thickening.”

BM: Mmmmm. Mm-hmmm.

CF: You can talk about what *you* left with, or how you see that still, or however you'd like to address it. But you brought it up at both ends — *context and community* — that students don't often realize until they leave, but that's what they got ...

BM: Yeah! Yeah...I think that we don't realize what we have until we leave — until we encounter ourselves in other situations, but *definitely* the sense of community — of people around us who supported us, and in a way our peers were all facing forward in the same direction, or main directions. And the contextual basis of what we *know* — that we know *how* to make, we know what it's made of, we know the elements of how to watch, how to take part, how to be an audience, how to *think* as movers. And so that context and community are kind of the *tracks* we travel forward on — and we build community and we build context, I think, as we continue. There was one other *word*...

CF: Thickening!

BM: Thickening! Oh, yes! So that context and the community and maybe a *thickening* of our *experience*, of ourselves in the world — I mean that sounds really grand, but it's pretty simple. It's just another way of approaching what we encounter, that we recognize the potential in relationship — physical, artistic, social...I'm *rambling* now... And I mean, I remember so clearly *leaving* here, and going back to New York, and kind of going to early rehearsals, early concerts, in loft spaces in the city, and...both kind of *finding* my community, but also seeing the live context unfolding, all around me, that I was *in Dance!* I was *watching* things happen. And it's funny coming back as faculty, as a professor — where we're studying the times and the people that I knew and went out for coffee with, and hung around with, and stood behind at the bar — (she clarifies) the *barre* — that this is just a really wonderful kind of a *quickenning* if not even a thickening — that this is an experience that is creating a way of looking at the world. Ten years from now, twenty years from now, somebody is going to be writing about it, and describing, say, what's happening in the field — but in *living* it, you are sending out those shoots, our students are sending out those shoots, our faculty are helping to *engage* those shoots of perception, of interest, of just *dancing*. I'm really grateful. Yeah.

CF: Well, perhaps you've now answered my last question, which isn't on my page because it has to do with *today*. I don't know why I'm getting choked up — I mean, *I* shouldn't be getting choked up, but I'm just a little bit still in it [the retirement process] myself...

BM: (Nodding) Yeah...

CF: But here you are...

BM: Yeah...

CF: You're ending a certain relationship with the University — I mean, your relationship with the Department transcends that ending, but I just wonder if there's anything that you...I mean, you said you were grateful! That's probably enough.

BM: Well, people have been asking for the last couple of weeks, like, "How're you doing?" You know, "Retirement is coming up..." And I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah — but I've got these papers, I've got this..." — and it's like, yeah, I know this is all going to happen. And on Monday, earlier this week — the last week of classes — walking from the kitchen area to my office, I realized I could maybe count the number of times I have left to do this. (a long pause) I walked around and I watched the technique classes — and I saw someone, and I said "There's a plié over there, and I could maybe help — but I won't have an opportunity to do that" — and that made me sad. I think I am a teacher and I will remain a teacher, but it becomes a different kind of a mentoring thing than a

classroom situation. That is freeing, actually. And I welcome that — but there is *nothing* like standing in the classroom and sharing what we love about this field — and knowing that that this is an *oral* tradition, this is a physical tradition, it's a person-to-person encounter — and I have a different perspective now; I will *be* in a different perspective. So, I'm a little sad...and also kinda' released. And *curious*. And grateful. Yeah. Yeah...(to CF, recently retired) *You* know what I mean.

CF: I do. Now (to the team) do you all want to ask anything?
We have your whole last *transcript*, but we just couldn't use the audio...

BM: Yeah. But anyway, it's okay! You can't revisit — you know, it's really what you have to say *now*. I appreciate it.

(To Jessica Cavender, team member) Looks like you've got something coming up for Bebe?

JC: I *did* have something, but it's not really a formed idea... I don't know. It was something about *returning* — and you know, like...

BM: Like now, or in the future?

JC: In the future, thoughts like... what will the distance grow to be — or how do you imagine that?

BM: Mm-hmmm, mm-hmm...

CF: You do have a work going up at the Wexner Center next year...

BM: Oh yeah, yeah...

CF: ...so, the relationship...

BM: The relationship continues! I mean, we're performing at the Wexner in November of 2017, and there's a residency next summer — and I'm sure... And it occurred to me I could take class! I could take a technique class! I could sit in on a lecture series! It's gonna' be fun. And I'm looking forward to that — of just kind of reshaping this relationship with the Department. So, grateful for that, too.

CF: Me too! Let's call it a wrap, then. Thank you so much for giving up this time on such a full day.