

VDC Interview Transcript
 Bebe Miller.1
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Key:

CF: Candace Feck

BM: Bebe Miller

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC team member)

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team member)

CF: When you arrived at OSU in 1973, Helen Alkire was Chair, and Vickie Blaine was...

BM: ...my advisor!

CF: ...and the department had just achieved autonomous status as a separate department; I don't know if you were even aware of that as you arrived, but it had just become its own autonomous department in '73. What kind of place did you find at OSU when you arrived?

BM: Maybe it would be helpful to talk about just before I arrived in the first place...I had applied to grad school right as I was finishing my undergrad degree at Earlham College two years before. And I'd been accepted — I'd applied for Dance and also Library Science — thinking I'd be a good librarian — but I didn't really have the funds to continue, so I just kind of filed that away, [thinking] “that was nice” — and then two years later, Vickie happened to call and said that she had a University Fellowship, a diversity fellowship, if I was interested in going to grad school. And I saw it first as a way to just continue taking dance class, without really thinking much further than that, so I said yes. And I came. So, I didn't have much of an expectation about what graduate school in dance would be — which maybe was a good thing, I don't know. I think at the end of the process, and we can talk more about the process itself — but at the end of the process, I realize I had gained context for what I had done before, what I had learned as a child, what was happening during the time — my time — and a sense of lineage, or parallel developments that have really remained with me as a “thickening,” I guess, of what it is that we do in this field. So, the Department was lodged still over on Milliken Road — I think there were two studios, smaller studios; I helped the department move over to Sullivant Hall right after I finished, so I got to see where a new building would be. But it felt like a really small community, but vibrant — and particularly, I think, the undergrad population was really, really strong — and not a whole bunch of grads — maybe seven, eight of us altogether — a two-year program. But that mix of undergrads who, to this day, are still very active in the field — and the grads, as well, who are still really active — felt like there was an understanding of contemporary dance that was being fledged: the Tharp work was really, really very much a focal point for Vickie and Helen. We had Gus Solomons as a guest artist, so the Cunningham influence...Taylor — there were the classic forms as well as this new energy — and I felt that my earlier training in the Nikolais technique had given me one kind of foundation that was totally blown out — I was totally blown out of the water of like, how to do things, how to stand up and do things with my legs and body, not just *feel* things. And I think that the Tharp influence was really exciting

for the department: she was here, we all learned some of *The Hundreds*, we saw their repertory, we became friends with these people, and so something about dance as a contemporary form was just coming together in my head, about what this could be.

CF: Maybe we could go back to the beginning again for a moment to ask how it was that Vickie called you, how did you know Vickie, how did that happen? Do you have a story to tell there?

BM: I guess so! When I auditioned, you know, it was sort of similar to the way it is now —there was a ballet *barre*: I was horrible, it was just *frightening*, and maybe there was some kind of a modern phrase, I don't remember that. But I had to do a solo, and I put together what was basically an improvisation — Nikolais-style — on interior space, I remember this still — like, the interior space of the body and then outward space (she brings her hands in close to her torso, interlacing the fingers slightly, then sends out her arms in a “v” formation, away from her body, moving back and forth between the two as she speaks) — like, how you go in and out of that is totally a Nikolais kind of gesture — and I guess they *really* got it, and Vickie filed it away, apparently, and remembered me, and thought “Why not?” Now that I've been in a university and a department, I realize that you do that — if you find applicants who are, who speak to you in some way, you know that you have that potential to contact them and change their lives. I didn't know that — I just went off and did what I did. And I think I was working at Macy's in the patio restaurant as a waitress when Vickie called, and so I thought “Yeah, okay” — I could go.

CF: You've already gestured to it, but how did your studies here launch you into what you did when you left?

BM: Mainly, I remember working with Vickie — never in comp class, for some reason — but in repertory. Helen — I don't think we overlapped much, but it was Louise Burns from the Cunningham Company, Gus Solomons, Lynn Dally and Nina Weiner who were really instrumental, I think, for me. So maybe I'll talk about them?

CF: Sure.

BM: Okay. Oh! Sharon Kinney, also — but she was on regular faculty. So, I think it really came down to the faculty who was here at the time: the regular full faculty, Vickie Blaine who was my advisor, Helen Alkire, who was the Chair, who I really didn't have that much contact with — she was pretty intimidating — but Lucy Venable, Odette Blum, Angelika Gerbes, Sharon Kinney. So they were all very much present and I remember them well. It was the visiting artists from whom I got more of a sense of where this could all take me: Gus Solomons, coming from Cunningham and starting on his own work: very, very severe, a little scary, but just a passion that was very physical and driven. Louise Burns from the Cunningham Company, as well: composition with Louise — I remember doing double-Dutch jumping in the middle of it, running out of the studio door, just suddenly — just the crazy things you could put in a work — Lynn Dally, who I worked with during my last, my second year in the department and then ended up staying in Ohio an additional year and working in her company and performing in New York — so a real opportunity to take what I had learned into New York Downtown Dance. And then finally, it was during that year after I graduated that Nina Weiner was a guest artist and so I got to take her class for two quarters, I believe. And it was stunning: I learned how to stand on my leg and not worry about it— (*sort of...still worried!*) But also there was something about the highly articulate control of the body — and putting it into the *Tharp* mode, that on a personal, physical level was totally — I had such an appetite for it — as well

as the difficulty of it — something about going towards something that was hard, just finally made sense to me — like, why not try to pursue that? So, working with Nina — after I left Ohio, and then moving to New York was my entry into the field — and I worked with Nina for five, six years.

CF: I'm curious whether you could speak to your relationship with OSU in the years that you were away, either through other dancers and choreographers or just through your connections back here with the faculty. I recall a gala concert in Helen's name during the early 80s, when you came back and performed a solo...

BM: I must have stayed in contact. You know, I do know that there were certain undergrads that I stayed in contact with: Anna Leo, who danced with me in the early 80s, Diane Jacobowitz, who is still very active in Brooklyn and sending some of her students our way, and others who, you know, you sort of become part of that big cloud of OSU dance people. And so I made my way back here sometime in the early 80s for a performance, perhaps, but I came back again in 1985 to teach for one quarter, and then again almost a year later in '86, setting work, teaching... At this point, I met Karen Bell. We became fast friends; it was my first sense of being faculty with *my* faculty — going to the Olive Garden was a BIG night out — it was just kind of fabulous. And so, I think that that sense of “there's this other thing that can happen, as a dance artist” — it's not only about doing the work, but I had begun teaching when I was still working with Nina Weiner because there were so many fascinating things about the technique or how to do things that I felt I wanted to share, and so that became the basis of my teaching.

CF: In your professional life as a choreographer in New York, you worked with other OSU dancers, along with other people. Coincidental? You know — something about the way they moved that was *of* this place — or, I don't know if you even remember...

BM: Yeah, I *do*. And this is something that I am trying to talk to my students now about — something about a community, that you don't know you're forming one until they're there and you realize that “Oh yeah, there's Robin Klingensmith” — I wasn't really in school with her at that time — she came a few years later, but she and Mary Richter and Maria Lakis were three undergrads who formed this group called Kinematic in the late 70s, I guess? Early 80s? And I knew that they were from OSU and so we sort of gravitated together — I don't know how these things happen, but you kind of have a matrix of support that comes through the OSU connection. I think it's an understanding about how we're trained, what we share about that — even if it's not exactly the same technique, but an understanding of the fundamentals and the foundation that is important to us, and remains so — or at least, you know, you track your own generation that way. And I think that New York being the kind of place it is, you need those connections — like little wires, invisible, but when you're straying a little bit, “Oh, yeah, they know me,” — and that helps locate you. So I think that worked not only from my direction but I think all of us had a way of finding each other — and maybe because we started out in a similar aesthetic, we found other people in that so that there was a way of compounding a way of looking at dance that was growing in the wider New York community that we were all sharing. So I think that the dawning on us that maybe there's a movement here or that there is a way of dance that's happening and that we're all a part of it.

CF: I don't think that I knew until today that you actually didn't do the weight studies or any of the compositional work with Vickie...

BM: No, she hadn't codified that yet. When I was in Vickie's repertory group UDC, University Dance Company — I tried out my first year and I didn't make it. (*Crushed!*) — The second year, I did. So I got to learn a piece of hers, called *Candid* — I think it was a reconstruction of an earlier work, and it was *beautiful, beautiful, beautiful* work — and that's how I knew Vickie, from working with her, not so much her teaching. Yeah. I think that that's important, because most of our students now if they've worked with Vickie at all, they have only worked with her as a teacher. And I remember her deciding as she's looking at work, like, pointing "No, more of this..." and there's something about watching a choreographer make those decisions that I realize probably got into me, like "Oh, that's what you do — you *decide* things!

CF: Do you have a sense of the way OSU is regarded outside, from living away for so long? I'm interested in knowing how you felt it was regarded from afar?

BM: Yeah, I do — and this is tricky, because I think we're all inside of it, and my sense is that OSU is still very well regarded — I think earlier it was like we produced dancers who go into companies and then along with that, we produced choreographers, who worked with the dancers that we've been producing and sending to various locations — as well as teachers. But that sense of a developing, evolving community of dance artists, I feel, is really strong and present in the field. I think, though, the field is also changing and building around us — so how we want to negotiate or really get that reflective view from outside is important as we continue to find — it's not so much, you know, our *place* — but what do we want to *be*? And now I think the wider community is different than it was — clearly, different than it was twenty years ago...or even ten years ago. The tools are different. The European, global work, African work, there are so many other kinds of things to do, and how do we want to enmesh ourselves in another kind of matrix of approaches, techniques, perspectives, *economies* of dance. So, regardless of how we feel about ourselves, I think our next question is what do we feel about everybody else — and how do we really engage with that?

CF: Would it be generative, do you think, as a discussion point, to actually think about the OSU Dance Department that you saw in 1973 to 75, and the OSU Department that you're about to leave soon? It's about changing over time... In a way, I guess, I'm curious what would you, you know —if you could snap your fingers and make it so — what would you go back to that there was; what would you import from now? I guess it's the value in each time...

BM: (a pause...) We may not keep this...

CF: We'll fumble around.

BM: Yeah. Good. It's funny about limitations, I think. Back then, there weren't as many choices, I think, in the kind of technique. I think, what are you going to do? What is your body going to do? What are you preparing yourself for? And, in a way, I think that there was a moment in time of a focus of the field and our teaching — or learning — there was the department, there was Cunningham, Taylor, pretty much...the Tharp was not necessarily taught as a technique, but there was a feeling in the air that we learned about how to swish around, and do that complicated work. There was also Expanded Arts, which was all of this artistic overlay that was very strong: I don't think that we do that now. The ground is almost too wide — or it's perceived to be too wide to bridge from here to the Art Department, to the Media Department, or whatever — or it's done on more of a case-by-case basis. So whether or not I would wish that on us now, you know, it's *not*. In

the reverse, we had no Media, we didn't have film, I mean, there was nothing digital. My graduating solo performance was done on reel-to-reel video tape, so I can't even play it — which is fine. So... so, the idea of what resources are or what we expect of the resources, what we think of the size of the generative landscape — those are suited to a particular time. I think how we learn how to read the clues and what the potentials are, is maybe what we're left with. Yeah.

CF: Want to take a crack at maybe describing the through-line... You know, what would *connect* then and now that has really sort of been a *spine* — or not.

BM: There is a spine — even with what I've said there is still an OSU spine — an “O-Spine” — anyway, whatever! There is an OSU spine. I think it sometimes is challenged — from inside and outside. But there is, I feel, still a belief in what the *movement* is, what the *dancing* is — and what is it saying. How — not how to *do* it, but how to take the sensations, objectify it enough to know what it is you that you're doing, figure out what it looks like, and feels like, put it next to someone else — that there is something about the kinesthetic reality of the body in relationship in time and space — and dynamic — that is an essential. Whether we called it Laban Studies, or the notation aspect that we're so still quite well-known for, there is, I think, still, that guiding principle. And we all know that with the internet, with all the possibilities that brings, with all that dispersal of point of view that brings, how hard it is to re-focus and kind of figure out how to put those things into service to where you want to *go*. So that's the challenge of the time. I think that we have these other ancillary directions that have spun off, in media, now in dance and science, and medicine, that are really supportive to the wider community in a very different way — but underlying that is still a belief in what does the body *do*? And what do we do with it *together*? So, *that* through-line, you know, through very different kinds of phases of what's popular in dance and — crazy-wonderful stuff, and more severe, and more narrative or more — I don't *know* — hip hop — you know, it's almost like the techniques are going to come and go, and how we get feeling we need to follow them or not will come and go. But the central idea that this is what the body can *do* — in relationship — and this is what it looks like and smells like, I think, is where we're at.

CF: I'd like to push you a little bit to go back: Helen was “intimidating,” you didn't interact with her much when you were a student, but you knew Helen for a very long time in very different contexts. Anything you would say about Helen and her leadership, or her legacy?

BM: Well, maybe Helen was intimidating because she knew where she was going so clearly, and she had a whole institution that she was directing: I mean, that's a lot of energy! That's a big ship to steer — in those times as a woman, as the director of a department who has just left PE? And become an art department? It was amazing, and my own entry into that is, you know, fine to be intimidated — that there is a direction that was being carved. And I think that we are living with that, and through her perceptions, and *really*, her sense of, like, what is *forward* here? And again, I don't think that she was waylaid by this particular style or another one or the budget here, and that: she just made it happen, and set us in motion. That was then followed by Vickie Blaine and Karen Bell, and all of the succeeding ones — I mean, I think every department chair and director of this department, not just the Chair, but the *director* has shifted the ship in whatever ways to respond to the times. But it had to be in motion in a really perceivable and *felt* way, and that's what Helen did for us.

CF: You originally worked with Vickie as an advisor, and as you've said, you learned a lot from her, working under her in UDC. What about afterwards, what about your long-term relationship with Vickie Blaine and her work? Anything to say there?

BM: Yeah, what I was saying about the OSU community, that matrix of support, *Vickie* — really, when I think about it — I wonder if all the undergrads that I saw afterwards probably would refer to Vickie, maybe before they would Helen? Maybe they had worked with Vickie in UDC, so they knew her on that creative level. Vickie did a great job of keeping in contact with people over the years — and with me. We weren't, you know, best buddies — but we kept track often enough so that she saw where I was heading, she knew of my work with Nina — was really supportive, she knew my work once I left Nina and went on my own, and was supportive of that as well. Supportive in that, well, she brought me *back*. But what I mean to say is that though we weren't in contact a lot, I could feel or I knew of other people who were making those connections.

CF: Okay, let's get to your final coming back. Karen Bell brought you back, I think 2000 — or something like that.

BM: Winter of '99 as a Visiting Artist, and then by the Fall of 2000, I was a Professor.

CF: Talk about that decision, and what that was like.

BM: Well, it had been almost twenty-five years since I'd graduated. I feel I just had a fascinating and just a fabulous — and *still* have a fabulous...I don't even want to call it a *career* in Dance, but a *time* in this field that I'm very grateful for, and am still consumed with in one way or another. But I think by the late 90s, other things were also coming into play. For the company, we had a really successful run — lots of touring, international touring. After the Mapplethorpe censoring, the NEA4, a few years after that, things were really calming down, less activity for the company. I was doing a lot of work on my own, doing commissions for different companies and things like that, and realizing that, you know, I would have a residency, have a really deep relationship with a group of students or dancers for two weeks, and then break it off and then start another one the next week. And it was emotionally really hard. I found that I was maybe withdrawing a little bit from the process — and it's always *been* about the process. So, Karen Bell kind of made an offer of “Well, why not *try* this?” This quarter-long, ten-weeks-at-a-time — a way of connecting back to my roots and things like that, but also another way of living that was *not* New York. And I think I was approaching my 50s — I was 50 or so — pretty much? So things like a porch and a garden for, I really was — if not aching for — then just kind of longing for another way of living. A few more closets, perhaps. And so, I felt a little cautious about starting it, but I *loved* the *teaching*. I did! I found that there was something that could happen over ten weeks that could not happen over three weeks at the Bates Festival, or a week and a half someplace else. That there was another kind of *learning* for *me* about what that connection could be — with students, and with colleagues, that I was anxious to try. I think Karen also made it easy in allowing me to work here, or setting up a situation where I could work two of three quarters, and use the rest of the time to either go back to New York, or continue touring work or developing work with the company, which I did. I think that's also an interesting shift just thinking of the field itself, dealing with the re-shift of the economy, the creative economy of how *do* you sustain a company, what are other kinds of strategies that you have to use and how do you make work? And so we were able to continue and use this *whole* university as a resource — besides just the copy machines! But there's a library, there's studios, there's time, so I was able to bring dancers here for long residencies, which meant giving up a bit of the rehearsing five days a week, four hours a day for six months and then having a piece and putting it on the road. But kind of reconceiving what a group might *be*. So, what if we worked for two years, to develop a piece, say — with multiple

residencies in a place like this with all of these studios here. I think the field sort of caught up with that as well: funders started responding to the idea that maybe the work that is developed over a longer period of time has a chance to *find* itself. So I think that my time here as a professor also coincided with a shift in the strategic organization of that whole creative collaboration: dancers and presenters and venues and universities taking another kind of peer-to-peer role, which has been great to have been a part of.

CF: I'm thinking back to years when you weren't here, and there was always a poster with your picture, that said on the bottom...I think it said, "For me, Ohio State IS dance." Would you like to talk about that?

BM: No, no. I remember them asking about it, and then it showed up everywhere.

CF: Bebe, is there anything else you'd like to say about your connection to OSU, about the department, about Helen, about anything? This has been great.

BM: I feel like I want to talk to you guys (former students who are part of the VDC team and filming this discussion). I'm hearing former students, or keeping that in my head... It's so interesting now, getting ready to leave this department.¹ And we all *know* it's a complex feeling: there's a future, and there's a past, and there's a right now and deadlines and all of that stuff. But this idea of context that I think I got by coming here — and you know, you sort of realize it on the way out — but context and community, and without knowing where they're going to take you, is a gift of this place or this time. I mean, I'm sure other departments feel this, too. But maybe taking the time to actually look and know that these people that you know now — as students, grads and undergrads — you will know, and that this is how you're shaping your creative life. It's like the boundaries that are given are there for a purpose, you know, just to make your way forward. And I think of the effect of that community for me, but also my colleagues over time here as a teacher. We are just lucky to be able to keep this field, this form, in mind and body as we then negotiate, move away — kind of re-find another aesthetic that we hadn't thought was there, or another way of teaching that is available, all around us. And that back-and-forth, that push-and-pull is really how we form ourselves.

CF: Well-said. (To the VDC team members): Anything from you two?

MDB: Do you want to talk a little bit about — I don't know if this is applicable — but your choreographic research here, the kind of things that you...like *Dirf*² — that was before me, but I feel like that was such a —

BM: That was before *you*???

MDB: It was, it was the year before I came.

BM: Oh God!

CF: Impossible!

¹ This interview occurred within days of Bebe's official retirement date.

² 2012

BM: Oh man! That was like one of my favorite things, *ever!*

CF: Mine, too!

MDB: Yeah, if you want to talk about any of those...

BM: Oh, *Dirt, Prey*³... oh, and what was the one...it has a long title, But it had Karen Ivy, Jacqueline Thompson...I did a piece to a Hilary Hann violin partita, oh!

Yeah, unexpectedly, one of my favorite things about being here has been making repertory works with students — in a way that I would never be able to do out in the field. You know, work with twelve, fifteen, or more at a time — and finding another kind of language and form and, just a dialogue, the daily dialogue that I had to give up after leaving New York. But like some kind of that “This is how we build, this is the conversation between us.” There have been several pieces that stand out in my mind: *Dirt* — done in the old Agricultural Arena near the West Campus that was a huge space covered with four inches of dirt, and with arena seating where the chickens were shown — and just throwing ourselves in this, and...I don’t know... With every process there’s that “I don’t know what we have,” we just keep making stuff — let’s just make, make, make, make and then by the end you put it together and there’s a piece there. Which leads me to think that it’s really about the process, it’s about what’s that weekly, daily dialogue? How do we parse out our attention — for me, choreographically, over time, but more in just this back-and-forth with my collaborators? I guess there’s teaching going on as well, and learning — but it’s also less about the final piece, than how do we find a language? What’s the *tone* of the studio that I want to build? What’s the tone that we can all fit in? So, how do I work with people and teach? You gotta’ have jokes, you gotta’ have jokes, you gotta’ have jokes! There’s something about finding the humanity — or the human element — that is fundamental to the creative process. And so out of it, moving sixteen people across a field of dirt — I don’t know. It’s just how to do that, and who to do that with? It’s been great.

JC: The project you did with Motion Capture...

CF: *Landing Place*.⁴

JC: Would you talk about that? In context with technology arriving...

BM: Yep, yep, yep, yep! I’m trying to think when this was — in 2002? Kind of around 2002. We had a former faculty member, Johannes Birringer, who put together a technology week-end — (referring to herself) kicking and screaming: *so* not interested! — but somehow I showed up. Scott deLahunta was there, the people from Troika Ranch were there, Motion Capture, ACCAD were all involved in some way...I put on this sort of reactive suit that Troika Ranch had developed — and I had done something like this once before. I thought it was really boring, ugh...but the bells and whistles seemed to work in a different way in that I found as a performer, negotiating my environment, knowing that I was changing, say, a visual behind me, or entering into a new audio zone that my sense of that space was creating; that narrative that I was creating was alive and maybe worth investigating. So, something about that said, “Okay, maybe I’ll investigate this a little further.”

³ 2000

⁴ 2005

The next step was going into the Mo-Cap lab —and I had two weeks of time there — like, 10:00 – 5:00 all day, six dancers — and no idea what to do with it, and no instructions beyond, like, pasting the little things on. So just trying to figure out, “Well, what is this for? What can I learn from this?” And my aim was to see how this would affect me choreographically, and I found that it came back to *weight*. There was something that I learned about “weight-at-risk” — is what shows up on the screen. With all the dots, unless somebody’s weight is engaged, the dots aren’t all that interesting. Particularly, say, if one party has no dots and they’re in partnership, or partnering with somebody else. And then you can actually *see* the play of weight when it gets to a risky point, and how it’s solved. And that was something that I could not see otherwise. When they’re standing, and even if in a live moment there’s all this kind of zinging going back and forth between two people, on the *screen* they’re perfectly still, and there’s nothing of interest. So, what to do about that? We did end up working with animators to kind of make something more, you know — working with Vita Berezina-Blackburn to dress up those dots in very interesting ways was more of an *afterthought* — but like, what about the *weight* shows up? There was another instance where one of the dancers was improvising, looks beautiful — *bababababa* — and one of the balls fell off, and I could *track* where he went from dancer to *person* to pick up the ball. And so that’s *quantifiable*. That’s a piece of information that you could recreate, you could look at it from all different ways, and what to do with that, I don’t know, but just the fact that there is something quantifiable in what had felt like just a kinesthetic response was pretty interesting.

CF: Thanks, Bebe. Always great to talk with you.

BM: Oh, great fun! Thanks for asking.