

VDC Interview Transcript

Rhythm in Shoes Group:

7.2.19

Total Time: 1:28:16

Home of Sharon Leahy and Rick Good

1627 E. Main St.

Dayton, OH 43205

**Key:**

**Green highlighting:** indicates (other) organizations and individuals that might be useful in mapping connections within and outside of the state.

**Blue highlighting:** titles of works referenced in interview

CF: Candace Feck

SL: Sharon Leahy

RG: Rick Good

JS: Janet Schroeder

BB: Beth Butler Wright

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC team)

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team)

CF: Well, it is a pleasure to meet each of you. I know Janet, but not so much in this context. In preparation for this interview, I was thinking what a remarkable history you have: twenty-three years as a company, plus all of the other things that you all have done! — but twenty-three years of keeping a company together that does a kind of work that is not in the forefront of public awareness and attention — that is amazing, and I'm sure it took a lot out of you, so congratulations on holding it all together.

RG: Oh, thanks. That makes it all worthwhile.

(There is group laughter)

CF: I seriously doubt that!

RG: No, the funny thing is, it does.

SL: Yeah, but I would also have to say that imagining it now? It was easier when we did it than it would be now. If you imagine doing it now, it seems like a Herculean task. When *we* did it, there was more support for it. The country was more eager to have arts experiences, and to gather for arts experiences. So much has changed. That's a little bit of a sad note. Thank you, anyway. It *was* hard.

CF: I am thinking that *would* be a Herculean task, but what you had was just a Sisyphean one...

SL: Yeah. Exactly.

CF: I'd like to circle back to that sad note, but I'd like you to introduce yourselves for the record. I'd like to know who you are, your involvement with the company, and so on. Why don't we start here, with Rick?

RG: Okay. Well, my name is Rick Good. I was with Rhythm in Shoes for the long haul. I was Sharon's partner in running the company, and I was the musical side of it. I kept the band in check, which is a very specific thing when it comes to playing for dancers, so I imagine we'll talk some more about that later. I've been a musician all my life, and I was playing in a band — playing banjo and guitar — playing largely traditional American music, which is the music that Rhythm in Shoes is rooted in. And while I was in that band, I met Sharon. She was dancing in the same traditions. Eventually, a few years later, we got involved in Rhythm in Shoes together, and that's what we did, for twenty-three years.

SL: I'm Sharon Leahy, and I was the Artistic Director of Rhythm in Shoes, and for awhile, the Executive Director, although that didn't sit with me very well — it wasn't my God-given position in life, to be an Executive Director! So I was the Artistic Director of Rhythm in Shoes, and the creator of the majority of its material — probably 95% of its original material. I am rooted in traditional popular music, both old-time Americana and swing era jazz, coming from parents who were dancers in that great era, and I use this material to kind of make a contemporary statement about life because people need to have their minds opened and their eyes clear about what's going on in the world, and I think it's an artist's job to provide that. So Rhythm in Shoes was my palette that I used for that.

BW: I'm Beth Wright, and I was a modern dancer with Dayton Contemporary [Dance Company]<sup>1</sup> second company<sup>2</sup> when I met Sharon, and I met her because I was teaching her classes at Jeraldyn's School of Dance<sup>3</sup> when she would go on tour. So she came back, and she was, like: "Oh, I kind of like what you're doing with the kids!" So then we got together, and just started to dance, and I just kind of got into the company that way.

JS: I'm Janet Schroeder, and I danced with Rhythm in Shoes from 2005 to 2010, which were the last five years of the company. I auditioned first in 2000, and I didn't get the job, and my heart was broken, but I moved to Dayton and I was teaching high school English, and I would go and take the 7:31 - Rhythm in Shoes classes on Monday nights, and eventually when the company was on tour, I was *teaching* the classes. And then in 2005, there was another audition, I got the job, and I got to sort of live a dream, which was to be a professional performer in my favorite form, tap dancing; along the way, I learned to clog. I had never done Appalachian dance before, and it was through Rhythm in Shoes that I did. And then after the company disbanded, I got an MFA in Dance and eventually a

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<sup>1</sup> Dayton Contemporary Dance Company: Established in 1968 by Jeraldyn Blunden, DCDC is a repertory company based in Dayton, OH that hosts the largest repertory of African-American-based contemporary dance in the world. The company travels nationally and internationally and has been recognized by critics worldwide. *DCDC and its founder, Jeraldyn Blunden, are featured as a separate entity within this VDC collection.*

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1975, DCDC2 is the pre-professional ensemble for Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, a training and performing ensemble.

<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1963 by internationally acclaimed DCDC founder Jeraldyn Blunden, the school remains a cornerstone of training in the Dayton community. Though closely associated with it, the school operates as a for-profit entity and is not owned or operated by the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

PhD in Dance, and Rhythm in Shoes is one of the subjects of my dissertation research, and I'm continuing to research and write about the company.

CF: Great. You mentioned your years with the company. Beth, would you mind telling us about your time with the company?

BW: Oh, sure. Let's see, it was the summer of 1994. I did, my first performance was at **Jacob's Pillow**. I think there was a teaser on the way...

SL: Yes, probably.

BW: 1994 to 2003.

SL: I moved out to Ohio from New York, where I was working as a dancer, and thought that my life was over, but quickly kind of fell into putting together this company. Actually, I was handed the reins of this company from an old friend who was a dancer and a fiddler, who had a very traditional step dance company, and he was going on to get his PhD in Ethnomusicology — (to Rick): Is that what Frank's <sup>5</sup>PhD was in? So he didn't want this little fledgling company anymore — it was based in Bloomington, Indiana, and it was called the Shuffle Creek Dancers. And he said they're young, they're passionate, they want to do things, and I said, "Well, I'll set a piece on them, and if they'll go out on my limbs, then I might be interested, because I'm not interested in archival work. I don't want to do "This is the dance as it was done by — I want to make new work." So I set a piece on them, and they were *very* courageous, and so I moved out here and I said "Okay, I'll take this little group of dancers and see what I can do." And that was 1986, I believe, and I was there until 2010.

CF: You moved from New York to do that?

SL: No, I moved from New York to be with him (she gestures to Rick), because we also had both had two children, and my children were getting to the place where — I had two boys and it was getting to the point where New York was not as friendly of a place...we're talking about the early 80s, so New York wasn't Six Flags over Manhattan: you know, it was a pretty down and dirty place. It just all seemed to be the right thing for me — even though I thought I was moving out of the world's capital of dance...you know, I was moving to — *where???* But it really was *such* an amazing move, for so many reasons: One, I had this little nub of a budding company that I could grow; Two, he was here and he wanted to do the same thing in music that I wanted to do in dance, and Three, Ohio — *who knew?* — loved dance, and was a very rich place, and supportive place, to have a dance company! It was also not coastal, and therefore you got attention if you could raise your work up to

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<sup>4</sup> A lauded venue, Jacob's Pillow is the oldest performance space specifically designed for dance, which hosts an annual summer festival at its location in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts. As America's longest-running international dance festival, The Pillow presents world premieres, U.S. debuts, diverse artists, and collaborations with composers, visual artists, and writers comprise over 150 performances presented to thousands of visitors from across the U.S. and around the globe.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Hall, formerly a fiddler in the Easy Street Band in Bloomington, IN, helped to start the Shuffle Creek Dancers, the forerunner of Rhythm in Shoes. Hall earned his PhD in Anthropology from Indiana University, and currently lives in County Galway, Ireland. He is the author of *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty* (2009).

the level of national prominence, you would get the attention, and thus the support. So, all of that fell into place to make Rhythm in Shoes, to really nurture the company, as it was emerging.

Have I talked too much?

CF: Not at all! I have some follow-up questions, but I would like for Rick to give the years he was involved with the company.

RG: Yeah, I remember that first project with the Shuffle Creek Dancers really well, because that was really the opportunity for us — for Sharon and I — to collaborate with dance and music in a more creative way than we ever had before. Just as a little footnote, prior to that, there would be, like, a clog team and an old-time string band — separate, at a festival, and...

SL: ...and they weren't called teams (laughing).

RG: ... and the old-time string band would play the music for the clogging team, and they would just play a generic tune for a piece of choreography, and along that process, I would discover that here were certain tunes that would really work better for certain dances, and thought "Okay, what if this was all developed together? What if the dance was choreographed *to* the tune..."

SL: ...or the tune was created to the dance...

RG: Yeah. So, when Sharon came out to do that piece with the Shuffle Creek Dancers, and kind of see how far out on that limb they could go — we were starting to do mash-ups of old-time tunes, and it was really fun. Because as any artist develops, you know, you kind of — like as a musician, I remember "becoming" certain artists that I loved. You know, like becoming James Taylor for six months, that kind of thing. But you get to a point where you start using everything you know, and you start to become yourself. And this was the beginning of that process, we were now becoming ourselves, we're doing our own work here, we're not just archiving something here or passing along a tradition. We're creating something here. And that was in '86 and we went all the way to 2010, doing that.

SL: I was just thinking about when you're growing as an artist. For six months he becomes James Taylor, and I immediately went, "Oh, for six months I became **Twyla Tharp**,<sup>6</sup> I became **Meredith Monk**,<sup>7</sup> I became **Pina Bausch**,<sup>8</sup>..." Who were all the people? **Honi Coles**,<sup>9</sup> I became **Sandman**<sup>10</sup> ... all the people that you really went after.

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<sup>6</sup> A highly regarded American dancer, prolific choreographer, and author who lives and works in New York City. Her work often uses classical music, jazz, and contemporary pop music, and has been performed in an unusual range of venues and types of performance, including modern, post-modern and ballet concert stages, Broadway, and television, among others.

<sup>7</sup> An iconoclastic and multi-disciplinary American composer, performer, director, vocalist, filmmaker, and choreographer. Primarily known for her vocal innovation, Monk has influenced post-modern dance, opera, site-specific work, among many other areas of accomplishment.

<sup>8</sup> Bausch (1940 – 2009) was a German dancer and choreographer who blended movement, sound, and spectacular stage sets, developing an influential genre known as *Tanztheater*. She created the company Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, which performs internationally.

In *our* age of dance, we had to actually *physically* go after them — *we* had to go where *they* were. I could not, like: “Twyla Tharp” — watch everything she did. I had to go over, and over, and over, and over, and over to her concerts wherever they were. I would follow it around. Then Meredith Monk, you'd have to go and see her. And you'd have to go to their classes, and get in their workshops, and listen to them when they did panels. And you'd have to go to all these places physically, which for a dancer seems a *better* way of doing things, do you know what I mean? I often wonder now, because I go into some studios and I think, “They're a little lazy.” I think it's because they don't have to chase it down. It comes right to them, boom! Anyway, that is a parking lot, and sorry I went in it.

CF: Not at all. I think what I'd *like* to do, if I could, considering the historical focus of this project...

SL: Yes!

CF: And we're talking about *your* history, and Beth brought up Jeraldyn's School of the Dance, and I'm thinking you probably all have some response to this, but especially since *you* came from outside of Dayton and plopped yourself down here...Bloomington is not exactly next door, by the way...

SL: Well, they came to me — that's how that worked out.

CF: Yes, but I'm curious, what did the landscape of dance feel like and look like here when you landed? If you could talk about that, and perhaps connections — I know **Miss Jo**<sup>11</sup> is on one of your tapes...Any of those connections from Dayton, I'm interested in — and musically, as well.

SL: Yeah. Well, there was Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, and the **Dayton Ballet**,<sup>12</sup> which was a very strong regional ballet company, both here. And when *we* landed, *we* brought the percussive dance, and so it was this trio of really strong dance companies that people all of a sudden got *so* behind, I would say. We were celebrated as a trio — of course, the funding was never equal, but I won't go down that road — but we were celebrated *artistically* on the same level, which for me as an artist, that was, you know, that was what made it all great, is that artistically we were all celebrated on the same level. The dancers were a unit, all of the dancers hung out together — the ballet dancers, DCDC dancers, Rhythm in Shoes. There was a dancer-produced award<sup>13</sup> for two of

<sup>9</sup> Charles “Honi” Coles: 1911 – 1992. An American actor and tap dancer, noted for his distinctive, smooth and elegant, effortless-seeming style.

<sup>10</sup> Howard “Sandman” Sims: 1917 – 2003. An African-American **tap dancer** who began his career in vaudeville. He was skilled in a style ... He was known for a style of dancing that he performed in a wooden sandbox of his own construction, thus acquiring his nickname from the sand he sprinkled to alter and amplify the sound of his dance steps.

<sup>11</sup> A reference to Josephine Schwarz (1908-2004): The younger of two dance-loving sisters, “Miss Jo” was a devoted artist and the main teacher and artistic director of the Dayton Ballet, which she co-founded with her sister, Hermene, among many other accomplishments in the field. *The Schwarz sisters are highlighted in a separate feature of the VDC.*

<sup>12</sup> The Dayton Ballet Company was founded by the Schwarz sisters in 1937. It is heralded as the second oldest regional ballet company in the nation, and the oldest ballet company in the state of Ohio.

<sup>13</sup> Established in 1996 by DCDC founder Jeraldyn Blunden, the JOSIE Award was created to recognize individual excellence in the art of dance. Named in tribute to Josephine Schwarz, the JOSIE Award acknowledges the significant contributions of dancers to the Dayton community while paying homage to a “pillar” of the Dayton dance community.

them every year — two dancers in any of the three companies that kind of *shone* that season, and this was all, you know, the dancers really knowing each other and being together. There were cross-classes, companies taught for each other, company members did, we were all in the same, we were next to — DCDC and Rhythm in Shoes were in the same building, and the Ballet was next door. It was a thriving time for dance in Dayton, and it was financially supported by the NEA<sup>14</sup>, by the Ohio Arts Council,<sup>15</sup> by the Montgomery County Cultural District<sup>16</sup>. You know, it was a rich time for dance in Dayton. And we were embraced, and I think it came mostly from the top-down in that embracing. It was Jeraldine and Miss Jo, totally embraced me: “We want you here. You were *sent* to us! You’re a fresh energy,” you know, and they wanted me here and they helped me in every way that they could. I remember just waltzing into Jeraldine’s office and plopping myself down on the couch and, you know, complaining, you know? About dancers, or schedules...and she would listen, listen, listen, and then “Now, get out there! Just go right back *out* there. Just go on!” But, any time, I could go into that office. So yeah, it was rich, and that’s *how* people thrive. You do not *do* this alone. It’s not a one-person possibility even, you know? It’s a collaborative between all of the artists you work with and then the artists who work here in the same genre, and the artists who work in supporting genres, and unless everybody comes to the same page, then no one can really succeed fully. And so it was a rich time, I would say. It was a very rich time. And it lasted pretty much...it started suffering in the aughts, I call them, and then *really* suffered with the financial crash — and never really returned.

CF: That sounds right. I mean, the whole country has been suffering in many ways since the aughts. Beth, you worked with DCDC. Do you have anything to say about that transition, or that community?

BW: For me, being in that building with everyone, you know, with DCDC... we would go in in the morning in the DCDC studios, and we would all work out together. That was our warm-up before class, before we started. And the ballet dancers would come over; I ended up living with two of the ballet dancers — we rented a house in Kettering together. It was very...we were all a family, and it was amazing. One of my very best friends was in DCDC, and we were the ones — Deshona Pepper Robertson<sup>17</sup> — we were the ones who started to have a party so that we could get together and know everyone, and I thought that was really fun. We had, oh gosh, it was a blast— and after that started and Nate<sup>18</sup> lived with ballet dancers and we really functioned together. If we were working on something — I remember one of the ballet dancers saying to me, “Can you help me with my arms in this section?” — of a piece that *they* were doing. “Yeah, great!” Helping them learn how to do back walk-overs, and they would help me with things that I needed, and it was awesome. It was just an amazing moment in time.

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<sup>14</sup> Funded in 1965, The National Endowment for the Arts is an independent federal agency that funds the arts.

<sup>15</sup> Founded in 1965 to foster and encourage the development of the arts and assist the preservation of Ohio's cultural heritage, The Ohio Arts Council (OAC) is a state agency that funds and supports quality arts experiences to strengthen Ohio communities culturally, educationally, and economically.

<sup>16</sup> The Montgomery County Arts and Cultural District (MCACD) is a government body that supports, nurtures, and encourages the development and preservation of arts and culture throughout Montgomery County (Dayton, OH), primarily by funding arts and cultural organizations and institutions.

<sup>17</sup> Currently the Dance Director at Stivers School of the Arts in Dayton, Roberston was a principal dancer with DCDC for 12 years, 1992- 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Nate Cooper is the son of Sharon Leahy, and spent more than ten years performing in the company.

RG: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

CF: (To Rick) Is there something you'd like to add from your perspective?

RG: Well, what hasn't been mentioned, in the same building was an organization called [Cityfolk](#)<sup>19</sup>. City Folk produced music concerts. [Phyllis Brzozowska](#)<sup>20</sup>, who was the founder of City Folk, I had known her already through the Dayton music scene. Cityfolk was given an evening, in the [Viva Victoria Festival](#),<sup>21</sup> which was the opening of the brand new [Victoria Theater](#)<sup>22</sup> that had just been refurbished...

SL: It was 1990.

RG: ... and she in turn came to Sharon and said, "Do something for this evening. It was like a Tuesday night during this big week, and there was something *huge* happening every night. Sharon just jumped right on it and said, "Okay, this is the piece — we're going to go *way out* on this..."

SL: Well, it was an opportunity to be in front of the whole community of Dayton —you know, *everyone* was going to be there.

RG: Yeah, yeah, so it was like "Seize the moment," which I think, looking back, we certainly did because we brought in a band that started out as an old-time string band — they were out of Tompkins County, up around the Finger Lakes region of New York, and they played old-time traditional music, but then they went electric, and started writing their own songs — but they were *rooted* in the tradition; they still had that really strong rooted rhythm of American music. They were called [The Horse Flies](#),<sup>23</sup> and they were very cutting-edge, their music was. And Sharon said "We're going to collaborate with them. I'm going to create pieces to their music." And there were a couple of things that they played of *our* rep, too. But these two groups came together — Rhythm in Shoes and The Horseflies came together and did a concert, and it just...it was...*magic*. The audience didn't know what hit 'em— it was, like, *whoa!* And that started — that was basically our first *home* concert, and so every year after that Cityfolk produced our home concert ...

SL: ...for ten years...

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<sup>19</sup> Founded in 1981 and closing in 2013, Cityfolk was a multi-cultural performing arts presenting organization in Dayton, OH that hosted 8 to 12 live musical performances ranging from the Jazz Series, to Celtic music and the World Rhythms Series. Cityfolk also hosted a popular annual summer festival, in which Rhythm in Shoes regularly participated.

<sup>20</sup> Co-founder and Executive Director of Cityfolk from 1981-1997. she also served as the Executive Director of the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company from 1999 to 2003, among many other positions in arts and culture nationwide.

<sup>21</sup> A festival established by the Victoria Theatre Association in 1990 to celebrate the renovation of Dayton's Victoria Theatre.

<sup>22</sup> The Victoria (Victory) Theatre is an historic building in downtown Dayton, which became the home of the Dayton Ballet School and Company, until its move to The Shuster Center.

<sup>23</sup> An American alternative rock/folk band, founded in the late 1970s in Ithaca, NY under the name "Tompkins County Horse Flies by husband and wife Jeff Claus and Judy Hyman, Richie Stearns and John Hayward.

RG: ...for ten years, and each year it was like, “Okay, what do we do this year? Who can we collaborate with this year?” That kind of became a template, and Dayton pretty much anticipated that this was going to be a big show, this was going to be worth going to. Whatever we wanted to bring to them, they were ready to take. I mean, what a great environment *that* was! And I would also echo the feeling that it was a wonderful age of camaraderie with DCDC and the Ballet. Looking back, it was really a luxury just to be able to, you know, go down and see what they were doing in *their* studio, or like Sharon — walk in, sit down and talk to Jeraldyn for awhile, and she was always so supportive. And she was so *wise* in the way that she nurtured what we were doing. First, she chose a piece of our rep to put on their second company, and then a little while later, she asked Sharon to actually create a piece for the first company. And then a little while later, we were collaborating on *concerts* where both companies came together and were doing work together. It just grew and grew, and those dancers became really good friends, and still are.

SL: So, before I came here, I danced in New York with **Livia Vanever**<sup>24</sup>. Are you familiar with the **Vanever Caravan**<sup>25</sup>? Yeah, she and her husband had a company, with live musicians, live music and stuff, and so it gave me the idea — you know Livia’s work, probably — it gave me the idea that it was possible to have a family and a company. And she actually showed me that that was possible, and so every person along the way that you go, they show you one thing that’s possible that you want to do, and you’re just blessed when you run into them on your path, when you need: “Oh! Yep! Look at that! She’s doing that. I can do that!” And you move on and you grow who you are as an artist, because the people support, you know, your vision, really. And we talk sentimentally about the old days and I know this is a history project, but throughout *all* of Rhythm in Shoes, I feel like we — well, *maybe* when it became difficult, maybe the wagons were circled-in tighter, but we still supported each other in that same way, throughout all — to the end. And almost the decision to end — there’s a series of unfortunate events that befell us — but nonetheless, the decision to end for *me* was I felt like it was going to be *really* hard to continue that — to both psychically, emotionally and financially — be able to support artists to have a life, to make a living, to have a life. This was my goal *all along*, that the people in the company — this was your living, this was what you did, you will be paid as well as you could possibly be paid, you will be supported to do *your* art, to create *your* work in this environment. And when that became almost *impossible* is when we thought, you know, maybe there’s a better way now, we’re going to close this, and move on, and we’ll all move on to other things. I mean, like I said, there were other — there was a series of unfortunate events that befell us as well, but it all came to that, at that point. You know, we decided to do one last season, and then everyone wanted us — “Last *season?* Last *season!*” — so you know, we had eighteen months of great work, and took it out — and Janet was instrumental in getting me through the end. Just...I couldn't have done it without her...

CF: Janet, coming in in 2005, the question about the given landscape might look a little different — and you may have something to say about that — but I do have another one, because I am thinking back to your nomination letter, and your description about what jumped out at you when you first

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<sup>24</sup> Livia Drapkin Vanaver is the co-founder with husband Bill Vanaver of the Vanaver Caravan (1972), based in New Paltz, NY. Among other roles, Lydia is Artistic Director of the company.

<sup>25</sup> The Vanaver Caravan is a Hudson Valley-based nonprofit organization that performs original, world-infused choreography and music, both locally and internationally.



saw the company at [Ohio Northern](#)<sup>26</sup>, which was the *joy* that they exuded on stage when they were performing. I wonder if you'd like to talk about that. And if you'd like to talk about the 2005 entry point, that would be great, too.

JS: Yeah. So, thinking about the dance and music scene in Dayton when I came to town, what everyone has talked a lot about is collaboration between organizations. And I think one of the *highlights* of my experience with Rhythm in Shoes was when we collaborated with the [Dayton Philharmonic](#).<sup>27</sup> I got to do two of those shows — there were others before I was with the company — but in thinking about the end of the company as well, one of our final performances was with the Philharmonic, and it was one of the most magical performance experiences of my life! I mean, we were in the [Shuster Center](#),<sup>28</sup> which is huge — this is — I always wanted to be a performer on Broadway, and this is where the Broadway tours performed — and here we are, and we're being backed up by an orchestra! I mean, the Philharmonic Orchestra! *This is insane!* And one of the pieces that we did was sort of a retrospective — it was to [Bolero](#),<sup>29</sup> Sharon stood center stage, just tapping out this regular cadence...

SL: It's the snare drum part...

JS: (She vocally imitates the opening rhythm) — and behind her, we were just processing out, doing a greatest hits of Rhythm in Shoes, and in an eight or nine minute dance, I had six costume changes! And I was [Baltimore Girls](#)<sup>30</sup> in my plaid skirt and my sneakers and my pom-poms, or I was...

SL: [Streets of the Capitol](#).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ohio Northern University is a small private institution of higher education located near Ada, OH, near Lima. The Dance program, part of the School of Visual and Performing Arts, offers a dance minor and hosts a robust guest artist program.

<sup>27</sup> Founded in 1933, the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra is a regional orchestra with 83 contracted musicians. Since July 1, 2012, the DPO has been part of the Dayton Performing Arts Alliance along with Dayton Ballet and Dayton Opera.

<sup>28</sup> The Benjamin & Marian Schuster Performing Arts Center is a world-class, state-of-the-art performance hall which, among many other activities, houses the three arms of the Dayton Performing Arts Alliance: Dayton Ballet, Dayton Philharmonic and Dayton Opera.

<sup>29</sup> *Boléro* is a one-movement orchestral piece by French composer Maurice Ravel, originally composed as a ballet commissioned by Russian actress and dancer Ida Rubinstein. Already a well-known work, it became a very popular and recognizable piece following its use in the 1979 film *10*. The Rhythm in Shoes work of the same name was created by Leahy in 2010 in collaboration with the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, and according to company member Janet Schroeder, “explores the Zen of tap dance. While Sharon taps the composition’s relentlessly repetitive and signature snare drum part from downstage center, a cavalcade of vignettes representing years of RIS repertory crosses back and forth behind her,” who also notes that Ravel’s full orchestration was played live by the Dayton Philharmonic under the direction of conductor, Neal Gittleman.

<sup>30</sup> *Baltimore Girls* (1995), is described by Schroeder as “a whimsical look at gum-smacking, hula-hooping Catholic School girls.

<sup>31</sup> Created in 1994. Schroeder says that *Steps of the Capitol* “examines the issues of civil war through rhythmic footwork in wooden shoes and the wielding and whacking of wooden sticks as weapons. Commissioned by Jacob’s Pillow, the Flynn Theater and Cityfolk of Dayton, the work was funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, with music composed by Rick Good and Peter Sutherland.”

JS: ...*Streets of the Capitol*, with my sticks and my wooden shoes, and *Cowboy Rockettes*<sup>32</sup> from the Gilly Christmas Show, and this was an amazing — I think that that piece really, for me, was like, “This is the history of Rhythm in Shoes in one song, in one dance!” And it was *really hard*! Because you *barely* had time to change your clothes to get back out there, but it was wonderful, it was amazing. And I think that it sort of brings both — like it talks about collaboration. We were playing — the orchestra was playing in that concert as well some of Rick’s original music that had been orchestrated, there were dancers who had been in the company in the past but were not current company members, who were in the show with us: it was collaborative, it was historic, it really was kind of a culmination of such an amazing history — and at the same time, I think it speaks to the joy that the company staged in every performance. But it wasn’t *always* joyful — I mean, the piece *Streets of the Capitol* was very dark, *Rhythmic*<sup>33</sup> was very spiritual, but so much of the clogging — especially the clogging — was a celebration of music and dance, and also an embodiment of history but at the same time new and fresh, and so lively.

CF: Thanks for the jumping-off point for a question I brought. Before I let you go, I wonder if you could take us to whatever year it was that you were at Ohio Northern, and you saw these folks.

JS: I actually don't ... It was 1996 I think; I was in high school. I lived near Ohio Northern. People that I knew, that I danced with, ONU has this great tradition of ... They have this great guest artist program, and it's not just students who participate, people from the community can also participate. So I wasn't in it at the time, but some of my peers were dancing in that show. And so I went to see it. Interestingly, Rhythm in Shoes was never a guest artist at ONU while I was a student. So it was before I was a student and right after I graduated that the company had been there. I'd never performed with them there, but I knew of their legacy because of that.

*Rhythm tap dance*<sup>34</sup> was always my favorite genre, that's why I went to that audition in 2000, because I was like, "Well, this is what I love to do, and here they are. I want to do that." Five years later I got to. And I still do!

CF: Thanks.

SL: We had three Rhythm in Shoes dancers from Ohio Northern. In fact, we didn't have a lot of auditions formally. What would happen is if I would set a piece somewhere at a college, or another small company, I would just look for my favorite people — people I liked working with, people who were really talented. I would say, "Well, when you graduate, or when you're done with this, get in

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<sup>32</sup> Circa 2008, Schroeder describes this work as “a trio of high-kicking tap dancers, with choreography in the spirit of the Radio City Rockettes.”

<sup>33</sup> Made in 1991, Schroeder describes this work as “a contemporary, rhythmic work created through the study of the sacred geometric figure, the enneagram, and Baka Pygmy singing. [There are] three sections with a full ensemble of barefoot dancers dressed in white. In the first movement, the dancers are sitting cross-legged on stage, clapping rhythms to original music based on the enneagram, a nine-sided figure of sacred geometry. In the second movement, the dancers sing words from nursery rhymes (*Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and *Starlight, Star Bright*) to melodies adapted from Baka Pygmy field recordings, while moving and making body rhythms. The third movement is danced to the original song, *O Karuna*, (from the **Sanskrit** *kara*, indicating an action-based form of compassion).

<sup>34</sup> Rhythm tap is a sub-genre or style of percussive dance, emphasizing acoustics and musicality rather than the more visual aesthetics of the artform. Rhythm tap is associated with the jazz tradition of music, with its emphasis on improvisation and complex rhythmic development.

touch with us." And lots of people came that way. Laurie Bell<sup>35</sup> was a great source. If I needed somebody I'd say, "Laurie, who you got up there?" And three dancers came, she'd sent me beautiful three wonderful dancers who were very instrumental in the company — two, especially: Gina,<sup>36</sup> and Janet, very instrumental in the works of the company.

JS: Can I add something?

CF: Please!

JS: Sharon just said that they didn't have a lot of auditions. And it's interesting that I was at two of those rare auditions, right?

SL: The only two we've ever had, really.

JS: Right? I went to that first one, as I said, and I didn't get the job. I was showing up — I was going to class, I was going to all of the shows. Like, I saw everything that I could. After one holiday performance at Gilly's<sup>37</sup> I just stopped to... I wasn't trying to get a job *all* the time! — I just stopped to say, "Great show!" But Sharon said, "Oh, I remember you! You're that funny actress." That was sort of... the seed was planted. I knew I just needed to keep showing up.

That's really I think what ... I mean, that was my job even as a company member — keep showing up. Because that's how this stuff happens. Keep showing up, both being here, but also willing to do whatever, *willing* to "Sure, I'll try those moves," or "Yes I'll do that laundry," — or whatever it was, because again that's how this company could be what it was for twenty-three years.

SL: And it's funny that we didn't have a lot of auditions because I never really tried to replace someone who was leaving with that person. I was always like, "Okay, well, that person is leaving and they're taking their skills. Let's be open to who comes along, and what their skills are." I knew that I could teach people what I wanted them to do. I learned this from Twyla Tharp a long, long, time ago. I think she changed her mind on it in later years, but I'm not sure. But she said early on, "Find your dancers raw. Train them yourself." That is really important. If you're doing work that is quirky at all, or in its own category, or not typical, then it's really possible to find raw talent, and just train people to do ... and that's why people stayed around in the company for a long time. Because they would come, and then they realized, "I'm going to get a chance to do ... I'm going to do a little acting; I'm going to sing; now I'm doing some postmodern dance theater; now I'm tap dancing; now I'm going to clog; now I'm doing a rapper sword dance!" They got the opportunity to keep learning and keep challenging themselves as artists.

CF: Many ways we could go here, but something that I'm interested in all of you commenting on perhaps is, just this ... It seems like the company had served multiple purposes. One was maintaining the cultural and physical legacy of step dance or Appalachian dance forms or ... I'm not sure exactly how you referred to it. But maintaining that, the cultural and the physical legacy of it, passing it on?

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<sup>35</sup> Chair of Dance at The Ohio Northern University, Bell, whose career at ONU began in 1991 until her retirement in 2019, is *also an informant for the Elaine Valois feature of the VDC*.

<sup>36</sup> A reference to Gina Unverferth-Burgei (now Fossitt), who was a member of the company 2000-2009.

<sup>37</sup> A Dayton jazz club at 132 S. Jefferson St, named for its longtime owner, Gerald "Jerry" Gillotti.

SL: Yes.

CF: Okay. *And* creating new work...

SL: Yes.

CF: ...which doesn't always go with that preservation part. That's already a whole different kettle of fish. Then, I think a third thing is educating audiences — education about these things that you were doing. I mean, what a noble, and grand, and good thing! I wonder if you'd talk about all the parts of that, or any part of it if you'd like to — anybody.

JS: There is so much there!

SL: Yeah. There's a lot there. I don't ever consider myself an archivist. When you say preserving the traditional physical culture, that I say yes, deeply — in the fact that I am preserving it as it was in its time. I am not preserving it now as it was in that time. For instance, clogging in old time music is ... I mean, my children do that. My children play music and are step dancers. So, what more preservation can there be than that?

My grandchildren are about to do it now. In *that* sense, yes. Absolutely, preserving. But there is a difference between that and being an archivist; I've never considered myself an archivist. Preserving, absolutely, because that preservation gives you your *soul*, and then your soul is where you create the contemporary work that is useful in *your* life. It would be, for instance, seeing how I clogged in this show, how I was dressed, how I did it in the show we just did this weekend — *not* what you would see in an archival picture of someone clogging from the way backs. And where *are* the way-backs, anyway? Where do the way-backs stop? Does it stop in the thirties, twenties, last century, century before that? 1600s? You know, people were striking the ground with their feet, and making sounds forever. Where do you stop in the past? Anyway, yes, in the preserving and making of the new. That's what this company embodied. For instance, both of *these* girls (Beth and Janet) were required to go south with me to a music festival, and camp out, and dance on a board!

Now, that ... (gesturing to Janet) She came out of musical theater, and (to Beth) she came out of modern dance. It's like, "Well, okay, here you go. Pack your sleeping bag, because we're going south." That was a big part of *us*. We did that all the time. We brought the kids up. I have blue ribbons from clogging contests in West Virginia. So, I *know* the form. My body knows the form.

That's what I mean when I thought, "I could teach them. I could teach them that. I can show them the roots of that, and teach it to them — by the way we live!" Then they brought those more contemporary skills that we can then go, "Okay, now, I could put all this in the tumbler, and see what kind of movement *style* is generated from this."

I remember some of our early reviews from **Deborah Jowitt**<sup>38</sup> saying, "I can't identify the movement style — jumps, turns, hops, smacks. It's a completely *inventive* movement style that she's doing." Once I realized that I could do all that, and then have mentors show me that I could do all that, and I could have a family, and I could have a life, then that's where we went.

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<sup>38</sup> A highly acclaimed American dance critic, author, and choreographer, based in New York City.

BW: As she was talking, I mean that's ... Going to Clifftop,<sup>39</sup> I think it was.

SL: And we also took to a week-long one.

BW: Right, a weeklong boot camp. But [at] Clifftop, I had to sleep in a tent for the first time, *ever*. (Laughing) I'd never been in a tent. They had a tent for me, I got in there, and I woke up in a puddle of mud. It was the muddiest...

SL: It was 30 hours of rain.

BW: It was unbelievable. But learning to clog in that environment, I mean, that's the real thing. That was *necessary*. When we went to Jacob's Pillow and it was my first performance, there was this section where all the musicians were center stage. And there was a mic that was hanging down. We were all free-styling around the musicians, who were free-styling. I didn't really know how to do anything at that point, as far as clogging goes. I just remember everybody is going "Down, down" — and I'm going up, up! At the same time. Then one of the dancers would take my hand and we're going back up, and again, "down, down" — and then I'd go back up. It was *hilarious*. But you know, now I look back at that, and I think, how could that have not been so natural? Because now it's *completely* natural. It was going to all those festivals in **Wheatland<sup>40</sup>** and **Hiawatha<sup>41</sup>**.

SL: I love that you always cry. I know, I do too.

BW: I'm always a crier.

JS: I want to follow up on that, too. Sharon said she could teach us to clog. If we could dance, she could teach us to clog. For a very long time I could only do choreography. I looked weird — if I look at a video of those early years, I am *doing* it, but I don't look like everybody else. I didn't go to as many festivals early on; it was later that I went. And I would just sneak off to the side, and [thought] no one would notice that I'm not dancing on a board. I eventually came around to it, but really, for me ... this is sort of like the backwards process of embodying a cultural tradition. I learned choreography. After the company disbanded, and I didn't have anyone to clog with, I found a person who played banjo, and he made a band, and we would play farmers' markets, and I would freestyle for three hours at a time. And *that's* when I learned. *That* is when I learned the tradition. That's when I learned the freestyle flat-footing tradition. It was choreography that then led me to the cultural — what felt more like the cultural preservation idea.

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<sup>39</sup> Clifftop is an unincorporated community in Fayette County, West Virginia. It is likely used here both to signify the geographic location *and* the American String Band Music Festival, an annual weeklong event (since 1990) often simply referred to as "Clifftop." The gathering draws thousands of string band musicians and their friends from across the country and around the world in late July/early August to celebrate the evolving tradition of old-time music and the community of people who keep it thriving by preserving and contributing to that tradition.

<sup>40</sup> A reference to the Wheatland Music Festival, a music and arts festival in Remus, MI specializing in the preservation and presentation of traditional arts and music.

<sup>41</sup> A reference to the Hiawatha Traditional Music Festival, a music festival held each year in Marquette, Michigan featuring traditional, acoustic, American music.

SL: I have a funny story about that, looking quite right, not at first. I was dancing Vanaver Caravan in New York, and we were doing a showcase. We got word that Agnes de Mille<sup>42</sup> was coming to this showcase. So of course, we were all a little nervous. Sure enough, she was there. She was very old. She had a wheelchair. She was coming in a wheelchair, someone brought her. She was, like I said, very old. We did what Livia called the *Appalachian Suite*,<sup>43</sup> which was clogging — *kind* of clogging. Her company was mostly modern dancers, and they did international dance. She came from a tradition of folk dance. So, she knew many, many international dancers. Clogging was kind of like one of that genre of international dances that her company did. So, we did this *Appalachian Suite*, and afterward someone came back and said, "Miss De Mille wants you." I was like, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God." I went out there, I knelt down at the bottom of her wheelchair and stuff. I could feel my heart just pump out. And she goes, "Why do you look different than the others?"

I was like, "Well, I come from that clogging. I know clogging. They're modern dancers, I know clogging." She looked at me, she goes, "I'm going to have something for you." I was like, "Oh my God. Oh my God." She goes, "Give me your number." That time there was no cellphones or pagers. I scratched out my home phone number. It was just ... For years, I said, "I met Agnes de Mille. She called for me. She called for me backstage."

It was just one of the high points of my dance life. Of course, she died not long after that, but I had my moment. She didn't have to have anything for me; I had my moment.

CF: She *had* something for you.

SL: She had something for me! She gave me something, definitely. It's that, it takes a while to *get* traditional dances; cultural dances come with a body carriage that takes a while. Especially percussive dance styles, because you have two toes, two heels — everybody uses them. So, what makes the difference between Flamenco and Tap, and French Canadian dancing, and Irish step-dancing, and clogging? It's the body carriage, and the weight, and the music. Those are the things that really change the dances from one culture to the other.

JS: And the *rhythm*.

SL: And the rhythms! Yes — and the rhythms.

CF: Well, could we take a minute and find out what Miss de Mille was asking about? Where did you come from? Were you born in New York?

SL: I was born in New Jersey. Yes, to an Irish Catholic family who always had music and dance. Like, my son has my grandfather's fiddle and banjo. We took Irish step dancing, but every New Jersey Irish Catholic little girl in the 50s took Irish step dancing — everybody. No one was serious, and no

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<sup>42</sup> 1905-1993: an American dancer, choreographer and author, DeMille choreographed for ballet, Broadway and film, including the ground-breaking choreography for *Oklahoma* (1943), the ballet *Rodeo* (1942), and many books, including a 1991 biography of her lifelong friend, Martha Graham, entitled *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*.

<sup>43</sup> Possibly a reference to the 1979 piece *Appalachian Medley*, a suite of short dances choreographed by Livia Vanever and Elise Monte, set to traditional American music and inspired by Appalachian clog-dancing

one competed in it. Everyone just learned the jig, and the reel. My parents were competition swing era jitterbug dancers. So, they were champions in that in the 30s. *They* were dancers. They went to the square dance ... My grandmother calls it the...what did she call the orchestra? The jazz orchestra. I think it was probably a Tin Pan Alley kind of band? A family of dancers and musicians.

I was mostly an athlete growing up. I took dance class all the time because my mother ... Where is my picture of my mother? My mother was a toe dancer in **Vaudeville**,<sup>44</sup> also. I have a picture of her on her little toes with her little flowery wings, you know, angelic. There was always that, around the house. I was a swimmer, I played basketball, I took dance class, all along. Not *really* focusing on career paths as much as I was, what kind of *life* I wanted. And that would seem to be my path, which my parents were very disconcerted about — that I wanted an *artistic* life. I wanted the world to be a place full of love. I wanted everyone to grow their own food, and make their own clothes. I did myself some survival training in that for a couple of years, where I lived like that. And then just thought I'd go ... I went to **Ithaca College**<sup>45</sup> for a while. It didn't really stick, all I did was go to protests and marches. And then I had two children. It was after I had those two boys, something clicked in me, and I went to **East Stroudsburg University**,<sup>46</sup> and enrolled in the dance department. You know, I had been *physical* and danced my whole life. It's not like I was learning something from the get-go, but I started learning modern dance compositional form.

I spent, I think probably a year there, just learning, doing technique classes, but mostly doing modern compositional form — that's what I wanted to learn from there. While I was there, a group called **The Green Grass Cloggers**<sup>47</sup> came through town, and I saw them, and I went (she audibly inhales) ... I mean, this modern dance department was *very* inwardly-turned and very serious. I saw these cloggers come through town, I said, "Whoa! *They* are happy. I want to be happy! I want that happiness." I found out who they were. I picked up my two little boys, and we went to North Carolina.

That was the late 70s. I said, "This takes me back to my *family*. This feels like my family, growing up." Yeah, I eventually danced with them — because like Janet, I pestered them until they took me on. Because I was a dancer, they could teach me very quickly, everything. Then it was very quick that I went through *everything* that they had, and then tried to start making them do things (she laughs) choreographically that were more modern. That was when I realized, "Okay, this is my time in this. I'm going to move on. I'm going to go back to New York, and I'm going to make a composite of *all* these things that I've taken in." And that's what I started doing when I was living in New York in the early 80s, and up through to 86, projects with these people, those people, and getting myself into student films, and dance films, and doing dance projects. You know, just jobbing around New York,

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<sup>44</sup> a theatrical genre of entertainment popular chiefly in the US in the early 20th century, featuring a mixture of specialty acts such as burlesque comedy and song and dance.

<sup>45</sup> a private liberal arts college in Ithaca, New York, founded in 1892 as a conservatory of music

<sup>46</sup> a public university in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, approximately 100 miles due north of Philadelphia. It is one of the 14 state universities that compose the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

<sup>47</sup> a touring clogging group of approximately forty dancers at any given time, the group was formed in 1971. Currently located in both Asheville and Greenville, North Carolina, the title of the group is a reference to Greenville, bluegrass, and the counterculture. The Green Grass style has been influential to the genre in its nearly fifty year history, and has maintained a distinctive style of partner-based choreography that prioritizes live music.

and refusing to get a temp job or a waitress job, because I thought, “I’ll never audition, I’ll never dance anywhere. I’d rather be poor.” I was very poor. My poor kids! They talk about that time like it was ... you know. Anyway, so yeah, so then that’s how my *particular* style as an artist, I think, developed from all those things.

CF: Great. Rick, do you want to add anything to this idea about the legacy, the creation of new work, the blend, the education of an audience to something that you’re doing — anything from your perspective?

RG: Wow. As far as the education of an audience goes, I think because the work we were creating came from so many different facets of life that we could pull in an audience, because there was always lightness and humor in certain pieces, and you get them to relax, and laugh, and enjoy themselves. Then, they could go to the dark side with you, and we could express more serious things. And because we could run that whole gamut from A to Z, it was very fulfilling artistically, and also I think audiences appreciate that. If *all* you give them is the dark stuff, then they leave the theater feeling weighed down. That was never the case, I think, with Rhythm in Shoes.

SL: It was hard for me sometimes not to just give them the dark stuff, like when I would get angry at them as a society. You know, “*Look* at what you’re doing.” But that’s why you collaborate with people. So that they don’t let you do that. That’s really important. I always said, the most important person, choreographer ... Well, there are two important people for a choreographer. One is an editor. The other is a musical composer. Those two things will make your work a success. Now, someone might not *like* your work, but it will be successful. They might have just not that aesthetic, but it will be crafted well, and if you have those collaborators, and *really* let them be collaborators —not, well, “Thanks for your opinion, but I’m in charge, I’m leaving that section in.” No, if your editor who you trust says, “What’s up with that section?” You best be looking at that. Then someone to musically *inspire* you, or musically support the work that you’ve already created. We work in both of those ways. With a good composer and choreographer combination, you find that you work in all those ways. It’s like, I’m having this idea, I’m making up these movements, look at it, see what you think, or, I made up this really good riff. Take this and see what you feel like you can do with that. Those are valuable relationships. That’s kind of what made our choreography attractive. A lot of people would come, not caring what style we were dancing in. They wanted to see how the magic of creating movement and music and what we had to say. We could be one thing or another. No. I mean, other people didn’t like all the edgy stuff, and would rather ... But then, they could come see us in the park on Sunday afternoon. That’s the other thing: we did *many*, many, many performances on *many* levels. We were at the park on Sunday afternoon, we were at your kid’s school. We were at the university. We were at the performing art center. We did this not only in our own community, but communities in every state in the country, every single one. Lots to say about that.

JS: Lots.

CF: I want to check the time. This is always the case — there are more things I want to know than we have time for. That’s a good problem to have, I guess. I’m interested ... I hate to bring you down, but I’m going to go back up at the end again, I think.

SL: Alright.

CF: It’s about things falling apart.



SL: The real story, or the story that you put out in public?

CF: This will be in the public — if we call the people who look at our website the public, but we hope so.

SL: Yeah, I don't care.

CF: What I mean is, is there something to share about this great buoyant renaissance time in Dayton that then came apart in the aughts, as you said, and then after the economic problems, and then mid first decade of the century? Is there something to say about it that would be instructive perhaps for people going forward?

SL: There is an ugly underside that is not shared.

JS: About personnel?

SL: About all of that. Yeah.

JS: We don't have to share that.

SL: I don't really think...

RG: It was all business.

SL: There was *some* of it was business...

RG: It was business!

SL: Well, *some* of it was business. (They all begin comically saying partial names, humming and talking over one another so as to make the names indecipherable.)

JS: I mean, personnel yes, but also economics. I mean, I have a perception that Beth, and Abby ... There was this great, there were so many incredible people who were part of the company over the years who went on to do other things in their lives.

SL: But here is the interesting thing — it's that they kept coming back.

JS: Right.

SL: I would call and go, "Hey Beth, we have this big concert. I need you." Back! Abby. Abby was there till the very end, and she was there at the *beginning*... Abby came from ... She should be here with us.

JS: She should be here.

SL: She came from Shuffle Creek Dancers, and she was there 'til the end.

JS: Right.

SL: I think...(to the group): How do you want to talk about it?

RG: Well, times change.

CF: You don't *have* to talk about it. It's your question to think whether this is worth pursuing or not.

JS: Yeah... go ahead, Rick.

RG: I think times change. No matter how much you resist them, which is not something we ever really did. We tried to go *with* it, but eventually the times changed. The peak, the way we were riding, there was funding and support, and jobs. You could even tour. That changed. Society's highs deteriorate. I mean, look at the world right now. We're in a period of deterioration right now. You can't swim against *that* current. And we swam against the current as long as we could, but eventually it just got too strong. We realized we had to find our joy in smaller ways, in different places. Because we couldn't do it the way we used to anymore.

SL: Right. When money started disappearing, then camaraderie disappears a little bit. This great collaborative of three dance companies now is getting less money, less money, less money, less money. Now, we can't *do* what we were doing, but *they're* getting more money still. Wait, why is the Ballet getting more money? Then all of a sudden when there is not enough money for everybody, why is the Ballet getting more money than everybody else? There is that kind of... it creeps in just a little bit. I mean that wasn't the reason, but those are straws.

JS: I think that economics ... It became such that it was almost impossible to have a life with a family... like, when I was in the company, you had grown children; Ben had a daughter and a son. But, *nobody* else in the company had families. That's what I'm thinking about. There comes a time when the economics of it don't add up in the same way that they did before. I feel like the company was smaller in the later years.

SL: It *had* to shrink because I was still committed to providing a living wage to people! I mean, in our fat years, we made good money! We really did. I mean, yeah, it was money enough to live on. And so, given my commitment to that, it meant that the company had to get smaller, because I still wanted to try to provide that. Then *smaller*, and then we were like, are we doing the work we want to do? Is it better to have a pick-up company and just hire some a bunch of dancers in that you can give a good wage to for three weeks, and not have to keep them working for thirty weeks? So, you know, those kind of economic constraints came in. And with economic constraints come a breakdown of relationships. The economic hardships in the *whole* community — this wasn't just our dance company, or these three dance company — it was Dayton, was suffering greatly, all manufacturing was gone. The money was disappearing, the beginnings of the *huge* opioid crisis were coming in. I mean, the whole city was suffering. So you take *on* those suffering, especially artistes, many are empaths, so you're taking on the suffering that's going on around you. And it's hard to keep that joy, and to keep that collective, and support each other. So, I think that it became too difficult, just too darn difficult. And I know for a fact, because we closed the company, and I went to India for four and a half months, and *sat*, and learned how to do nothing. That was what I had to do to recover. It was *hard*, it was... this had been our *life*. Our children had grown up in this company. Three of them were in it! It was all... now we saw that it needed to close. There is a sadness, but there is a *joy* in it as well. Like I said, without Janet, both of us never would have gotten to the end, because she was Miss Sunshine. She was always positive. She came in with the right

attitude. She made everything happen. She was training a second company — you know, **Shoe2**<sup>48</sup> — we were still teaching classes. We tried ... once we saw the writing on the wall, then the next 18 months were what we wanted it to be. I saw the DCDC struggling, struggling, struggling. And I said, "It killed Jeraldine, okay?" And she *told* me ... She had me in her office one time, and she said to me, "Do not let it take you down." And this was a little bit later on, and I felt like she *knew* that it was taking her down. I mean, when you talk about your mentors right in front of you... First, she just went down in a tech rehearsal on stage. Then she came back from that, and we thought, "Okay, she's going to be okay!" She wasn't *completely* the same after that. That's when she said to me, "Don't let it kill you. And don't let it take your marriage."

So, I remembered those two things, and in the end when I thought, "Yeah, this is killing me, right now. And it very well *might* take my marriage." That's when you think, "You know what? Let's *celebrate* what this is, and just take it on home." That's kind of the decision we made. I can't say our board was very happy with us.

JS: I *will* say that out of all of that, that last season — it was *incredible*. We're coming up on the nine year anniversary of the last show, two days from now.

SL: Yeah.

BW: On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010 was *the* last show.

CF: Cityfolk, right?

JS: Cityfolk.

SL: Yeah.

JS: At the Cityfolk Festival in 2010.

SL: Thousands!

JS: On the 4th of July. I mean, it really...

SL: And *all* the old company members came back.

JS: It was *huge*!

SL: So many of them came back, *almost* all of them.

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<sup>48</sup> According to Schroeder, Shoe2 was a junior company for middle school-aged dancers from 2008-2010. They practiced tap dance and Appalachian step dance technique and learned RIS rep. Shoe2 appeared in a number of concerts with the full company.

JS: Yeah. Not just that, I mean, I talked about the collaboration with the Dayton Philharmonic. We did *so* many school shows. We had school shows with **Muse Machine**.<sup>49</sup> We had toured around so much in all of the years before that...

SL: Lots of concert seasons around the country...

JS: Yeah. Rick had written a new show for that that last round of school shows, and it was incredible — a tight, small group of us. Touring around, it *was* a season filled with joy, as much as it came out of *hard times*.

SL: It was. Yes.

JS: That was a really incredible show.

SL: The decision came out of hard times — and then once the decision was made, it was like the joy returned. It was like, "Ohhh, yes, we can celebrate this."

RG: Something I want to underscore about that last season was that... Janet was talking about that last collaboration with the Philharmonic, and the Cityfolk concert, and the Muse Machine show. *Even* in the last season, *all* of that stuff, included new work.

SL: Mm-hmmm! Yeah.

RG: I mean, we did the retrospective...

SL: That's why we did it!

RG: We did the retrospective to *Bolero*. But there was a whole section in that Philharmonic concert that was *completely* new, that we were collaborating with musicians that we had just met in Louisiana, and brought up.

SL: (sighing) Yeah...

RG: I mean, even in that Festival set at the Cityfolk, there was some new stuff. We had Erk<sup>50</sup> on stage.

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<sup>49</sup> Founded in 1982 by Artistic Director Suzy Bassani, Jean Woodhull, Franny Sullivan and a corps of dedicated volunteers, Muse Machine was designed to involve young people in the professional performing and visual arts in Dayton, Ohio. The program has become a nationally celebrated arts education organization serving more than 76,800 students and their teachers each year throughout central and southwestern Ohio and Kentucky.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Erk is described by Rick Good as "a fine contemporary tap dancer with an impressive resume who became a good friend." Schroeder adds that "Chris toured internationally with Tap Dogs from a young age. He lived in Dayton during RIS's final years, and while there, he created an organization called The Tap Factor, which aimed to bring tap dance to anyone interested."

SL: That's what we do — that's what we do. So it was *ever* so important to keep doing what we did.

CF: Well, let me clarify and ask you: All this being said — the company as a stand-up wage-paying organization ends in 2010 — but you were performing this weekend!

(Lots of group laughter)

SL: Yeah...

CF: Let's hear about that!

SL: We end. We still have Rhythm in Shoes. We still have the organization, the 501(c)(3). We have a very small board, five people. We have a wonderful volunteer accountant. And we do projects through the company. We were commissioned in 2013 by a music organization in Michigan to make their 40th anniversary celebration. It was a \$100,000 project that I basically managed. I had 10 professional dancers, 70 community dancers. *And* because they wanted me to do this so badly, and I was just back from India and saying, "Mmmm, no — peace. Peace out." I said, "Well, it has to be something new for me." Because what they wanted to do was use retrospective Rhythm in Shoes repertoire, because the company had been out there. "So, there has to be something new for me." They said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "I want to make a dance film." They said, "Have you ever done that?" I said, "No, but I can." They said, "Well, we want you to do a *stage* show." And I said, "Well, I want to make a dance film." They said, "Okay, if you'll do the stage show, you can make a dance film, and you'll get a \$20,000 budget for it." I said, "Okay, I'll do it for that."

So, we made my first film, which has shown at [Lincoln Center](#),<sup>51</sup> and at [American Dance Festival](#),<sup>52</sup> in San Francisco, in Warsaw, Poland — and at [The Wexner](#)<sup>53</sup> — which started me down a new path *completely*. It was like, this was what I wanted to do then. So, I've made another one since then, and that's also done really well, and I have my third one on the burner right now.

That's choreographically where I am going because I am succumbing to the fact that we're all going to look at things on screens, and we're not going to gather in theaters anymore. Where are dancers going to do their work? We have to do our work somewhere.

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<sup>51</sup> Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts is a sprawling 16.3-acre complex of buildings in the Lincoln Square neighborhood of Manhattan in New York City. It has thirty indoor and outdoor facilities and is host to 5 million visitors annually. The Center serves as home for twelve resident arts organizations, including the New York City Ballet, the Juilliard School, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the School of American Ballet and the Metropolitan Opera among them.

<sup>52</sup> American Dance Festival (ADF): Originally begun as the Bennington Summer School of the Dance, re-emerging after the War as the New York University-Connecticut College School of Dance/American Dance Festival in New London, Connecticut, the American Dance Festival is now based in Durham, North Carolina. Heralded as "one of the nation's most important institutions" by the *New York Times*, ADF's sustained record of creative achievement is indivisible from the history of modern dance. The Festival serves the needs of dance, dancers, choreographers, and professionals in dance-related fields.

<sup>53</sup> The Wexner Center for the Arts, opened in 1989, is The Ohio State University's "multidisciplinary, international laboratory for the exploration and advancement of contemporary art." The Wex, as it is called, is named in honor of the father of Limited Brands founder Leslie Wexner, a major donor to the Center.

So for now, this is what I'm doing. But I *can't* figure out how you make money doing it. You can get commissions. I got two commissions to create these. This next one, it's my own idea, and I don't see anyone stepping up to commission it quite yet... So I guess you have to fund-raise. Twenty-three years of Rhythm in Shoes fundraising has kind of made me fundraising *averse*. So, I have a little of a problem with *that* — but that was a parking lot as well. I don't know why I went in there...

JS: What about **The Elements**<sup>54</sup>?

SL: The Elements perform this weekend, yeah. It's a music/dance/theater ensemble.

RG: It was, this weekend...

SL: Yeah. It can be a band. We just play clubs, and stuff, and we all dance on a board, tap dance, or clog on a board. I'm *still* interested in creating that theater work that has depth and message. So, I turned them into a little company this weekend. It's hard, because they're all musicians. They basically want to stand behind the microphone with their instrument. I stripped that away from them. No microphones, and they have to move. They have crossings, and paths — I wouldn't call it dance, but they have to move in certain ways around the stage, and there are transitions between things, so that it's one journey. So creating the same kind of work that we created for Rhythm in Shoes. I do all the dancing, but as I look down the road I think maybe another dancer. Maybe Beth, Janet could come, and they could do some...

CF: Beth, how have you gone on since the end of the company? How has it impacted you?

BW: Well, I wasn't there for the end. I mean, I was there for the *very* end, I came back. I went to Pittsburgh and had children, and then moved back, *right* at the very end, which was unfortunate...

SL: ...sad!

BW: ... bad timing.

SL: I know...

BW: I am teaching. I am teaching *a lot*. I teach at traditional schools, and I do work through Muse Machine, which Janet mentioned, which is a nonprofit.

CF: Suzy Bassani founded it?

SL: Yes, Suzy Bassani started it. She started that.

BW: Yeah. So, I do arts integration with elementary school kids.

CF: Some of this, is it informed by your work with Rhythm in Shoes?

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<sup>54</sup> A group of four seasoned artists, Michael & Sandy Bashaw, Sharon Leahy & Rick Good, that combines the energies of choreographer, composer, dancer, director, musician, playwright, sculptor, singer and songwriter.

BW: Well, *everything* is informed by my work at ... Everything, absolutely. My choreography is influenced by Sharon *a lot*.

SL: She'll call me up, she'll go, "I have a group of kids; I think they could do *Locust*.<sup>55</sup> Is it okay if I set it?" "Absolutely!" It's like, that vocabulary is kind of out there because there is ... So, also happening now, is I spend half of my time in Lafayette, Louisiana because that's where Emma, our youngest, who danced with the company her *entire* life — Right? A *beautiful* dancer, had her entire career, a twenty-year career as a dancer, and then decided to go nursing school. And she has a family down there. So I go down and help her.

I was looking around, and there is a woman who had just moved back from New York, went to *Tisch*<sup>56</sup> for her graduate degree in dance, and had worked ten years in New York — mostly as a dance captain, resetting works for ... like, she worked for *Susan Stroman*,<sup>57</sup> is that the Broadway choreographer]?

CF: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SL: So, being dance captain, keeping her pieces and stuff. And kind of making her own work. She moved back to Lafayette after ten years of doing that, and opened a place called *Basin Arts*,<sup>58</sup> which was a dance studio, and wanted to have a small company. I said, "Well, I can teach tap." That's all I said: "I can teach tap."

So, I started teaching tap for her. Then one day she came, and she goes, "I googled you!" (Everyone laughs.) I was like, "Uh-oh." She goes, "Oh my God!" She was like, "You did what *I* want to do here! You had a company! I want to have a small company. I want to have a small regional company." I was like, "But it was so different then... I don't know how I could *advise* you now." "No, you *know* — but you know!"

So, I started ... she's the one that fundraised, because she's a go-getter, to commission the second film of mine. She thought she was going to lure me in that way. And she did, she was right. She also danced in the second film — she's a beautiful dancer. So, now she's got me lured in, helping her ... It's called the *Basin Dance Collective*.<sup>59</sup> And I just choreographed live for the first time since she got me to make a piece for the company, which is a really strong, little regional company, trained well. She has a great ballet teacher for them, a modern teacher. I teach them tap and viewpoints, and improv and composition. We have a concert at the performing arts center down there in September.

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<sup>55</sup> The name of this piece, created in 1987, is *Seventeen Year Itch*, but according to Rick Good, the company referred to it as *Locust*. He describes it as "a repeating set of clogging steps, choreographed collaboratively by three company members, [with] patterns that change continually in number and shape, suggesting the activity of locusts on a summer's day." Schroder adds that "the steps and rhythms of *Locust* bring together the flatfooted bounciness of clogging and the rhythmic syncopation of tap dance. The choreography includes a sequence of steps the length of one time through the tune, and the tune and sequence are repeated numerous times over the course of the piece. Additionally, dancers enter and exit and travel to various formations throughout the stage space to create a dynamic music and dance composition."

<sup>56</sup> A reference to the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University (NYU), founded in 1965.

<sup>57</sup> A five-time Tony award winner, Stroman is a noted American theatre director, choreographer, film director and performer.

<sup>58</sup> Founded by Clare Cook in 2016, a multi-disciplinary collaborative arts space in Lafayette, LA, hosting open-ended, process-based inquiry and engagement in the visual and performing arts.

<sup>59</sup> The resident dance company of Basin Arts, directed by Clare Cook.

She's got me lured in, working there, at least half the time. She goes, "I *know* you're going to go away half the time, but I still, I want your *eye*." She said, "You come to my rehearsals, and your comments afterward are just boom, boom, boom, boom. You see *everything*." For *me*, it was like "Wow! Someone *values* what I have learned all these years, and, you know, appreciates it, and wants me to be part of what they're doing." I had mostly been teaching yoga...

RG: What's her name?

SL: **Clare Cook**. Yes, Clare Cook. She's *wonderful*! It's Basin Dance Collective in Lafayette, Louisiana. And recently, we started a little program where I mentored a choreographer<sup>60</sup> who came down, lived in Lafayette—which is a very ... I know it's Louisiana, but it's a very musical happening little place — from January to May, she lived in Louisiana. All the people in Louisiana have little cottages in their backyards. So you can go down and rent a little cottage in someone's backyard and live there.

I mentored her, I worked with her, three or four days a week. We did table work first. Then we did work in the studio. Then I started her working on a piece, and then I brought other dancers in so that she could have people to work with, and then created a piece where she choreographed it, and I directed it on her. And I just kind of did a dump, a choreographic dump for her. Clare, at the end of it ... and we worked at Basin Arts. Clare at the end of it, she said, "This could be a program." And I was like, "It could. It really could." So, get out of New York, or wherever you are, come to little Louisiana in the winter, you won't be cold. There is a studio, there is inexpensive housing, there is music happening. There is dancing: you can go *out* dancing every night — every single night you can go to a dance hall and dance. So, it's a little scene happening down there.

CF: Well, unfortunately we're running right out of time. I think I would like to give you all each a minute to think about what hasn't been said, or what final thought would you like to share? Not that it's final, but final for our purposes. It could be what it has meant to you, looking back. It could be a highlight. It could be a lowlight, it could be anything. I'd like to just give you ... You could take a minute and think about that. And go in any order really, but I'd just like to give you that opportunity rather than me, directing the conversation.

SL: I already know what I want to say, so I'll go first. I am ever so grateful to *all* of the dancers and musicians who worked with us in our career. You know, I'm not a soloist. So for me to be an artist, I need the cooperation of people. And the people that worked with me all those years — and continue to work with me — I feel just *blessed* to have them have come into my life. If [there is] anything I walk away with from that, it's that those people, the relationships that I still have with *all* those people — and I have to think that I did something right because I have good relationships with all of those people still. And I think there are like maybe forty people who have come through the company. They were a blessing to me. That's the most important thing.

JS: I can go. I think a lot about the legacy of Rhythm in Shoes. Perhaps it's because I was there at the end. I feel sort of responsible for *thinking* about that legacy and sharing it where I can. Sharon said something about that somebody values... that Clare Cook values what she has to offer. The thing is it's *not* just her. I see Sharon's choreographic legacy, as I look at other choreography that

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<sup>60</sup> Leahy refers here to Becky Hill, whom Janet refers to on the next page.



people are making now. There is a young woman named **Becky Hill**<sup>61</sup> who recently made a show called *Shift*<sup>62</sup>—and Sharon, Sharon *and* Rhythm in Shoes is all over in that show. My own work as a scholar as a dance researcher includes Rhythm in Shoes, and it feels like that's one of the ways that I can make sure that the legacy continues, and that I can show how much I value it. I'm so curious to see how that will continue, because it is ... we carry these dancing histories in our bodies, all of those forty people who have gone through the company whether as dancers or as musicians, bring that legacy with them, and we're sharing it in so many ways, and we're maintaining it, as much as we can. That feels really important, and a very important responsibility to me.

BW: Well, for me, like I said before, everything that I do is *deeply* influenced by *both* Sharon and Rick, because — I'm crying again!

RG: We love you Beth.

BW: Yeah. Seriously, everything that I do. Teaching — with my kids, too. (too choked up to speak): I can't say anymore.

CF: You might come back. I do relate to the crying!

SL: Yeah. It was really important for me to make sure that all of our dancers knew how to teach well. I fostered that, and I gave them opportunity to teach all the time, because being able to teach is sometimes your lifeline.

BW: Sharon would, she would say in the morning, "Okay, you're going to teach this class, and you're going to teach that class." And I was like, "Okay, I don't know what I'm teaching." And she would just stand back. (To Sharon) I loved the way you did it — because she just trusted that we could do it, but she was there if we needed her.

CF: Empowering.

BW: *Very* empowering, because she gave us the confidence. Well, I *know* you can do it. You can do it, what's the problem? So, we did it!

RG: I look back on ... It's pretty much my whole life, I've been a guy with a banjo and a guitar. I'm not a soloist, either. I guess I could have ended up as another one of those fellas standing with a guitar, and singing songs that he wrote, those dime-a-dozen singer songwriters, but I always liked playing in a band. I always liked being in a group. If none of this would have happened, I probably would have been in a band, off and on, because that's the way bands are. The *longevity* of sticking to it, and going through the process of creating work, and continuing to do that, and having the luxury in my life of new projects coming in all the time, new ideas, and new assignments. Like, "Can you write this kind of music?" Or "Can you combine something that goes with this?" Going from the

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<sup>61</sup> Rebecca Hill, a foot-percussionist, Appalachian square dance caller, and choreographer based in Ashland City. Becky apprenticed with Footworks Percussive Dance Ensemble, Rhythm in Shoes, and other percussive dance luminaries.

<sup>62</sup> A 2017 full-length music and dance work inspired by Appalachian traditions, directed and danced by Becky Hill.

inception of, like, a creative spark of an idea, and seeing what it takes to get all the way to the end of a show— where you've just *presented* that work, that finished work to an audience, with all the lighting cues, and all the choreography, and the blocking, and the transitions — and the stress, and the pain involved in the creative process. And seeing how that ... I mean, there is no getting through it without suffering. But that *because* you get through that you get to the end, and the joy that is part of your life, because you've made something, and you've seen it through to the end. That is something beyond value, you know. And the fact that you've done this with other people, and those people become your friends, and your family, and the people you love — and these are the things that make your life.

CF: Well-said.

SL: Should we hold the Barbie doll poster up?

BW: Well, I saw that halfway through, it made me laugh.

CF: I did want to know if either Jess or Megan has a question they'd like to ask.

MDB: It's been lovely to hear.

CF: Yeah, it has been a really rich morning with you all. Thank you for your work, and thank you for sharing it so openly and honestly.

SL: Yes.

CF: And you leave me with more questions, but they'll have to simmer until another time, I guess. Thank you so much.

SL: Yeah. Sure.

JS: Thank you, Candace.

SL: Thank you. And thank you, Janet, because *nothing* will happen if Janet doesn't do it. (Much laughter.) Is the camera off? Yes. I couldn't even get myself to go look through the books of Rhythm in Shoes articles, or the thing. He had to get the thing out of the attic or the garage and look through it. I was like, "Yeah, I'm gardening." I'm like, "I don't go there." I go forward, or something. I only have forward-brain. It *informs* everything I do — when I do see something, I go, "Oh, look at that." We did a lot of stuff. That's what I usually say to someone: "We did a lot of stuff." I so appreciate Janet in our lives, because I feel just like in the ending of the company, where she enabled me to get to the end. She is now *enabling* it to be remembered — or carry on.

CF: It's a big job, Janet!

SL: It's a huge job. Well, I give her access to anything she wants. She knows that. It's like, "You want that? Okay, here, take that." I have an attic-full of stuff that's just... "What are we going to do with that? I don't know. We have all the concert ... the big boxes outside the theaters, where they put the huge posters in. We have years of those. We have posters, and programs, and articles dating back to the late 80s.

CF: It's a big job.

SL: Yeah. And *all* those videotapes that are just sitting there on VHS.

CF: Yes, I know that problem!

JC: Well, we'll take some of those videotapes for our feature on you...