

VDC Interview Transcript  
ŽIVILI!/Loren Bucek  
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OhioDance  
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**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck  
LB: Loren Bucek  
JC: Jessica Cavender  
JD: Jane D'Angelo

*preliminary discussion:*

*CF: You know an awful lot about dance in this state — and beyond. I had a question come up for me after I sent you the preliminary questions...*

*LB: Here are my questions for you guys. Would it be okay if I get my notes out? Because, honestly, there are things that I didn't want to forget that were connected to this...*

*CF: Great!*

*LB: And we'll see if they're even necessary...your questions were very nice.*

*CF: But they stimulated your own memories, which is good!  
As for myself, I was listening to my earlier interview with Melissa Obenauf in preparation, and she was talking about you becoming the Company Manager, after Ann Dils, and I thought "I didn't even know that happened!"*

*LB: Yes, Ann was the first —*

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CF: Let's begin by talking about how you first came into contact with ŽIVILI!.

LB: I can't be completely sure because a lot was going on in the community at the time; however, I can take a stab at it. I had my own dance company in the Columbus community. We were all members of the Association for Dance and Movement Arts — or ADMA, and we also all partook in a lot of community events that were cross-fertilization for dance at the time...(microphone problems interrupt here). So when I learned about them, it could have been through ADMA. I'm not sure how I first met Pam and Melissa, but it was probably through a community ADMA meeting, where all of us in dance and movement arts met to network — to make sure we didn't put programming on top of one another, to exchange ideas for choreography and performances, for

marketing and shared publicity and things like that — so that was a place where a lot happened because we all seemed at the time to, one, have opportunity — there was nothing we couldn't do as artists in the Columbus community at the time, and two, we went off and did it. So I think that might have been where I met Pam and Melissa. I also knew about them as performers because I would go to performances of the company, and probably last but not least, my friend and colleague Ann Dils, who was at the time the first Company Manager for ŽIVILI! — she and I had a dance studio that was right here in this building [Ohio Theatre basement], and so she was doing several different types of jobs in the arts. One of them was working with ŽIVILI! as Company Manager and also performing. So when she was leaving Columbus, the job was open — I think that's the easiest way to explain.

CF: Can you give me an approximate year for this?

LB: I have to give you an approximate range. I think I was with the company for six to eight years, but I also had Moving Arts Company at the same time so I know that was between '82 and '87. They overlapped quite a bit — so somewhere between '82 and '84 was probably when ŽIVILI! came in, and I stayed with ŽIVILI! until I left for New York to study at Columbia University, and that would have been '91? '92?

CF: That's a pretty long tenure with ŽIVILI!...

LB: Yes.

CF: ...while juggling other balls. What in your background was useful to you in getting on board with this company?

LB: I came in with no background, except for the desire to learn something new about dance. I had been in ballet and modern dance my entire studies and career. And I understood that pretty well, but I wanted something new, something I knew nothing about. It was about studying the culture and the people of Yugoslavia; I'm not Yugoslavian, but it was appealing to me because of the sense of community. And I felt that from the very first moment I had the first rehearsal, and knew it was the right decision for me at the right time in my life at that point.

CF: I do want to push back a little bit, only in that your background was in dance, and this was a dance endeavor, so you certainly brought all of that.

LB: Oh, sure. Sure. My career was as a dancer and a performer and as a teacher, but this was different.

CF: Can you elaborate a bit on the differences?

LB: The training process of ballet and modern dance, especially, was much more competitive: "I'm in it for myself, to do the best I can do for me." ŽIVILI! was not that at all. ŽIVILI! was about family —and you didn't have to be blood family at all. You just wanted to get together and hold someone's hand and dance together, in unison in joy, to look over across the circle with people smiling back at you, that is ŽIVILI! — that was ŽIVILI!. And it meant a lot, because I knew what the other one was. This was a whole new chapter in dance learning for me.

CF: If it seems relevant, I'm curious about how you saw the existing landscape in Columbus at that time.

LB: I graduated from Ohio State University in Choreography and Performance in 1980. Between approximately 1980 and 1989 — so a good fertile time, dance was very much a part of the genesis of a larger arts scene. We were told to try everything, and we were supported by both the Greater Columbus Arts Council (GCAC) and the Ohio Arts Council (OAC). Ray Hanley, who was the Director of the GCAC, helped us to get performing venues, including the Arts Festival, which they don't have anymore — the dancers were always involved in main-stage performances. The Ohio Arts Council, under the director Wayne Lawson, also provided us funding to do independent work as well as collaborative work — totally invaluable to the development of being an artist in the world at that time. I hope there is a renaissance now, going on — because I haven't seen it since that time period. The decision for the dancers and the movement people in the community to become ADMA, or the Association of Dance and Movement Arts, was also vital to the development of dance in Columbus; we worked collaboratively, we worked in tandem with one another, we did not compete. When one of our movement people, David Krohn, was in a horrible accident, the whole community came together and put a concert on to pay for his medical bills. We did those things unselfishly. That is something I haven't seen much since that time, so the timing of everything was, I would say, alive, integral, exciting. Columbus... I had the opportunity to move, but I chose not to, because I felt that I could develop here — and did — and ŽIVILI! was one of the strands that I moved in and through.

CF: What do you think about the academic division between performance art and folk dance or ethnic dance?

LB: What is the context?

CF: For example, you had danced your whole life, but never had you been in a non-competitive program or group. You walked into ŽIVILI!, and there's a community. Why is that kind of dance not part of academic programs of dance? Why are they so separate?

LB: I don't know that they are. They may be in certain locations, and maybe here in Columbus, in some ways. But in other ways, those walls were broken down, particularly in the mid-80s. Susan Van Pelt, who is now Susan Petry, and I co-coordinated the 1988 Ohio Dance Festival. There were more than 800 people in attendance over a seven-day period. We used multiple sites here in Columbus, and we brought *everybody* together. So we never saw it as This and That and They and Us. It was all of us together, celebrating dance community, from the smallest child to the oldest elder. In my own perspective, I never really saw a division; I felt maybe on some levels that it was my responsibility to break down *any* division — because dance is much larger than any one dance form or genre, done by any one specific person with access and privilege. And we were able to take it out of a theory and make it real during that time period. To me, that was probably one of the most exciting times in Columbus. And it wasn't just Columbus — it was Ohio that came together, all the dancers in Ohio. It was exciting.

CF: So, your friend Ann Dils leaves town and this job opens up. Talk about what went into your decision at that juncture.

LB: When my friend Ann Dils was leaving Columbus, I interviewed for the job that was open that she had. The job she had was company manager, and also as a performer with the company. How that fit into my life was a surprise. Mainly because I was already working at Ohio State University, teaching as an adjunct; I was already teaching at a brand new school for the arts, of which I was a co-founder, Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Elementary School, and I had my own company, which was called Moving Arts Company, a collection of five independent choreographers who wanted to work together, including Ann Dils. But at that time, Ann wasn't the only one leaving the company, and we saw that as things were beginning to shift, maybe we were *all* shifting: some wanted to do independent work outside the company, some were taking other jobs, some were moving out of the area. So maybe the timing was just right to try something new. That's what I remember — I mean, if something happened differently, I don't remember. But the opportunity arose, I went for the interview, I loved the idea of learning what it would be like to be with a touring company, and I took the job. But to say more about the difference between ŽIVILI! and Moving Arts Company, I think, is important. Moving Arts Company was a young company — I think we were only four years old — and ŽIVILI! had been around for a number of years, many more. I knew instinctively that we were just getting off the ground as a touring company, that our tours were local — maybe regional, maybe state. ŽIVILI! was another level of being able to tour nationally and internationally, and I wanted to have that experience while I was still an active performing artist. So that decision was very important to me. It was all-important to me to try something new. I knew quite a bit about the modern dance/ballet/choreography genre in that western form, but I wanted to learn something new that was completely different for me. My ethnic background is Czechoslovakian and Italian, so in some ways the Yugoslavian culture was closer to anything I might have experienced previously in that area of dance. I wanted to try new things! I think that's all it comes down to.

CF: You talked about the joy of holding hands and looking at other dancers across the circle, seeing other smiling faces. As a company manager, stepping into this vibrant and growing and, as you said, a little bit more established company, what was it? What did it look like? Who was there, and what was happening? What *needed* to happen?

LB: The company at the time was growing. I think in my tenure it grew to 43 people performing onstage — musicians and dancers. As a company manager, I had a lot of different kinds of responsibilities: As a touring manager, that was one level; writing grants was another level; managing rehearsals and paying the bills was another level. In the studios, I led warm-ups for the company every Tuesday and Thursday night for rehearsals; Friday, Saturday and Sundays were performances, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. We were gone at least two week-ends out of the month — that was just a given. Managing forty people with all their instruments and their suitcases for costumes, their suitcases for personal things, making sure they were on time — that was its own challenge. But they respected me, or I believe they did. We almost always got where we needed to go on time (she laughs). When we were in New York City performing at the Tribeca space, one of the company members and I decided to take a side trip, and we didn't get back on time, and everybody was on the bus but us — so that was kind of weird! But also it was very fun, and you know, everybody kind of went, “Oh okay” and then we went on with the performance. Some of the highlights of the performing and touring part of it were taking a Los Angeles company's place on tour. This was AMAN, and they're from Los Angeles. They could not, for whatever reason, go on this tour through Wyoming, and so we did! We took it for them. We traveled to I think *at least* five or six cities in Wyoming. We took a bus out; I think we were gone for two weeks, maybe, and came back. And that was an absolutely brilliant time to be together with people, from horseback riding in

Jackson Hole to performing [at] altitudes where we needed oxygen on the side of the stage, they were just wonderful experiences — and *always* with the community focus. Always with looking at the various regions or republics of Yugoslavia and *all* the different kinds of dialects and challenges for both vocals and movement — that was just split-second changing. Those kinds of things I couldn't get in the other company at the time. Also, in addition to the Wyoming trip, we went to Florida twice in about six weeks, and we went to perform for...they were called Century Villages, most of them — and they were Jewish retirement communities. We would have two performances a day with about 700 people at each performance, every day for “x” number of days. That was thrilling! We would get back from that trip — and this was all on a bus — and a week later, we were on a plane, and everyone was flown down to Palm Beach for another performance in a huge basketball arena. I mean there were weird, wonderful things that not everyone gets a chance to do. And why I want to talk about those in particular, as well as the New York City work, is because I was teaching dance full-time in a Columbus City School at the time. That was my job. And I was given opportunities to leave my job with no penalties, with full pay, to be able to go and perform. That is not done today. I was treated as a professional performing artist, which we were at that time, and I was also a dance educator. We don't see that in today's culture, and that's worth noting, I think.

Also, this is not about the work, but the people. I am glad that I had the questions ahead of time because it really brought something into memory that would not have been there had I just done it on the spot...when I joined the company, it was also the beginning of people knowing what AIDS was, and I lost my dance partner during that time period. As well as at least ten other men died, who were in the company. And that was just a small portion of what was going on in Columbus and beyond. My partner was one of the first to be diagnosed in Columbus, and it was a really difficult time. We all persevered and kept going, but nobody talks about that anymore, either. But it was significant. When you are as I was at the time, in my late twenties and thirties, you're very young for a lot of death, and that was an experience that also bonded us. I would say that we don't talk about that as a community very much anymore, and sometimes I wish we would.

CF: Lest we forget...

LB: Lest we forget.

CF: Did you learn the musical instruments and the singing as well as the dancing?

LB: I chose not to. It was enough for me to do all the other things! I had to learn to sing the music. I didn't know, usually, what it meant. I mouthed the words a lot; they all loved that I tried (she laughs). But I made up for it in the technical ability of my performance in dance, and my ability to teach and help them become more cohesive as a group, and the warm-ups. But, no. A couple things about the singing: one, it probably was okay that I did what I did, because I was always told that I couldn't hold a note — and then I found out that I really *could* hold a note as long as it was in the right key, or had the right dissonance. But even then, it was a challenge. I didn't even try to learn an instrument; it would have been too much!

CF: How did you get people, in terms of your many years with the company, in your audition process — which I know evolved, how did you find people who could do all of that? What would you look for in the auditions?

LB: I wasn't really part of the audition process. What I was is whoever came through the door as a bona fide company member, my job on Tuesday and Thursday nights and before every performance, was to warm up the company — and I would use a basic movement warm-up, without trying to have any specific genre. There were various levels of interest in doing that — a lot of them wanted to come and just enjoy themselves, and do recreational dance. But Melissa and Pam wanted more, and they wanted me to *do* more, and so I had that as a goal, a directive from them. No one ever said no to me that I can remember...again, we just all started together and worked it out. I think there was about a 20 - 25-minute warm-up each time, really focusing on the legs because there's so much impact on the leg movement. But as far as interest, some of the dancers that came after me, or almost *with* me, had some ballet training, so it wasn't hard to bring them along; some had only folk dance training but wanted to learn; and then others were just there because they knew they had to do those twenty or twenty-five minutes to get on with the rehearsal...and it worked fine.

CF: I think it was Melissa who said that you were experimenting with the size of the company for awhile, and that forty was actually a bit too much...

LB: Yes.

CF:... and I think you came around to about thirty.

LB: Yeah. It wasn't anything that I was concerned about, personally. Whoever was in front of me, I was part of their world; they knew that better than me! What I do know, and I think should also be stated, is that at that time, and again in dance you don't have this, so this, to me was a privilege — we got paid for every rehearsal, and we got paid for every performance. And I was the second signer-on of all of the checks, so I knew what was going on, financially. I also was the person who ran the booth or the boutique before and after the concerts, to raise additional funds. So I kind of understood what it took to put a company together of this size, and to go after being able to pay everybody for their time. And it also was not done — it was, again, another level from the Moving Arts Company; we could only pay for a performance.

CF: How did ŽIVILI! get to that point?

LB: I don't know all the details. Pam and Melissa would know much better than me, but I do know that I was involved in writing Greater Columbus Arts Council grants for project and organizational support. I don't know who wrote the state grants; I don't believe I did. I did later, based on what I learned from them. But I was only responsible for the ones in the local bracket. We also did a lot of community in-house parties, where you would go and dance in somebody's German Village home, and they would open up their pocket books and give donations, or go to Muirfield Country Club and do the same — or wherever it was. We did a *lot* of that kind of work; it all mattered. There was a lot of investment in a lot of different ways.

CF: In some ways, you hit upon one of the low points of your time with the company, in citing the AIDS crisis, and you also mentioned a high point, in describing some of those amazing tours. What else? Talk about some of the highs, lows, big achievements, big difficulties for the company, if you care to.

LB: I don't know about a difficult moment right off, so I'll have to think about that. But some of the highlights included getting opportunities to work with choreographers from different regions in

the former Yugoslavia, and learning about the minority communities in the country whether it was the gypsies or the people from Split or the Albanian strand. There were very different strands; it wasn't necessarily the general population of the country; it was now definitely taking it from a scholarly research perspective, to learn something that would be more obscure. That, to me, was very exciting. And to know that the authenticity of the movement, the music and the costuming or clothing, the manner in which you performed — they were *huge* for me as a person who was still learning about performing. It's not that there weren't lows — but I don't feel they were low enough to even say anything about — because it's just a general cycle of people moving through any kind of organization: people needed to leave, people came on board, some people didn't want to work as a professional artist — they wanted to do it recreationally. I *wasn't* there when they eventually had a larger schism, when several people came forward, so I don't know that whole piece of the history. I left because I was getting ready to go to graduate school, to get my doctorate at Columbia University, so I had a very real purpose of... I remember when I turned in my costumes, I remember when I turned in all my files, and it was a part of closing up one chapter to be able to start another. But as far as highs and lows, it was just more the cyclical nature of an organization, for me.

CF: No big crisis points, funding-wise...

LB: Not when I was there, yes. I don't know when the crisis [occurred]. I think I was not around anymore.

CF: As you've had some time to look back since your days with ŽIVILI!, I wonder what you might identify as the threads that informed your life *after* ŽIVILI! that came out of that experience, whether academic or personal.

LB: Two things. Personal: I lost my partner in a divorce, because I was doing too much. And if I hadn't been doing too much, I probably would not have had that loss, and that was huge. But I learned a big lesson. On the other side, when I directed the Masters degree program in Dance Education at Columbia [University] Teachers College, the thread of community never left me, and in the four years I was there, I grew the MA student population from four to forty-four — and that was all about building community that I had learned from ŽIVILI!. And for me, just as a person in the world, I love making connections with people. I don't know how to do it any other way, and I know that ŽIVILI! was influential in that development.

CF: I'm sure it was also what you brought in terms of your sensibilities, which enriched the ŽIVILI! community.

LB: I think they think so. And all of us are still friends, and we do meet up more than once a year.

CF: Were you part of the company during the international touring?

LB: I was not. I was already in New York [City] at that time. However, after the Bosnian War, and they had gone over to the refugee camps, I was back in Columbus and I was directing another Masters degree program in education with a Fine Arts degree at the University of Rio Grande. The students there were already teachers, who were coming back for their Masters, and I hired Pam and Melissa to teach a graduate level course, and that course was based on not only the music and dance and culture of the former Yugoslavia, but also the thread or the strand that ran through it was

healing. And it was transformational for everybody that was involved in that course. So it came back that way, but I was not part of the international tour. I still have Pam and Melissa come to teach my children in elementary school; they haven't been in two or three years now, but prior to that they were part of coming to do workshops. So that's a longer tenure for me out of the company.

CF: I did wonder if that came back around in your current teaching...

LB: Yes. Both as a dance educator, and then as a classroom teacher. But less, now — and there's not necessarily a reason. It's just what has happened over time...even after today, those connections have been re-made and that space can be opened back up.

CF: What do you remember about how ŽIVILI! sat in the dance scene here. You mentioned it was a very open time, and a very “anything-is-possible” time. But I've also heard, or I think Melissa and Pam at least comment on the fact that the point had to be proven that this was a serious art form — they had to insist that folk dance deserved respect within the “established” hierarchy of movement art forms...so, how did you see ŽIVILI! respected, understood, supported?

LB: During my time, ŽIVILI! was possibly in development, but as far as I was concerned, ŽIVILI! was living in its best time, and I think I was part of *helping* it become its best time. But I *never* — at least this is my own personal opinion — I never saw us struggling to find place. And I know today, the people in 2018, the people of Ohio who still do dances of communities struggle mightily with the privileged forms. So it's going backwards. I don't know exactly why, but when I was involved in ŽIVILI!, I *never* felt it.

CF: And as I recall, there certainly was an open door to travel easily between studio dance at OSU and ŽIVILI! dance. It seemed like an open door, not a struggle.

LB: No, and I don't know why there was no struggle. Except what I will repeat over and over again, that we could do anything! We were *told* that we could do anything. And we were supported by our own teachers, by our own mentors. Because they said “Go. Go do it.” And they would always show up for everything; it didn't matter what form or genre. I don't *know* what it's like today. But I do know that that was a big part of it. I know that if we needed help financially, they were there. I know the phone call was made to be able to get someone else to help. Those things are invaluable. I just don't know what it is in today's landscape.

CF: Are there other people that you think we should talk to about ŽIVILI!?

LB: I would talk to Stan and Tina Gehres, absolutely. Because they come to this as one of their things — not the only one, but I think their breadth of knowledge would be very interesting as well as the legacy of what's occurred as ŽIVILI! started to... I don't know, regress.

CF: It is my understanding that ŽIVILI! was continuing to thrive, but that the state of Pam's health required a pause while she took time to care for her health...

LB: She did need health care, but also there was the birth of Selo<sup>1</sup> that happened, which I don't think was because of Pam's illness.

CF: Tell me about that.

LB: I can't — because I don't know. I can just say that I don't think Pam's health was the whole picture.

CF: Is there anything you'd like to say that we haven't asked you?

LB: I'm glad that I was invited to have a voice. It was a very important time in my development, a loving time. It was also a very difficult time as far as my personal changes, and just to go back and have a chance to remember has been exciting. I tell my students now today — we talk a lot about performance, whether I am with a seven year-old or a forty-five year-old or a seventy year-old, it doesn't matter the age — about a performance that occurred in Cincinnati at the Taft [Theatre]. We were in a piece, and I can't remember the name of it, but it was without music — the music only came from the coins that were on the costumes. I just tell them all the time, because it's a struggle in performance, how to *be* in complete focus when something goes awry. And one of my coins on my costume not only fell off during this rhythmic foot pattern in the choreography, but it rolled in circles in the middle of the stage for what seemed like *hours* before it finally stopped. And all you could hear were the people breathing in the audience and our feet moving and this thing whirling — and how we could only laugh when our faces were facing upstage, and then we had to be serious when we were facing downstage. We were in hysterics, but to watch our faces be so elastic through the process, it still brings tears to my eyes because it was so funny— but to tell that to other people, at least with my kids, my students, it helps to ease the stage fright that they feel as they're becoming. So, that's my last “tah-dah!” — it was pretty funny.

CF: It humanizes the performing experience, for sure: things happen and you have to deal with them.

LB: In the moment!

CF: Yes! A life lesson that we continue to learn over and over, everyday.

It was a big chunk of time that you committed; not the whole time that ŽIVILI! existed, but at least a third or more of the company's existence involved you as company manager. Did you see ways in which ŽIVILI! evolved over that time in response *to* the time — you mentioned the dawning of the AIDS epidemic as one example, but I just wonder were there ways in which you had to respond to the times — the build-up of the Bosnian conflict, for example.

LB: I'm not going to be able to say too much about that because I was so busy living — I mean Tuesdays and Thursdays I was teaching at OSU and then going right to rehearsals, and then Friday,

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<sup>1</sup> a Columbus-based community group that formed in 1996 and meets at the Clintonville Lutheran Church on Clinton Heights Rd. Selo, which means “village” in Croatian, meets the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month to perform only Croatian music, songs and dances. Many of its current members were once associated with ŽIVILI!!

Saturday and Sunday, I was on a bus, and then teaching Monday through Friday all day from 7:30 to 4:00, so there probably wasn't a whole lot of room for a whole lot else to think about. I don't think I was fully present mentally to all of those things that were also impinging on the growth and development of the company — I was too much in the *center* of the growth and development!

CF: Did you work on any of the choreography for the company?

LB: No. The choreography was always Pam, with Melissa right next to her.

CF: It seems they were a great model of partnership and leadership.

LB: Yes. Very well done. They knew their roles and their strengths, and they played them well — and I felt privileged to be a part of it.

CF: How many other paid staff members were there?

LB: It was just the three of us, and then the rest of the company members were paid for rehearsals and performances. I don't know how much of their own money Pam and Melissa might have put in — those things I wouldn't know. I knew the goals we were always trying to fund raise for.

CF: It feels like a great loss that it is no longer happening.

LB: Yes.

CF: And it doesn't seem that there's much that has come in to take its place — not just here, but for example, Youngstown has lost some of its adult folk dance community...

LB: People don't want to recreate right now. And to me, that's a real loss of history — especially when you're actively involved in experientially living an aspect of the moment. Today there was something on the feed for Jacob's Pillow...Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn's trunks of costumes are going to be part of an exhibition opening next week. There was a beautiful, beautiful article about seeing the photographs of the costuming in black and white and then seeing them in color. And they have lots of color photographs, and I thought "Ah, people don't remember!" They're removed from the actual experience by looking at a screen, and not living it, and that's a huge part of history that's being shifted today, and I wish it weren't. I've had a hard time with picture screens since 1980 anyway — whatever picture screen we have to look at instead of living it, you know, or to go to see a performance and everyone has their phone up — I don't understand that concept. You're there in front of people — why aren't you experiencing it firsthand? — but times have changed.

CF: Well, I want to thank you not only for this time today, but for your many contributions to this company when it was up and running.

LB: You're welcome! It was a pleasure.