VDC Interview Transcript
David Shimotakahara
GroundWorks Dance Theater
Executive Artistic Director

6.18.18
Total Time: 2:14:09 (usable footage ends at 2:05)

Cleveland State University
Middough Building
1901 E. 13th Street
Room 255
Cleveland, OH

Key:
CF: Candace Feck
DS: David Shimotakahara
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)
JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking with David Shimotakahara at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, OH on June 18, 2018.

From film footage:

CF: Congratulations on your nomination, and thank you for giving us this time when you're so busy.

DS: Thank *you*! It's an honor.

CF: Having reviewed the nomination materials and other sources, I am eager to know much more. I know that you were born in Iowa City, were raised mostly in Montreal, and then moved to New York City in 1977. Is that correct?

DS: Yes, I moved to New York City during the summer of Son of Sam!

CF: Ahhh…that's right! An auspicious beginning!

DS: Yes! And there was a black-out, too. I had a *wild* summer — but I guess I liked it (laughing), because I never returned to Montreal after that, and it was just fortunate that I had an American birth certificate. I didn't even *know* I was entitled to stay in the States. I often tell this story of writing to the American consulate, and I had gotten all these letters of reference because I thought I was applying for American citizenship (he laughs, remembering), because I had decided I wanted to stay in New York, and about three weeks later I got a very curt, typewritten form letter, basically saying, you know "You already are a citizen, dummy!" Not quite in those words, but (laughing) you know, it was like "What are you doing?"

CF: Oh my! Such a contrast to the present moment of immigration policy. I also read about your supposedly coming to dance "late" – I believe at seventeen.

DS: Yeah…

CF: I saw a story about an experience of your coming across the studio floor doing a hitch step, when something "clicked." I'd love to know more…

DS: That was, I think, the epiphany. I just remember at that time feeling really confused, and really kind of lost. And something clicked, you know, through movement, which allowed me to connect, connect to my *self*, I think, mostly — and I didn't know what that would mean at that time. I just was just suddenly very, very engaged in this way. And I spent quite a few years trying to figure out just what that was. I just knew I was very attracted to moving, myself. And at that time there weren't very many programs. It wasn't about going to college and getting a degree, and so one really had to just kind of go to these little private studios and figure out who you wanted to study with. And I did do some intensive training at *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens* in Montreal before I moved to New York, and I was at the Joffrey School for almost two years. But again, in New York it was just sort of about finding teachers and charting your own course. Yeah…

CF: Were there certain mentors that you would cite as particularly important to you at that time?

DS: You know, it's the teachers from whom you find something that makes you want to continue to learn, and for me, I was one of those dancers that was fortunate to get to learn from Maggie Black[1] when she had her studio. That was a real eye-opener, because there were dancers from the entire spectrum of the New York dance community at that time; it was the place to take class, so to speak. And there've been a number of other teachers — Melissa Hayden[2] had her own studio, and David Howard[3] had his own studio — and everybody had their own studio. Marjorie Mussman[4] was also teaching right up over Erick Hawkins'[5] studio, and it was just a very, very rich environment for learning, and for seeing, and for being exposed to really great, great dancers. So that was a wonderful time for me — and for my wife, [Robertson], who was there with me as well. A really great period!

CF: An incubator, of sorts…

---

[1] Maggie Black (1930 - 2015), a renowned ballet teacher in New York City, performed internationally with various companies, including the Cleveland Civic Ballet, before beginning her illustrious teaching career, which spanned the 1970s and 1980s.

[2] A highly acclaimed Canadian ballet dancer, Melissa Hayden (1923- 2006) performed as *prima ballerina* with the New York City Ballet from 1955 until her retirement in 1973.

[3] A ballet dancer and legendary teacher, David Howard (1937 – 2013) was born in England, and emigrated to the US in 1966 to teach ballet for the Harkness Ballet. He later opened his own school, and continued to teach in various institutions around Manhattan.

[4] A legendary ballet teacher, Mussman (1943-2009) danced with the Joffrey Ballet before opening her studio in New York.

[5] A major figure in the American modern dance movement, Erick Hawkins (1909-1994) studied and performed with such notable and varied organizations as the School of American Ballet, Ballet Caravan and the Martha Graham Dance Company before forming his own eponymous company in 1957.

DS: Yes, and even in Montreal, too, probably just part of the "Dance Boom,"[6] you know — things had just kind of opened up, and *everybody* was taking dance — as far as I was concerned! There was a lot of energy.

CF: I know that in 1983, you came to Akron to dance with Heniz Poll[7] in the Ohio Ballet[8]…

DS: Yes, yes…

CF: But there are also references to Atlanta, Pittsburgh and Boston Ballets as well as Kathryn Posin[9]…

DS: Yeah!

CF: I wonder if you could fill that in a bit — let's say from 1977 until then.

DS: Well, that was my, you know, "sewing my wild oats," I guess. It just was a very intensive period, and I started to be offered work, and it seemed I was being offered ballet opportunities with ballet companies outside of New York. And I was just keen on having professional experience, so I would do that. I would go for a year or…I think I was in Atlanta Ballet for two years… and then the contract would end. They were only short-term contracts, as they still are, and at the end of the contract, I'd pack my bags and come back to New York and (he laughs) look at the bulletin board at the dance studio and find a sublet and pick up where I'd left off. And Pandora was doing the same thing, and she was getting jobs here and there — in Boston and...we, you know, had a great time, but it was crazy-time, and I think that right before we came to Ohio Ballet, we were both looking for someplace to unpack our bags. And fortunately, we were both in Pittsburgh at the time and we saw an audition notice for Ohio Ballet, and we'd heard about Heinz Poll and we said "Why don't we just go and audition there?" So we did and he offered us both contracts, and we thought "We'll just see. We'll see what *this* one is like…" We didn't know a *whole* lot about the company, you know. We knew of Heinz — he had a great reputation — but we didn't really know what the essence of that company was about. But I think the idea that he was working on with Ohio Ballet, I think for that time was quite unique — this smaller, chamber-sized company that was on pointe, and doing neo-classical and classical work — no story ballets, but really trying to cross over in many ways, and looking at dance more holistically, challenging the dancers within the company to take on all kinds

---

[6] An informally designated period of intense and relatively well-funded American dance activity that roughly lasted from the late 1960s to the 1990s.

[7] Heinz Poll (1926-2006) was a German-born dancer and choreographer, who began his studies at the famed Folkwang School in Essen-Werden before leaving Europe to join the National Ballet of Chile. In 1961, he moved to Akron, Ohio where he taught at the University of Akron and co-founded the Chamber Ballet, later the Ohio Ballet, a major cultural institution in northeastern Ohio He remained its director and principal choreographer until his retirement in 1999.

[8] Co-founded by Heinz Poll and lighting designer Tom Skelton, the Ohio Ballet (originally, the Chamber Ballet) was an important cultural institution in northeastern Ohio, based at the University of Akron. Under Poll's choreographic direction, the company largely performed his contemporary works, but also included a roster of selected commissions by other notable choreographers. Ohio Ballet closed in 2006 due to financial difficulties.

[9] Kathryn Posin is a well-known New York-based choreographer and director of the Kathryn Posin Dance Company. Trained in technique and choreography by iconic early modern dance artists, she is known for work that fuses modern and ballet influences.

of *ways* of dancing. And one of the best experiences I had — and fortunately was able to do it with Pandora — was that we were the first company that Pilobolus[10] ever set work on outside of their own company, and we had this opportunity to learn their signature work *Untitled.*[11] What an experience that was — completely outside of our training background!

CF: Wonderful.

DS: Yes, that was a very memorable experience, and we took it to New York — and, you know, had the audacity to show up in New York doing Pilobolus' work! But it was great, and it was well-received.

CF: Tell me when the choreographic part of your work emerged, because I am assume you were being contracted to work primarily as a performer.

DS: Very much, yes. As a dancer. I don't know — I think a lot of dancers experience this: you become fascinated with how that works (he laughs). And at that time, you know, I wouldn't say there was a *process* for creating work — certainly not in Heinz's orbit: he was very much a "This is me. I'm the source, and all the steps come from me." And that was fine; that was the way he wanted to work. But you don't learn about how to construct work in different ways in that model. But, you know, I just was curious, and I kept thinking about it, and I can't remember the exact year — I think it was the late '80s — but I had an opportunity to work with Gerry Freedman,[12] who was an amazing kind of creative force at Great Lakes Theater Festival. And I didn't know Gerry at the time, I didn't know his background, I didn't know that he had been involved with the original production of *Hair*, you know, at the Public Theater in New York, but you're asking me about mentors, and you know, he decided that he was going to give me this opportunity; I think he knew me as a dancer, but I had never choreographed. I didn't have any (laughing) *credentials* as a choreographer, but he was looking for someone to help him with more dance staging in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, actually. And that was really my first "professional choreography assignment," was with actors, and subsequently worked with Jerry on a number of his plays, his productions. And I thought at the time, "Ah, well, they're just actors, and this will be a piece of cake," you know? But it really taught me — because as you know, in theatre, the dance really serves the play – it needs to — so it really taught me a lot about context and structure — and also, the creativity of limitation that you have, you know, and how to work with people's limitations in a creative way. It was a *great* training ground, that way.

---

[10] Pilobolus Dance Theatre was co-founded by a group of Dartmouth College students in 1971, and continues to perform over 100 choreographic works in more than 60 countries around the world. The signature style of the work comes out of a group creative process, and is marked by strength, athleticism and gymnastic dexterity that often emphasizes exaggerations or distortions of human and non-human life forms.
[11] Created in 1975 by the original members of Pilobolus, *Untitled* is a dance for six performers. As in many Pilobolus works, the costumes play an important part in the company's characteristic exaggeration and distortion of the human form, and in so doing suggests playful commentary on social issues while delighting the eye with surprising shapes.
[12] Born in Lorain, Ohio in 1927, Gerald Freedman is an American theater director, librettist and lyricist. He served as the Artistic Director of the Great Lakes Theater Festival in Cleveland, Ohio (1985-1997), and is Dean Emeritus of Drama at the North Carolina School of the Arts. Among his many theatrical credits is his role as director of the off-Broadway production of the iconic 1960s rock musical *Hair* (1968).

So consequently, I feel Gerry helped me *very* much, and he was very patient (he laughs) with this "punk" who thought he knew everything.

CF: So this would have been in the 80s?

DS: Yes, late 80s.

CF: So you were with Heinz at the time?

DS: Yes, I'd been with Heinz for a little while. And at the *same* time, Heinz came out of the Folkwang Institute[13] in Germany, and he kept talking about the rigor of how they were taught at that school — they had to make up their own dances all the time, and I think every week they had a showing. As I recall him talking about it — they were always obliged as part of their training to instigate yourself, find your creative vein, your own voice — and so he wanted to do that with the company — not on a regular basis, but one day he said you're going to have – I think it was a period of a probably a week, and he said "Everybody has to make a dance." And we said "Okay…" You know, we were like "How?" What?" and he didn't care, he just wanted people to try it. And it was a really *great* exercise for the entire company, I remember being very inspired. And out of that I started a solo work, which really, for me, was a kind of "coming out" in terms of just finding something about choreography. It was one of those moments, again, where I felt "I really, really like doing this. This feels like the next step for me, in some way." And that solo is called *A Person* (1997), and Heinz really was taken —not just Heinz, but his partner Tom Skelton. Tom was very nurturing in his own way. I wouldn't call Heinz nurturing, but Heinz had a *way* of nurturing through his…I mean, he *knew*. He wasn't warm and fuzzy about it, and neither was Tom. They really believed that there is a way to work, and you need to apply yourself to that, and if something happens, good! But they both gave me this opportunity, then, to showcase that solo with Ohio Ballet and that really kind of started the ball rolling, at least for me. I felt encouraged, I felt…you know, I think you need that when you're starting. You need somebody to say "Yes!" You know, "Continue!" — to feel legitimized in some way.

There is an interruptive pause here, while recording equipment is addressed.

What follows is footage markings from the voice recording.

CF: I was curious about that piece, *A Person*, which became such a significant experience for you, and the encouragement you took from it. Was that in the 80s also, or…

DS: I think it was early 90s, probably —

CF: It sounded to me like the recipe for Heinz Poll and Tom Skelton was "Tough Love!"

DS: Tough Love — well-put!

CF: Nurturing, but demanding…

---

[13] A leading university for music, theater, dance, design, and academic studies, located in 4 German cities, Folkwang Institute has spawned such major 20th century choreographers as Pina Bausch.

DS: Yeah, he was very "old school," and I think that the thing for me with Heinz was he had such integrity and he had this very clear vision for what he wanted Ohio Ballet to become. I think he struggled in Akron with that, and the fact that he was able to nurture that and see it grow, certainly with Tom's help — kind of amazing, he created something there…and I worked with him for fifteen years, and I know when I first came to Ohio Ballet, it felt like I was learning how to *work*. I thought it was a way of applying myself. He gave such clear structure — very hard, rigorous, disciplined structure, in a way, but it was good. It was what *I* needed at the time as a performer and a dancer. I knew, and I talked about this – we wanted a place where we could just *apply* ourselves. And we felt that we had helped create a body of work — not just a gig, you know. And I still maintain that the idea of *that* when I was thinking about a company, I just felt that made sense. You *want* to have artists with you for a period of time, you want to create this sense of shared understanding and artistic values. I mean, you can only *do* that over time. So, when I was thinking of retiring, I mean, I was lucky in many ways – I didn't have serious injuries throughout my career, so I wasn't crippled or anything like that. But I was tired; my body hurt — a lot. So in my early forties, I thought "Well, why don't you try to start something yourself?" And I again didn't know anything about starting a company! (He laughs) I *thought* I did, just like I thought I knew everything about dancing and choreography when I started those things. I had a chance to do a TED talk, and the topic I chose was (laughing, again) "The Art of Not Knowing (2014)." Because I think that is the connecting thread for me in terms of *many* of the choices along the way, and ultimately, I think you have to have a certain amount of that willful ignorance, if you will, but faith that you can *do* it; otherwise, you'd never start. But I thought towards the end of my performance (career) — and Heinz was getting ready to retire, too… he actually retired in 1998. I retired, and then (laughing) went on to dance with GroundWorks for another ten years, but it just felt like the next step for me, and I had been exploring different opportunities, sticking my foot in the water… We started — myself, Maggie Carlson, and a dancer, Ginger Thatcher, who was with Cleveland Ballet at the time, started a little choreography project — we called it New Steps,[14] and it was a way we thought to encourage dancers who were transitioning or were interested in starting to choreograph, a way to give them opportunities to have that experience — in the same way that Heinz did for the company, just to kind of *try*. And then we started bringing in guest artists and teachers to give guidance and help with some of the basics — because even though I didn't know anything about process then, I knew what I didn't *know*! And I knew that I didn't need to necessarily rewrite the book on that – there was lots of *knowledge* out there. But New Steps was also about figuring out how to produce concerts; and we had had a great model in Heinz and Tom, and I was used to seeing world class production values, and I wanted to know more about how that happens — how do you bring it all together? So that was a great sort of stepping stone to what eventually I tried to do with GroundWorks. During that time, I cold-called Bessie Schonberg[15] — talk about…! "Oh, I'm doing this thing, maybe Bessie Schonberg will help us!" I got her number from a friend, a colleague, who was a friend of Heinz's. And she took my call, I mean I called her at home, and she took my call and she listened and she listened, and she agreed to come out the first time — she came out twice — and she agreed to

---

[14] 1989-1997

[15] A well-loved and very important modern dance teacher and mentor, Schonberg (1906-1997) was born in Dresden, Germany and emigrated to the United States in 1925, where she encountered another highly influential teacher, Martha Hill. After dancing in two of Martha Graham's early works, *Heretic* (1929) and *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), Schoenberg's performing career was ended by a knee injury. She proceeded to teach, and became the Director of Theater and Dance at Sarah Lawrence College, where she served until 1975. Schonberg taught throughout the country until her death, and one of the most significant annual awards in dance, The Bessie, is named in her memory.

come out on the train, as she didn't want to fly. And I remember I met her, like, in the wee hours of the morning at the train station and she gave us this inspirational — it was just maybe three days — but still, it was an *amazing* experience to hear her talk about process. At the end of that time, she refused the fee. She said, "I can't accept that." And I said "*What*? Why not?" And she said, "Well, if you haven't noticed, my eyesight is not good," and she said "I feel like I could have done much *more* if I could have seen the pieces better." (He laughs) — which was a big surprise to me, because she'd been giving us feedback for two days certainly on what she *did* see — and I said, "Bessie, that's nuts!" And she said "No, I feel like I didn't do as much as I should have." And it just touched me, you know? What an amazing experience.

CF: Was that with New Steps or GroundWorks?

DS: That was New Steps.

CF: How many years did New Steps last?

DS: I want to say — I can't remember …we would always try to produce a showcase, and I think we must have done it for like three or four years…

CF: Different venues?

DS: Different venues, different groups of dancers, because the dancers changed... Oh, and I think even Maggie [Carlson] at that time, we didn't know much about grant-writing, either…Little did I know… (again, laughing) that was certainly one of the legs of the stool that was going to be part of the training. But doing that… we applied to the Ohio Arts Council, and I remember sitting with Ginger [Thatcher] at the table and trying to figure out what to say — you know, on this very intimidating grant proposal form, and so little by little, just sort of assembling those experiences, I think, gave me the courage to think about having my own platform, if you will.

The other person that was instrumental, I think, in that process was a woman who had founded the Center for Contemporary Art up in Cleveland, which is now MOCA. Her name is Marjorie Talalay, and she had just audaciously, too, gotten together with Nina Sundell, who was the daughter of art dealer Leo Castelli in New York City, and they decided that they wanted to bring cutting-edge contemporary art to Cleveland. And they *did* that! And about the time I was thinking of starting GroundWorks, Marjorie was thinking about retiring, so she was turning the reigns over to new leadership, and I think interested in what she would continue to do. So it was just lucky timing, and she commissioned me to do a solo concert at the last exhibit that she curated – it was called *Transition/Dislocation*, and she gave me free access to contact any of the artists whose work was in the exhibit. One of those artists was a Japanese/American woman named Masumi Hayashi, an amazing photographer, and I was struck by her photographs. She had done a whole series of photographs about the Japanese relocation camps out west, and she was very involved with this sort of research and documenting these things through her process — she had a 360° photographic process that she would then reassemble as a sort of collage — extraordinary work. So, it was through Marjorie that I got to know Masumi, and after that show, I just said "Marjorie, I'm thinking of starting this company. Would you consider being my Board president?" I didn't even know what a Board was, but I knew I had to have one. And she agreed. And I think that was the foothold, certainly to the Cleveland community, because she knew everybody, and if Marjorie asked you to do something, you generally did it — at that time, anyway, and she helped me assemble a small Board. One of those

women is still on my Board, Kathryn Karipides, who founded the Dance program at Case [University]. And we had our very first performance at Case, at Mather Dance Center…You know, I mean, how lucky can you get? Right? It's extraordinary.

So, the other piece about starting that organization, apart from my wife, who put up with me the whole time, was a dancer who had danced with me at Ohio Ballet, Amy Miller, and I asked Amy if she would come with me to GroundWorks. I don't know…we had nothing, you know? I don't know if right away I could pay her a salary – I *think* we did: a small salary, a very small salary. But she, coming out of — I mean, I think she started dancing for Ohio Ballet when she was, like, about 16 — just this amazing, naturally gifted dancer/performer. And I loved the way she moved, and I just loved her spirit, and I knew I could create with Amy; I just had a sense — she inspired me. And so we just started. It was one of those terrifying moments when you finally realize "Okay, we're going to do this!" And we're in the studio and we're looking at each other, like I'm at looking you, and thinking, like, "Okay, so how do we start? Like, what are we going to do here now?" I mean, we were so used to being told what to do, and how to…I mean, we didn't have a company class, you know, we didn't have a way of even *thinking* about what the work day would become…

CF: Remarkable!

DS: (A big burst of laughter.) And I didn't know anything about process, you know? But I knew…how to make steps, I guess. And I think that's just the way it began. And I think we both, just out of terror, kept at it — we just didn't know what else to do. We were sort of stuck with each other — well, she was stuck with *me*. I take my hat off to her, just to have the faith and the patience to know that it would come.

CF: Tell me about naming the company.

DS: Yeah, so I read this article and I wish I could recall where it was, but it just was one of those articles that was talking about the Information Age, and they were using the analogy of a high-rise… and how there were going to be all these information workers that lived on the upper floors and in the penthouse and how there would be this stratification of the work force – the division of labor would change, would shift drastically, and that labor — you know, manual labor, would be down on the ground floor. And I liked the image of that, the more I thought about it, and because at that time, too, computers weren't a big deal…I remember I wouldn't have started using a computer if it weren't for my wife, who when she retired in 1990, went back to college and was an early adopter of using the computer to do all of her assignments — and she made us buy a home computer — a big clunky thing that sat on our desk. Anyway, it was just one of those things, and the more I thought about it, I thought the thing about dance that is still amazing to me is that it *is* an act of labor — and yet we deal with ideas, just the way information culture is all about ideas. And so, it really bridges the two, dance does. But the thing that always has been comforting to me, and I remember feeling this as a dancer — was that you always came back to this ritual of your body, in space, in real time, doing something physical. And it always grounded me, that thing. And I used to love to warm up for that reason, and just spend time in the studio — that physical reality was so important to me and still is important to me as a choreographer, even though I'm not dancing. I need to reconnect constantly with that. And I know that for me dance is always about that present-tense experience. It's about that in terms of our relationship to the audience, in terms of *my* relationship with who I create with, and for me there is no substitute for that and will always make dance essential and vital. And that it

will always be connected to this act of labor. So it's a ground work, and we will always be on the ground doing it, you know, so to speak.

CF: I see. So the year was 1998?

DS: That's when we had our first show.

CF: That's when you and Amy…

DS: Well, I remember I contracted out with dancers from Ohio Ballet, primarily, at that time, and they graciously rehearsed with me in the evenings, after their work, and we put pieces together that way, for quite a few years, actually. But two other dancers who joined up with the company quite early — one was Felise Bagley, who just retired at the end of last season. You know, she just committed, heart and soul — and body. And I remember one of my early dancers was this fellow Mark Otloski, who danced over twenty years with Cleveland Ballet, and was getting ready to retire, just like me. And I said "Mark, you know – I think I saw him at class one day and I said "Mark, you're dancing beautifully. You know, you really should come to rehearsal sometime, because I'd love to just see what would happen…" And he did! And then he ended up staying and dancing with us for another seven years, and then he became after that our Outreach/Education coordinator, and he just decamped at the end of this season with his wife to Denver. So, yeah. You know, but to have had *that* continuity with him — Amy left — I can't remember the *exact* year — but I think she had been with me for about eleven or twelve years, but her husband wanted to be a chef and he went to cooking school in New York, and she said "I have to go with him. I want to go." And it was a great decision — it was hard at that time, I felt like I was losing my right arm, but since then I have colleagues who tell me, "It gets easier! It's going to keep happening." And they're absolutely right. But I think also what was essential to the formation and stabilization of GroundWorks was that early dedication from a group of dancers, who fortunately had ties to the area and we stayed together. Damien Highfield was also one of those dancers, who also just retired. So, I feel very, very fortunate to have had this amazing launching pad.

We are briefly distracted by a timer that has gone off in the room.

DS: If I need to shorten my responses, just tell me — I can *do* that…

CF: No, we're not interested in abbreviation!

DS: You're inspiring me to think about these things…

CF: It's good!

DS: Thank you.

CF: I'm wondering about this time when you and Amy started — really said, "Oh, my gosh! What have we done and what do we do?" How did you conceive *at that time* of what it was that you wanted this company to be? Because I see certain things that you perhaps took away with you from Ohio Ballet, but then you made something else.

DS: Yeah…

CF: So I wonder about that evolution. What your vision was, early on.

DS: If I *had* a vision! No, we did, we did — we really did. I have to say that I knew very much, right from the get-go; I knew that I was interested, just as I was as a dancer, in finding ways to move — and I didn't *want* to do it through ballet, although I really valued that training background, and my eye was attracted to that sort of clarity and articulation, and the speed with which it allowed people to move. So we thought, "Okay, this little thing is going to always be about new work," and we were not saying what kind of work at the beginning, because I didn't know! I didn't know how to describe the work I was creating, or was interested in. But we would take what we knew, and we would use that and we would explore other possibilities from there. That's all we said. And we'd use *ourselves* to experiment that way. And it wasn't that we were saying that we knew where the cutting edge should go or what it should be, but for us it was going to be about new exploration. And I think that continues to be the artistic DNA for GroundWorks. Very simple, and to me, a very clear mandate to always dedicate ourselves to thinking about how do we do something that's a little different from what *we* know — and so that's a constant evolution. And you know, I look back at video when we first started performing, and then ten years later – and it was a different company. You know, some of the same dancers, but we were definitely moving differently; I don't even know if we knew that individually, but I definitely look at that and I go "Oh, yeah! There has been an evolution" —like, this process has brought us to this different place. And then the idea, too, that I would be the source of this inspirational creativity — I abandoned that pretty quickly. I wasn't interested in being a single-choreographer company. And I thought, too, what an enormous responsibility that is, and to be able to sustain that over time — I mean, yeah, maybe for a couple of years I can turn out work, but I knew even then I wasn't going to be *that* prolific with my creativity. And so we developed this interest in working with other choreographers, and one of the early artists we brought in was Gina Gibney.[16] And what a great experience that was, again — to find her – and I didn't know where that would lead us at the time but Gina was all about process, and she really helped reinforce this way of working which I became interested in, which was about how do you create work that's not just informed by how do you move me, but by how do you work with others that draws on their strengths? And so I think I began to become much more interested in thinking about what that would mean in terms of the way I would work with the dancers. I also knew I wasn't going to be able to generate every step from my own tired and worn-out little body. It wasn't, you know, something I was interested in doing, anyway, although I really always have trusted my sense of movement. I do trust it. And I go back to it constantly. And I went through this whole period where I said, "Okay, you're not going to create on yourself first; you're just going to — I gave myself those assignments, that restriction, and it made me feel disconnected in a way – and I still struggle with that, because the feedback loop is very different in that process; it's much more a visual process. There isn't sort of a physical sensation associated with the way the steps connect. But I'm still committed to it, because I think ultimately it's about really working with the artists in the room in a way that I think engages them, too. And it doesn't have to be one thing or the other — we try to do everything; we combine all of those things. The other early influence I think I had in the company — I didn't say this before — but the gentleman who worked with me on *A Person* was a musician I met at the University of Akron, where Ohio Ballet was based, and he was doing his undergrad (work), and he was accompanying classes. He was a percussionist named Gustavo Aguilar. And I

[16] Gina Gibney, born in Ohio and trained in Dance at Case University, is the highly influential Director of Gina Gibney Dance (now called, simply, Gibney) in New York, where she is concerned with dance and social issues such as women's rights and survivors of domestic violence, among others.

think when I started sort of dabbling and creating pieces — studies and things — Gustavo approached me one day and he said "I think I'd really like to work with you." I said, "Really?" And he said "Yeah." And I said "Okay, I'll let you know" kind of thing (he laughs), and I remember kind of forgetting about it for a little while, and then this piece began to take shape and I just decided…I can't remember; I think we were on tour or something and I just decided "Well, why don't I call Gustavo?" I was trying to think of what music to use, you know? And I did, and he said "Why don't we get together, and see what happens?" And he came up with just a magnificent score for that piece. And his wife, Galen, was a singer —self-taught — but I think she had sung in a number of choirs. I think her heritage is Macedonian — and she did this sort of vocal part to that score, which, I mean... I still think about it. It was just a really successful collaboration, and so consequently I began to work with Gustavo on a regular basis. And we did — I don't know, we did many, many different projects. And he was so interested, himself, in process from a musical perspective. He was also very interested in New Music; he didn't want to become a classical musician. And I didn't know at the time, but I mean he was just driven to continue to explore — and he still is. He went on to get his Masters and then he did his Doctorate out at UC Irvine; I think he did his Masters at California School of the Arts. He kept surrounding himself with different musicians and kept exploring ways of composing, and it opened my eyes to thinking about music in this other way, and I mean stuff that I was like (he cringes), "I'm not sure I want to *listen* to that, but…" Or sometimes he would bring me ideas for pieces, and I was, like, "Gustavo, I can't move to that; you know, that's just not —it's interesting to *listen* to, but…" and I still think that way about a lot of new ideas in music. So there was this really, really rich creative period working with him, and he would work directly with the dancers, and we would combine that with our own improvisational ideas. And he would be reacting in Real Time, and we did some really crazy, wonderful projects together!

And the other idea we had initially and it was just part necessity, but we knew — at the time I started GroundWorks, so, okay, we had Ohio Ballet functioning in high gear, and Cleveland Ballet up in Cleveland — so I just was, "You know, we're not going to be able to compete that way, so what are we — where are we going to perform?" for instance. And so we thought, "Well, okay, so we'll just create these concerts in these unusual places and spaces. And we started doing that, and one of the venues we had initially in Akron turned out to be an amazing kind of mainstay of our programming. It was called The [Akron] Ice House because it was, literally, the original ice house storage facility for the city of Akron. And this guy Michael Owen that a friend of mine, Penny Rakoff,[17] introduced me to, who owned the building and he was like, "Oh, yeah, sure, you want to do some performances here? Well, okay, I've got to clear out my junk first" — he had a pink Cadillac in there, and a bunch of other stuff — and it was filthy dirty. But once a year we would turn this amazing space – about which somebody said "It reminds me of an industrial cathedral," and literally that's really what it was: these 55-foot ceilings, these massive steel girders holding them up, and these brick walls with these amazing sort of *spikes* sticking out of them — which I was told was where they used to put cork on the walls to help insulate them. The trains would come in with these blocks of ice — I guess, in the winter — and they would store it for the rest of the year there for refrigeration. But the space just had this amazing atmosphere and drama — and we used that every way we could. You know, projections on the walls, shadows and up-lighting. We even hung things from the ceiling, and it became this really cool event each year, which helped us to launch this series we called The Landmark Series,[18] because we began to think "Well, what other interesting spaces…where can we

[17] Professor Emeritus in Photography, University of Akron

[18] In addition to the Akron Ice House, the Landmark Series has gone on to stage performances in areas such as Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ in the Tremont neighborhood of Cleveland, Trinity

take this?" You know? And the idea, again, of thinking about dance in this way that just turned the cube around. Does it have to be presented in the same way? You know — and this all sounds rote now; I mean, everybody is thinking this way. It's been (done), but in 1998 it was still like, "Okay, so we're going to do this in a *different* way. And we thought "Oh! This is so...*new*!" And I didn't know at the time, I didn't know where it would take us. And I think in retrospect, it was just the feeling that we had, that we would just keep dedicating ourselves to trying to rethink these things that I had been brought up with — you know, how to think about the ballet idea of dance, and how to present it — a very traditional model, really. So I was very interested in seeing "what else?"

CF: It's taken you a long way!

DS: Yeah, yeah…

CF: What about the number five, your company size —

DS: Yeah.

CF: And it seems that it was from the beginning?

DS: Well, we were four for a while, and we used to do a lot of duets (he laughs). Five was sort of this number we arrived at — we kept thinking — I wanted to have, like I said earlier, I wanted to have a standing company; I didn't want a project-based company, and, you know, we didn't know what our support system would be able to bear. So we didn't add dancers until we could afford to support them. We did two things: we committed to a year-round salary — so whatever that was, it wasn't going to be over a period of thirty weeks; it was going to be over a period of fifty-two weeks. And we would pay that out, because you know, I used to…it was just so *demoralizing* to have to go on unemployment every year — and kind of silly, too, in this region, to be thinking about looking for work — there wasn't any other place! So, yeah, we made a commitment and when we hired dancers, it was a fifty-two week contract, and very early on, I wanted the dancers to have health insurance, myself included. And so we also made a commitment to try to help – and initially, we paid it all — so that restricted us in terms of how many dancers…you know, we knew we couldn't just suddenly become ten. And the idea of working that way was consistent with — you know, this whole model to me was based on the idea that it didn't need to be a lot — a number. It was about intimacy. It was about the intimacy of the experience with the audience, but it was also about the intimacy of the creative experience, in the process. And so I *liked* working with five dancers, initially. I'm trying to get more dancers now — but even now… I mean, everything, the cost of running the organization has increased dramatically and so it's still something that we are talking about regularly but we haven't committed to until we know we can sustain those positions. We still pay health care — we have a different kind of policy now, with a deductible — but we pay the deductible, so the dancers aren't doing so out-of-pocket. It's just one of those things we prioritized from the get-go. I wish we could just suddenly expand the company, but I don't believe in doing that, unless we can afford it or sustain it.

Episcopal Cathedral, Saint Peter Roman Catholic Church, First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights and under the dome of the old Cleveland Trust Building.

CF: Right, and what you might sacrifice in terms of the value of intimacy is always a question, I guess.

DS: Well, I think of it in a broader sense now; I'm *hungry* to have more dancers to work with but (he laughs) I've also learned to be patient, too, I guess.

CF: I think it would be good to hear about your investment in the community and, of course, theirs in you, as it seems that you have a lot going on in terms of outreach, and you're looking to hire a new Outreach and Education person. Would you like to talk about that aspect of your work?

DS: Sure! I think for me the biggest difference has been a *way* of thinking about *how* we connect to the community, what that means, you know? And I think when we first started it was all about artistic innovation; for us, that was the goal, was to keep pushing ourselves that way and to prioritize that — it was very much about performance and we are still very performance-driven in terms of this desire to continually commit to artistic excellence. And I hope that will always be the through-line here; we're not going to sacrifice that to do other things. But more and more, I realize that that, in and of itself, is not really what it's about, either. You know, there's much more to the work, certainly, of an artistic organization, and I think over time that becomes more and more apparent — how you need to have a different kind of footprint or a more inclusive, more expanded notion of what is it that it means to be in this community and how do you touch people? Is it just through performances? So, you know, we've really thought a lot about that — and I think that as I get older, in terms of what is it that I'm building here over time, and helping to make possible, what does this organization mean to its community over time? And in thinking that way, how do we *use* artistic excellence, then, to connect in ways other than just through our performances? I had this wonderful opportunity when we brought on our General Manager, Beth Rukowski, it was just again, one of those pivotal moments — perfect timing. We had this great opportunity to be part of this cohort that the Cleveland Foundation sponsored called *Engaging the Future*[19] and the then program officer for Arts and Culture, it was her vision, Kathleen Cerveny to bring together a number of different organizations — different sizes, shapes and disciplines — just to give them an opportunity to think about their business model. And to also think about their way of *thinking* about what it is they do, with guidance and input from world-renowned speakers. And I wouldn't say it was a crash course; it was a very thorough kind of grounding in organizational development in a way, but questioning everything about the way non-profits work and think about themselves in relation to community. She was just starting with the organization, so it was just this amazing opportunity to have this concentrated time with her to just think through ideas, to think through what it was that we thought was important to GroundWorks, and out of that, you know, I just came away thinking it's not *just* about what *we* do. This idea of performing is so much about *presenting* yourself, and so it's like how do we encourage a two-way exchange? And what does *that* mean? How do we create programming that reinforces *that* value, and this sort of dialogue. So that's really what we've been focusing on, certainly over the last five years now, is just designing our programming, thinking about the organization as a way to create an exchange. So I'm very interested in thinking about how we use artistic excellence to inspire creativity — maybe creativity is the wrong (word)…it's not just creativity, but it's creative *thinking* with other individuals. Because so much of what we do, process-wise, is like design-thinking; it's a process of problem-solving and analyzing and turning things over

[19] According to the Cleveland Foundation website, the program ran from 2011 to 2013, in order to help local organizations better adapt to quickly changing demographics and technologies and competing entertainment opportunities.

and finding new ways — and sort of like *reimagining*. And so in that context there are so many ways that we can use what we do to connect with people from different perspectives, different sectors, different disciplines, different interests. So, when we think about it *that* way, again, it sort of *reinvigorates* the company, reinvigorates the idea of what GroundWorks can do. I'm very excited about it.

CF: What timing, and what an opportunity with the Cleveland Foundation!

DS: It was a three-year commitment, and they supported it for five years. Totally amazing!

CF: I feel as though we've just begun a conversation, and we're going to have to end. There are so many things I wish I could ask you…one thing, though, is to say what an exciting time to be in this area, given the developments at the University of Akron with the National Choreographic Center[20]—there's so much going on up here that you're a part of, and probably instrumental in. It seems that the future is bright.

DS: I have nothing to do with the Center for Choreography…

CF: Perhaps not *directly*…

DS: …but I'm very excited for that development. And again, I think we want to be at the table in terms of these new developments in the community-at-large, in the whole northeast Ohio region, because that is really what we stand for. And we're very excited because we've been doing a feasibility for our own space, and that's made us think about a lot of different possibilities, the way that will allow us to build on and expand programming. What does the space mean for GroundWorks? It's not just our studios and office space, but it's like what kind of resource can this become for the creative community, and that's again really consistent with our whole commitment to collaboration and working with other disciplines, and I feel very much, too, that the dance community is ready now for *more* ways to interconnect. I think we were, in the fall-out of the demise of the Cleveland Ballet – when was that, back in 2004? There was a kind of reaction – everybody kind of pulled in tight — "We'll see this through"— it felt like, and I would be the first one to say — "guilty" — everyone was very protective of their own little corner of turf. And I was at the time very interested in defining the organization, what it would become…it wasn't so much to me, "How do we do things with other people?" It was like "What are we that distinguishes GroundWorks? So I think we've made the case. I mean, here we are at 20, and I feel very proud of what this small community is doing, and I think, you know, it has a *long* way to go but it needs much more of a unifying philosophy and vision around it. I don't pretend to think that we're going to become the dance center for Cleveland or anything like that. It's just that I know by what we can *do*, it will help. And it will hopefully give other professionals a sort of place where they can extend their training in different ways – choreographers, certainly, smaller organizations — so I'm really, really excited; I think it's going to happen. Again, I don't know anything about running a building (he laughs) — just like I didn't know anything about starting a company, just like I didn't know anything about running a company, but I'm prepared to learn. And I think it will be, for me, a really exciting, looking at the

[20] Initiated by Pamela Young of DanceCleveland, the National Choreographic Center (NCC/Akron) is only the second of its kind in the United States. With lead funding by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation as well as the Doris Duke Foundation, the NCC provides a residency program for choreographers, with a full range of support, in the development of new works.

next ten years, if we're able to launch this idea — which again, I hope is bigger than any one person in the organization, myself included — it's bigger than the company, in a way — but it makes something else happen.

CF: I know that we're out of time, and (turning to Megan Davis Bushway on camera) I bet you have questions…

MD: I definitely enjoyed hearing about your beginnings in the ballet world and having a process that came from the main choreographer, and then over time you started to play in a more collaborative spirit, but I haven't heard a whole lot about the products that you're proud of in GroundWorks, and I'm just curious whether that collaborative process really has created some unique highlights in your repertoire.

DS: You know, yes, I have pieces that I am very proud of in the rep, but none that I would hold above (all) the others. You know, "Oh, here's the iconic piece!" There have been a number of music collaborations that we've done, both with classical musicians and with new music musicians, and I'm very proud of the way that process has evolved over time, in working with composers. You know, it's very, very different than working with pre-recorded music, and I'm happy to say I feel pretty comfortable in that world. So over time, some of the amazing work I did with Gustavo, this great sort of jazz cross-sectional piece that we did called *Heart and Vine* (2002) — it's like this intersection, and I love that piece. Also, a piece we took to New York called *Nano* (2007), and he did the entire score just on a snare drum, and we did a wonderful collaboration with ChamberFest here in Cleveland, which is a Chamber Music Festival, to Tan Dun's score *Ghost Opera* (1994)[21] — it's with a string quartet — and, you know, that wasn't new composition, but the idea of using that score with dance had not been done before, although the musicians are practically like dancers in that piece because he asks them to do all these extended techniques. There are these classically-trained musicians, sticking their hands in bowls of water, and playing combs on paper and doing all kinds of banging rocks together. Terrific, terrific. So, yeah, there's that area of the repertory that I'm very proud of. I think some of our collaborations with other organizations, too, we did a wonderful collaboration at the Cleveland Playhouse and members of the Cleveland Orchestra; we reimagined Stravinsky's *A Soldier's Tale* (1918), but we didn't use the Ramuz libretto or story. It was a version that I didn't know existed —that but Kurt Vonnegut wrote about a resister, a conscientious objector in the U.S. Army, the last American soldier to be sentenced to death for desertion. And what a great experience *that* was![22] And then on a much different scale — just crazy, but it turned out to be so much fun, we did a wonderful collaboration with the Akron Symphony Orchestra. I thought I would never do this, but I did, and it was *Carmina Burana*,[23] not that that needs to be reimagined (he laughs) — it's such a war horse — but I loved it! It was so much fun to do. And we worked with a number of students as well, and we fully integrated them —it wasn't like "Here's our student section — and now the dancers will come out and really dance…"— we just fully integrated them, and it turned out well.

CF: I'm sorry that we have to end. Thank you! It's been wonderful talking with you.

---

[21] This work culminated ChamberFest Cleveland of 2014, and was produced June 28 at Kulas Hall, the Cleveland Institute of Music.
[22] The production occurred as part of FusionFest at the Cleveland Playhouse, April 23 and 24, 2010.
[23] This production took place on May 7, 2016 at EJ Thomas Hall at the University of Akron, and also in Cleveland's Cain Park on July 15, 16, 17, 2016.

DS: Thank you!

CF: I hope this isn't the end of the conversation.

DS: Well, I don't know if she'll let me add to it later — that's the thing!

Usable footage ends