

VDC Interview Transcript
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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

VM: Victoria Morgan

JD: Jane D'Angelo, Executive Director, OhioDance

JC: Jessica Cavender: videographer and media manager

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway: videographer

2.11.24

preliminary conversation about the city of Cincinnati...

JC: Start whenever you're ready.

CF: Anything you want to confess now?

VM: Okay (laughing), I thought this was friendly!

CF: It is — very friendly. Congratulations on all that's going on here.

VM: Crazy huh? Oh my gosh. In the middle of this to feel ... I mean, it's been all stop and go with the pandemic, and rep and choreographic decisions and all of that, but that building — that is just slamming forward. There is no stopping that engine.

CF: I'm sure that's great to get to see. I think that's what most of us are lacking during this pandemic — some sense of forward movement.

VM: I know. Thank God for that, because really so much of it has been so much in the air, but that is like a sturdy sense of the future.

CF: Well, I have to pause here to say I'm Candace Feck and I'm interviewing Victoria Morgan at Cincinnati Ballet, and today is August 18, 2020.

Would you mind ... I couldn't quite ascertain, were you born in Salt Lake City?

VM: I was. Actually, I was born in a little town just outside of Salt Lake City called Bountiful, Utah. It's kind of like it sounds: it's a very friendly little town, very Mormon community, everybody knew each other. You know how our religion is, we're ... we have those polygamists in the past and so you're semi-related to most everyone around you.

CF: And Salt Lake has such an amazing dance history — and even a history for children's dance, with Virginia Tanner. How did you ... I read that you had a stomach hernia and that's how you got started dancing ... Would you mind talking about that?

VM: Sure, I love talking about my stomach hernia (laughter)!

CF: Oh, I'm sorry...

VM: No, no, no, it's fine. So, it was decided ... The doctor told my mother, "This little girl, she needs to move, she needs to exercise." So, at two, you're in the modern dance class, moving like leaves on a tree blowing in the breeze. It's all that imagination, in terms of movement. So, yeah, it started when I was two, barely walking, and moving around, and feeling your body. Then the rigors of ballet technique didn't start until I was eight. That's normal, I think.

CF: Was that in Salt Lake too?

VM: That was in Salt Lake City, too.

CF: Where did you study there?

VM: I mean, in my early days of memory, I'm thinking about William Christensen, who was there, but that was probably, if I'm honest, it's probably a few years down the line. I don't remember my initial, very first teachers, but I do remember feeling ... In the Mormon religion — it's a great religion, but I could see from examples in my neighborhood and my own mother that, in general, women were sort of expected not to disagree, and to be a team player, and to be the supporting system, and better seen than heard, literally.

So, really when I started understanding the concepts and the rigor of ballet technique and started feeling the power of my body getting stronger and started sensing that I could put up a fight for something, it gave me ... for the first time, a sense that I had grit and that I could actually fight for myself. So, that was an addiction that happened early in my little life. I would say I pretty much made a decision I was going to be a ballerina by the time I was twelve.

CF: Well, the grit has stood you well, I'd say!

VM: It's come in handy since then, I have to admit.

CF: I know that you got your MFA at University of Utah, but I'm somewhat confused about the order of events...did San Francisco Ballet happen first? Talk a bit about the nature of that progression.

VM: Yeah, it was handy; it wasn't *easy*, because it was a pretty intense schedule between a full-time professional dancer, which I started right ... Even in high school, I was in *Swan Lake* and some of the bigger productions, but I started in a pretty intense way, being a full company member when I entered into college. So, I remember I could get up in the mornings, I could take maybe two academics before the first technique class, and then we would rehearse until about 3:00. Then, they opened up the studios for the after-school students and then we'd come back and rehearse from 7:00 to 10:00 at night. Then, you'd do your homework in between that, and sometimes I could even squeeze in an academic between 3:00 and 7:00.

So, it was a slow process. It took me a long time to get that Master's degree and I kind of fought it because I really wanted to be a *dancer*. I mean, that was first and foremost, and I felt like, "Wait, all this rigor around academia" — it was not serving my career! So I actually was pretty frustrated about it, but my parents were utterly determined that I wasn't going to *not* go to college and I am definitely going to get that degree! You know, "As long as you're going to college, it's okay, go ahead and dance." It's probably not the most normal Mormon activity, but they were very supportive actually, in the long run.

a sound in the building that might have an impact on the recording occurs....

CF: *This is a new noise isn't it?*

JC: *It's the dancers.*

CF: *Okay....*

VM: *Yeah, they're jumping on the floor upstairs.*

CF: *Okay. Sometimes we have to stop when a sound intervenes. I'll warn you.*

VM: *Oh, yeah.*

CF: I'm confused now. So, with what company were you dancing?

VM: With Ballet West in Salt Lake City in my early days. Then, you want to stretch your wings, you want to try other challenges, explore. Instead of being a big fish in a small pond, explore being a small fish in a big pond. So, I was determined to get to San Francisco. I'd looked around ... I'm pretty tall. By the time I was on pointe, I'm like 6'2", so I needed a company where there were tall men and women and where there was the kind of repertoire that accommodated that type of physicality. At the time, there was a lot of Balanchine work that was good for those tall dancers.

When I found San Francisco Ballet, I knew that's what I wanted. It wasn't actually a very easy entry into it, because when I went there, there were not contracts available. Now this is a long time ago, so I got away with a lot of things that you wouldn't be able to get away with today. That is, they allowed me to take company class and to even go to rehearsal. Now I think it's worker's comp and all kinds of union issues [that would interfere with such a situation]. So, I actually got to stand in the back of the room and I got to learn choreography. I think I did that for, I don't know, maybe two months.

At the time, you know us dancers — we don't have any money, really. So, I moved to San Francisco for a professional dance career. Luckily I had a friend who had a little office in Oakland, California, right across the Bay Bridge, and he said, "You can stay there, but we can't see a sign of you between 8:00 in the morning and 6:00 at night." So, I stayed in this place and then hid my clothes in little side drawers. Sometimes it was a day off for the dancers, but I still had to get out of there. I spent a lot of time in Golden Gate Park.

Anyway, when I was in class and in rehearsal, I was so inspired about it. I really felt determined, and I really felt like that was the right place for me. So, I really... I *pushed* it. I made sure the director knew I was there and I was working during the lunch breaks. As we've heard those stories, someone got injured and someone had to step in. Then, they *had* to hire me. You know, you can't go on stage and dance without a contract, so they had to hire me. So, that was my very glamorous entry.

CF: Auspicious!

VM: Yes.

CF: That's a great story, though. What about your move from San Francisco Ballet to San Francisco Opera...

VM: Yes. So, after I retired, I ended up getting the position of resident choreographer, and San Francisco Opera has a small ballet company that's a subset of the whole massive organization. I was there not quite ten years. I was working with some of the biggest divas in the business and it was wonderful. It was really inspiring. A high caliber organization. I learned a lot about lighting and I learned a lot about my art form, too, because as the resident choreographer I was not only choreographing for the subset ballet company, but I was also choreographing for the chorus, and the supers, and those beautiful divas. So, it was challenging.

I remember the first time trying to give one of the chorus singers *Tombée Pas de Bourrée*, which to us seems so simple, but you understand things in a really different way — and I learned to really count on the people in the room to help direct me about what they're comfortable with. That has actually served me when I'm looking at a room full of ballet dancers, too. So that was educational, but you're not the gem of the evening, and it always seemed to me that the maestros were breathing on every breath of when a soprano did an inhale before — but for the ballet, it was like, okay, let's do it and the tempis were ... Anyway, I shouldn't say that, but sometimes it was pretty challenging.

There came ... It was really a personal reason why I left San Francisco Opera, because it's a beautiful place and I loved the city. By then I'd been there about twenty years, but I was in a personal situation where the man I was living with didn't want to get married. And for a long *time* he didn't want to get married. So, it sort of dawned on me in this really intense way, “Oh, I get it. You need to take care of yourself. You need to find a position, a place to be, where you feel gratified, where you feel that your sense of integrity and your artistic aesthetic is at a high level.”

The noise above us inserts itself again.

CF: (to our video team): The jumping. Should we wait?

JC: We can give this combination a minute.

VM: Right, they're probably at big jumps now.

CF: Soon they'll be running to the water fountain!

JC: They have to get to adagio some way...

VM: Right. Okay.

CF: I'm sorry to have to pause.

VM: That's fine. Anyway...

CF: You were talking...about taking care of yourself.

VM: Yeah, I was taking care of myself and some financial stability as well. So, again it's always been a process of... people are so kind, and so willing to step in, and support, and help, and I found that all the way along on my path. A lawyer who I'd kept in touch with, very good friends with, in Salt Lake City said, "Put together a portfolio." He really ... I wouldn't have put together the portfolio that he helped direct me in, and so that got me actually a couple of interviews. The interview with Cincinnati, while it was a torturous wait — it took them three or four weeks to figure out who it should be — and it finally was me.

CF: That was, I think, 1997?

VM: Yes, it's been a few years...

CF: So, talk about what it was like to go from San Francisco to Cincinnati and what compelled you to take this particular job.

VM: I think the dream of many, I would say, ambitious professional dancers — that ultimate place to be is an artistic director. So, I actually thought...

noise again...

CF: So, we want to wait? Sorry. Before it was the blowers that were bothering us when Scott was down here.

VM: I wonder when they're going to be done? I think it's 12:30 that they're supposed to be done.

CF: Okay, so a couple minutes.

VM: Yeah.

CF: It's an important story, and I do want to capture it.

VM: Yeah, so I got the position, not without ... and in those days, there wasn't email and so I felt that I hadn't answered some of the questions as well as I could've or should've, and I felt that I needed to have a better perspective about budgeting and how it works. So, I got with a friend of mine who was an accountant, who had been on San Francisco Ballet's Board, and he helped me get through all the numbers. Then, I hadn't thought in the interview process about ways to link with the community, the kind of marketing that would be interesting, how we could open the door to other segments of our community that maybe aren't attending. So, I put together this little packet, made twenty copies, and we sent it all out individually. I was very aggressive about it, and it got me the job. I really thought it would take years, because look, I mean, I'm here twenty-three years and artistic directors often do last a long time if they're worthy. In addition to that, there's the complication of being a woman, and there were very few female artistic directors. I mean, that's starting to change.

the noises above us resume...

CF: I thought they were finished. There was a lull. I'm sorry. It'll be unusable audio if we continue; we won't hear you.

VM: Should we just wait for a sec?

CF: I think we have to.

A long pause ensues as we wait for the sounds of jumping dancers above us to conclude...

I'm not sure if maybe we had finished a thought, but you got the job, you were very aggressive, and you got it after doing a lot of homework to round out your portfolio...

That leads me to ask you, how did you find the rest of the dance landscape in Cincinnati when you got here?

another break for noise...

VM: Yeah, when I first arrived I knew of course about Jefferson James and I loved the kind of contemporary work that she was bringing in. Since then, it feels like there's been a flourishing of dance. We've got MamLuft, we've got Dance Planet, we've got Pones Dance. I mean, there's a lot happening on many different levels, and a different movement orientation with each one. We've had Missy (and?) Andrew in, choreographing. There's

wonderful rapport and relationship. I've always been of the mind that the more dance there is the better, so we *all* get to benefit from that. Yeah, I've loved watching the evolution.

CF: When you got the job, you must have been aware about the string of AD's before you arrived. I mean, there was this wonderful Camelot period with McClain and then he was sadly taken out by cancer, right?

VM: Yes.

CF: Then, so many changes...

VM: Yeah, I think it was really disorienting for the ballet to have ... It's so hard to even implement a vision in under five years. In the course of about, I think it was maybe five or six years, maybe seven, even — there was Ivan [Nagy], and then there was Nigel Burgoine, and then there was Richard Collins, and then there was Peter Anastos. So, in that short period of time there was this evolution of artistic directors, which is really undermining to the organization. I mean, you can't really ... Each one of them had a great vision. Ivan was amazing, big international Hungarian, danced with American Ballet Theater, and each of the artistic directors had something unique and special about them, but there were issues around all of them — for a variety of reasons, each one completely different. They were in, they lasted a year or two maybe, and then they were out.

So, I really came into a place where there was not much trust about artistic direction, about the longevity of it, and I felt, in part because there'd been so much transition in the artistic director position, that the board had stepped in and the executive director had stepped in. So, it was really an interesting process of weaning them from feeling like they had to be responsible for everything. Also, in that way it was... it was stressful sometimes, but also joyous, and exciting, and getting to know the community better through board members and through the passion that so many of our constituents feel about our Cincinnati Ballet: I'm so grateful.

CF: Well, I mean, speaking of weaning them from thinking they had to do everything, there came a time when you literally *went* to them and said, I need to *do* everything, right? Do you want to talk about that? Was that 2008, maybe?

VM: Yeah, that was really bad timing. It was just before the first real serious drop in the stock market. I didn't see it coming. So, it started in about 2000. We were making decisions about the next season and the executive director was really pushing forward a plan whereby the dancers, the number of weeks of employment would go from 35 to 30. I knew that with other mid-range ballet companies, they were offering 35, 36, 37, so I knew that we would not be able to attract a high caliber. I knew that we would get the dregs of what was left over. I just felt ... By then I'd been with the company about ten years, and I felt like we deserved more than that, you know? I felt like it was a wrong decision. So, I did — I went to the board chair and I said, "I think I just need to try it." As it is with most ballet companies, here's *this* line; over here is artistic; and over here is administrative — and you don't really cross back and forth. You really kind of have your territory. So, while I could inform and I could give ideas about what was happening on the artistic side, I had no power over here [on the administrative side] and if you have a semi-malfunctioning marketing department or development department, then you don't get access to good artistic caliber. So, I just wanted to try it. It was crazy — people thought it was nuts. You know, "You're an artistic director, please, you're going to ..." It was already ... There was a big deficit and it was already a mess.

My board president said to me, "Well, now are you *sure* that you want to do this? Because you haven't done it, and there's a good chance that you'll fail, and then it's on your shoulders. Is that what you want?" Anyway, I decided, "Okay, we have to ... I have to try. I have to try." Again, I'm not one to hesitate about asking for help. We had Michael Kaiser in, several times. He did a whole board retreat and he was an adviser who I could call when I needed, when I had questions. We had Dory Vandergriff (?), who was *great* in the development department. He (?) came in a few times and helped restructure development and had serious conversations with our board. So, we started really re-formatting ideas.

It was a tough time when that recession hit. I think I maybe didn't sleep for a couple years. But it also was interesting how when you go through a tough time, you rally. There's a couple of team members who were amazing. I'm very, very good friends right now with the chair of the board at that time, Kathy Selker, who was running her own marketing company. There's a ... sort of like we were at war together. There's a deep camaraderie in the difficult conversations you have like, "Okay, how do you fire somebody?" I mean, I'd done that a little bit, but it was rough.

I think I put a huge focus on ... We did a strategic plan and we tried to pare it down, what's really at the essence, what do we really need to hang onto, and what really defines us as high caliber, and what do we bring to the community that nobody else can or does? So, with some of those ideas in mind we really started pushing education outreach. We started really developing the Otto M. Budig Academy and I was ... I didn't know that I was going to be a pretty good fundraiser but it turns out that I was (she laughs).

So, I don't know ... I wasn't as structured or as experienced in the whole management, and HR issues, and things that were really shocking. Like, I thought the staff would be as passionate as the dancers and some were, but it's not *always* the case. So, it was a huge, huge learning curve and I think in some ways it's given me a perspective about having huge empathy for a person in that position. I did it for about nine years, and we got out of our deficit, and we ... thankfully, we had annual surpluses in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. So, we put a lot of that into endowment, we put it into an operating reserve, we had a few wonderful patrons who passed, and so our endowment flew up to 14 million in a fairly short period of time, and we got rid of the deficit.

We were able to do some really cool work. We did a brand new *Nutcracker*. I had the great joy of creating an original full length ballet, which is King Arthur's *Camelot*. We did really great things like Mozart's *Requiem*, which was with out resident choreographer. We started bringing in people like Ohad Naharin, and Yuri Posokhov, and Jiří Kylián now. So, I felt that finally ... I was really a little bit desperate about ... I *want* to be an artistic director, that's what I *really* want — and I would love to be an artistic director of a company that is financially *stable*, so it's great. The board rallied around it and we had a wonderful headhunter — we did this very intense, long process of investigation about who it could be. It couldn't just be anybody, it had to be Scott Altman.

So, he got here during the 2016-2017 season, which was my 20th anniversary, and I celebrated. I got to be, for the first time in my twenty year history, an artistic director of a financially stable company. It was like a frick-ing miracle.

CF: Well, you built it. I mean, you got it stable and then you got off the boat and got on that other ship you wanted to really be on.

VM: Thank you for saying that.

CF: That's how it seems to me. I was struck and am struck talking with you about the amazing overlaps between you and Scott. There's the Ballet West connection, there's the Salt Lake City connection...

VM: I know, we have commonality.

CF: Yeah, so I can imagine that your search, it just got you right the guy.

VM: Yeah, it really ... He was very articulate, and very knowledgeable, and he's got, of course, that operatic voice, which is seductive. Our search committee really loved him. It was a difficult process, in truth. Trying to figure out when do you push things off your own plate and when is ... How fast should that happen, when should that happen, when do you let go of this piece, when do you let go of that piece? In some ways ... I love the patrons who I cultivated through the years and I'm really trying to let go of that side of it because that was a pretty big job. I really want ... We have a wonderful director of development, VP of development,

that's Sara Pomeroy, and I want to see her be so successful. I want to see her just make it happen and she is, she's really fantastic.

CF: Great. I think these were my words after reading so much about you and this organization, but maybe I borrowed this phrase: it seemed that you created a world class organization with a regional ballet budget — when you got here anyway. I mean, does that describe the arc in a way?

VM: I *feel* like it. I mean, I think the orientation for me, it was ... Since we can't afford the big guns, it was really hard. Are we going to have Billy Forsythe ... We had scheduled it before COVID, but are we going to be able to do Jiří Kylián? Are we going to be able to access Ohad Naharin? Are we going to be able to do that? In those days, we really couldn't, but we had access. I felt that as a mid-range ballet company that it was almost our obligation to, in a grassroots way, find great talent that is not already at the top.

So, it was a really interesting challenge. Really looking at all those videos and really trying to find who has that potential, where you see that it's not quite there yet, and nurture them, and make them your resident choreographer for a period of time. It was fun, actually. At first, I felt so frustrated because having come from San Francisco Ballet, I was used to these big international choreographers and I somehow had this crazy dream that that's what was going to happen here. It wouldn't make sense — that *doesn't* make sense, but what happened is we ended up finding linkage and we ended finding really interesting relationships in our own community. You know, we had an evening with Peter Frampton that was just killer. We have our own Over the Rhine — you know, they tour internationally, they're beautiful.

So, we were able to get pretty creative. There were collaborations with Contemporary Art Center and we did a big ... There was a moment that the Museum of Art was doing a Ballets Russes retrospective and we did too. So, there was a lot of really *rich* coming together of ideas from different genres and I just think our art form — you know, we can be a little bit on the esoteric side and the precious side. To open it up and to crack open that formality — that in some way is so essential, and at the essence when you think about our history really stemming from those aristocratic courts in France and Russia. So, that was part of like, okay, we can be that, but we also need to be something else. That was part of my reasoning about bringing on Jennifer Archibald as our resident choreographer, who's this gorgeous, big ... I shouldn't say big— *tall*. She's Canadian African and she is so ... She wanted to be a ballet dancer, so she's got a lot of that ballet technique in her. Then, she ended up going more into hip-hop and break dancing, but I haven't seen, really, a lot of the combining of those things — and she does it seamlessly. It's like it makes so much sense, it makes so much kinetic sense, and it's kind of magical. I think it took our dancers a couple years to catch on to the spirit of the isolation and the aggressiveness of it. The pieces she does for us, they're just killer.

CF: Well, I was thinking about your ... realizing, okay, we're not bringing William Forsythe here in 1997 or anywhere near then...

VM: Yeah, not going to happen.

CF: ...but your search for talent in the raw and also I think your commitment to trying to support female choreographers, right, that kind of dovetailed?

VM: Yeah, actually that's been a huge part. In the beginning, I think I was just trying to keep my head above water and in truth, you start ... you're bombarded by male choreographers and there's so many options. It's starting to shift. There was a big survey ... Actually, Amy Seiwert, worked to put it together. She studied all the ballet companies of mid-range and above. I think there were 292 ballets, I want to say, and of those, only 25 were choreographed by women. So, it was a very small percentage and there's a wonderful ... If you want to get education about stats in our art form, it's called Dance Data Project. They do a very deep dive into statistics.

For the recent 2019-2020 season, it went from 12%, 11-12% in 2012, I think that survey was, and then in the 1920 season it really only went up to 17% we're talking about one-act ballets and it's much worse for full-length ballets. So, it's shifting and it's painfully slow, but we're also seeing transitions in artistic directorship. It was a *celebration* when Lourdes Lopez stepped into Miami City Ballet, and Julie Kent into Washington Ballet, and now we've got Susan Jaffe stepping into Pittsburgh Ballet. So, I'm feeling like there's starting to be a recognition.

We are interrupted again by elevator sounds...

What was I just saying?

CF: Julie Kent....

VM: Yeah, I'll go through that, because I think it started in the middle of that. So, right now we're seeing female artistic directorship and we kind of call ourselves a club, because there's a few of us. It was so great when Lourdes Lopez stepped in to Miami City Ballet, and then we saw Julie Kent into Washington Ballet, and now Susan Jaffe is with Pittsburgh Ballet. So, we're seeing that it is *happening*. And I know that there have been studies done about women in leadership positions, not only talking about ballet, but we're talking about corporate, corporations. There's more of a lift in believing in the potential of women who are there more in the administrative and managerial positions.

So, I feel like it's going to change. I started out with saying, okay, every year, one full series is going to be only women. Then, I started feeling that that's also segregating, in a way. So, then I thought, let's just infuse the year, make your goal 50%. Sometimes it was a little more, sometimes it was a little less, but I've really tried to stick with that. These female choreographers, I mean ... maybe people have an idea, "Well, they're women, so it's going to be maybe poetic, it's going to be nurturing and internal..." — but it's all over the map. It's as wide and full as each personality.

CF: Of course!

VM: Yeah!

CF: Well, this gave me a jumping off point for something I'm curious about that's very recent and that is the Power of Her. It's been interrupted by COVID, right? Could you talk about that project and where your company is with that?

VM: Yeah, sure. So, we participated ... There were about maybe twenty-five arts organizations who were a part of that, who were a part of collecting female leadership through the years. I mean, some in it are founding members of various arts organizations. So, there was a book that was published. I think it's around 200 women who are included in that book. And we wanted to do something acknowledging suffrage and that really was the celebration of women, we finally get to vote. Of course, it's only taken us almost 100 years to get a female president candidate in place, but anyway!

We were committed to that for our new works of September, 2020. So, we realized we're not going to be able to do that and in the meantime, of course, with COVID and Black Lives Matter, and that sort of ... has also opened the door for other marginalized communities, LGBTQ community and indigenous communities. So, we thought, it's not really fair. It's important, it's a huge step, white women got to vote — but black women did not. So, we have shifted with the times, and we decided that when we do our New Works, which is going to be mid-February, it's going to be an unusual setting. Usually New Works, it's all world premiers and it's in a very intimate theater where there's less than 400 seats. So, we're going into Music Hall in the Springer Auditorium, but we're using the stage that the symphony players use and... what happens is it protrudes into the audience, so they're semi on three sides of you. It's a little tricky because there are no wings and there's just an exit on stage right and left, but I feel like so much of what that series is about, it's about telling the story of today's ideas and conversations. It's about dynamic and world premiers that you can't ... it's hard to predict. It

drives marketing crazy sometimes because hey want to know, “What is this?” She laughs. I have to say, well, it hasn't been done yet, so we're not 100% sure what it is, but it's going to be awesome.

We have a very passionate following for our world premiers, our new works. So, we are doing that and we're focusing on the theme ... Suffrage is in there, it's going to be part of it, but it's going to be really more about the voices that have not been heard.

CF: Today's the 100th anniversary!

VM: Today is the day, you're right!

CF: Yeah.

VM: Wow.

CF: Here we are.

VM: So, cool. Oh, happy centennial.

CF: Yes, same to you. Who's going to choreograph that work? Is it yours? Are you doing any choreography?

VM: Yeah, I'll be doing some... I'll be doing a little choreography. We've got one piece coming up, an outdoor festival the end of September and then we've got a more intimate ... We may do it in our studio here, we may do it in a Music Hall ballroom, which is more a celebratory ... like a thaw after a long difficult hibernation and that sense of isolation, just hoping and feeling that shift, you know, our first time in an indoor theater, of course, everything socially-distanced. We have to be nimble because it could be that by that time we might be able to have five dancers on stage. Right now, we only have two or one, so it's a series of solos for the outdoor festival, twelve little solos and *pas de deux*. Maybe by November we'll be able to open that up a little bit.

We have some wonderful talent. I mean, I know you would think, “Oh, she's just prejudiced, she's just saying that.” No, just some *phenomenal* talent in our dancer roster for choreography, and they really want it. So, we're giving them opportunities as well. We're also exploring collaborations for them. I've always ... when I have done full-length ballets or when I've done story ballets, I've always had a dramaturg, so we're exploring bringing theater-focused dramaturgy to the process because we want to be able to tell the stories that I've just described to you.

I think it's going to be really rich and interesting. We've got ... Jennifer Archibald is going to be there, and a wonderful young talent who's just making her way and doing a beautiful job, Dana Genshaft from San Francisco. Those are for sure on the repertoire. I want to leave it a *little* bit open, because I want to see what our dancers are driving towards. Then, I have a few up my sleeve that... understand that we just need to play it by ear a little bit. So, yeah, I don't know, will we be able to do beyond solos, beyond *pas de deux*, will we be dancing in masks? We told the dancers “You may be dancing in masks, and don't worry, we'll make them really pretty.”

CF: Oh, what a time! Well, I know that technically we're out of time, would I be able to ask you maybe two more questions since we've had so many interruptions, or do you have to go?

VM: No, no, I'm fine. I think this is fun.

CF: Well good — I do, too.

VM: Thank you.

CF: I don't know how long ... I don't want to keep Mr. Deleon waiting, either.

VM: Oh, yeah, okay. Whatever you want, whatever you decide.

JD: He's not starting until 1:30, so...

CF: Oh, I thought it was ... Oh, good! Okay.

JD: We've got plenty of time.

CF: Let's have a beer now!

VM: Good idea!

CF: Actually, you have a Beer and Ballet thing don't you?

VM: We have.

CF: I just wanted to ask about your community outreach efforts. Would that be something you'd like to address?

VM: Sure, I would love to talk about that. Yeah, so we're in almost every single public school in Cincinnati in the third grade. Why do I say that? Because our education outreach, our Community Enhancement Director would say that by the third grade, they know their left hand from their right hand, so, you can actually structure movement ideas. We've got a wonderful program called Cincy Dance, which is in, I think I want to say, 33, 34, mostly Title One-supported schools. It's a couple thousand students, and we go... we are with them for a semester, and then we choose — there's an audition process — we choose about forty of them. Now maybe it's going to be able to be a little bit more when we expand into our new building. Then they come once a week and we help them with their leotards and tights — it's all uniform — and transportation, and we give them a lifetime scholarship to our academy.

So, now we're starting to see just a little bit of a shift about what our academy classes are looking like and this ... you know, our art form has been a bit under attack with Black Lives Matter because we really are quite European. And I feel that it's going to be much richer, as I've watched Jennifer Archibald take hold of our dancers and push and pull them into these really dynamic places. I have to say, I love seeing women being *fierce* on stage. I think it's important for a number of reasons — and number one, do you draw on that because it's there or do you find it? Do you put it on the surface, and then it sinks in? I think it's important to feel that you can be fierce, and it's important to feel that you can have power, and huge control of your body.

So, I *love* all of that and I think that the more we have these kinds of incorporations ... It's just impossible not to share knowledge and information. We are in a place where knowledge and information is so accessible, and so our art form needs to be responsive to it. I think we'll start seeing more of this diversity that we haven't seen. It's not going to happen the day after tomorrow, but I feel like we are on the path to embracing and to finding some kind of structure to change that.

CF: Fantastic!

VM: I know!

CF: Amazing, I mean, it does really need to happen, and for so many reasons. Okay, so you did talk about ... I forget what that program is called, but you named it already. Then, the third grade thing and the Title One...

VM: Yeah, we also have a wonderful collaboration with Children's Hospital, where we see [children with] Down Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy, just wheelchair-bound — a variety of abilities. I'm very excited in our new building ... I don't know if Scott described this, but we're going to have a track around the studio in our community building. So, for the first time, there'll be young people who have been in wheelchairs most of their lives and they'll be able to be harnessed, and they'll be able to move and be upright instead of always

sitting — instead of always having somebody wheeling them around. There are wheels along the track and so with very little effort, there's a chance to actually move.

And we're working very closely with Children's Hospital to make sure that we've got the right equipment and to make sure that we are ... you have to be careful. Down Syndrome kids, for example, they're very, very flexible, so the focus is to build strength for them. So, through this collaboration we've been really able to change the life of a young person who has been so restricted.

CF: Oh, wonderful!

VM: Yeah.

CF: Talk about the Beer and Ballet for a second because I think I read that it happens down here in your space, but you'd like to go out to Hyde Park, you'd like to go out to the west side. I don't know where I read that.

VM: Sometimes. We've kind of been all over the map with it. We've taken it to cool bars and we've done it in restaurants, and Rhinegeist, and we've been all over the place. We used to do it always here, but we have an academy that is bursting at the seams, needs every ounce of studio space available. But we used to do ... It's totally free, and it's an opportunity to get behind the scenes and to see the dancers up close. We'll do excerpts of a particular ballet that's coming up. It usually happens the week before production week, so we're pretty ready.

So, you get to see maybe a final run through of a section of a ballet or even a full ballet. You get to have a sense of what you're going to see when you go to the theater. Yeah, it's behind the scenes, and it is informal, and it's ... I think it helps ... What's interesting is we have this thing of "We have to make things look easy, that's the goal. We're doing something amazing, we're jumping over the moon, but it was just nothing." So, I think sometimes people watch it and they go, "Oh, that's nice," but then when you actually get close to it and you see the actual physicality and what it takes to do some of that partnering, those *double tours*, and those big jumps, and those multiple *fouetté* turns. You get a *really* different sense of what this art form is about.

CF: Absolutely, but you ... Did you say you go to the bars?

VM: We do.

CF: What happens?

VM: People gather, people join. We sometimes put a floor down and actually ... We always put Marley down, but we don't always have a sprung floor, so we're very cognizant of that. We've got, not only do we have our own internal desire to take care of our dancers, but there are union AGMA requirements that there's a sprung floor. So we have to sometimes modify if we go other places, but sometimes it's just about being able to see a costume up-close. It's more conversational. You might be able to hear a conversation with one of the choreographers and hear what they're thinking, and see a solo excerpt from their ballet. So, it's those kinds of things.

Then, because it's very informal, we look right at the audience and we say, "What are you curious about? What do you want to know? Is there something you want to ask?" So, it's really a wonderful way to bring our art form down to an easy commonality, and it's educational; I think it changes people's perspective of what this art form is about.

CF: Oh, I think it's *so* important and so great. Dancers always ... I mean, the audience is other dancers — and why is that? Because they *know*, because they get the close-up experience. So how do you get that to your viewers?

VM: Yeah, yeah, it's a big challenge! I think it's one reason people have loved our New Works because the 400 seats, you're pretty close. We used to do it in our studio, Kaplan Studio, upstairs. This is what happens when you have a successful academy — you get kicked out of your studio space.

CF: Be careful what you wish for!

VM: (laughing) Yeah...

CF: Okay, two more questions. One comes from your conversation about working with people in wheelchairs. I thought immediately of Mary Verdi-Fletcher up in Cleveland and I also, earlier, I thought about the “girl posse” artistic directors you named from other states, but what about within this state? Is there any kind of consortium here? Do you benefit from dance around the state?

VM: Yeah, it's been really wonderful. Somehow I was invited to be a part of something called Cincinnati Women's Executive Forum. What that basically is, is mostly CEO women around our community. I really didn't realize the kind of leadership in our community on the female side. There's about seventy of us and we get together, we go to retreats, do spa retreats together, we have dinner at each other's homes. Now we're doing what we call Wicked Wednesday Zoom. So, it's a way to talk about ... it's not supposed to be about, you know, “I'm going to sell my product to you.” It's really a safe way ... sometimes I'm not totally comfortable talking to board members about difficult issues, not always, because I just feel like it's important that we're confident leaders.

This group, and there's always the little subsets — like there's a couple of women friends who I'm really super close to who I can call. Even though they're not in the ballet, we have similar issues. One of the big issues about COVID for them and for us in our art form, for all of us wanting our wonderful dancers... we want them to be able to have families. We want them to be able to lead that full life and to have it all. It's this COVID, with childcare, is a huge issue. For example, that's just one of the topics. We just talk about how do you make it happen, how do you lift and support? Barbara Perez who directs, is executive director of the YWCA, she's in that group. That theme about lifting as you climb and I feel that there is a sense of camaraderie among women that I don't know if I could live without it. I have that here in Cincinnati.

CF: How about in the rest of the state?

VM: Well, we do. We get a chance to get together several times a year through Dance USA. So, we'll meet at conventions and now that we know each other, it's easy for me to ... I can't tell you how many times I've called Lourdes and asked her opinion about things. We talk to each other very honestly. “What are your protocols, and what are you thinking, and are your dancers all wearing masks, and when are you coming back, and are you paying your dancers?” So, we have all of these kinds of conversations that are really relevant today; I get to have them with my female comrades around the country.

CF: That's wonderful. Well, okay, my last question is ... I know you can address it; I'm just trying to think how to frame it. Very early on, you were talking about, at a *very* young age — I think you said by the age of eight or something — you *knew*. You said that you had experienced the power of dancing in your body, the experience of feeling strong, of being empowered — and you went with it. I think I joked that it served you well through now, but really, if I go back and transcribe this interview, which I will get to do, I'm going to hear this theme running throughout the conversation because I've been hearing it — about grit, and about power, and about women, and being aggressive when you need to, or assertive at the least.

So, I don't know ... What I would love for you to talk about is how dance *itself*, dance training, the dance world, the dance *life*, prepares you for any number of things. Could you address that?

VM: Yeah. I think it's a tricky topic, to tell you the truth — because I feel that any dancer who moves into being a soloist or principal, they all go through the *corps de ballet*. What is interesting in our art form has to do with the big classic ballets. They have big female *corps de ballet* sections that are breathtaking. The process for creating that breathtaking movement quality that is shared by all, where you're breathing together, where

you're absolutely ... that hand is at exactly that angle and the head is just right at that angle — that requires a lot of time, and the focus on that is that you're unified and you're the same as everybody else.

In part because of the competition for women in our art form, you don't have a voice. Your voice is... everyone else in the room. There is something really comforting about that. I've loved a lot about the *corps de ballet* because I felt almost like we're becoming a society where we're one, where we have this belief that we're going to work really hard to bring this unity into form. You know, you count on each other and you know what each other is going through, so there's some wonderful comfort in that.

the sounds of the elevator, again

CF: Okay, let's give that a second, because this is so good. You're in a room with women here.

VM: I know it. I do love that.

CF: I'm thinking about ... Oh, go ahead.

VM: So, it's not exactly *conducive* to inspiring leadership because I think in leadership you need to have confidence to have your *own* voice. While you need to have an open ear and you need to be able to hear other points of view, you also have to have a vision. Sometimes that requires this great amount of confidence to step out and go outside the lines. So, I don't know that our art form ... I think it's one reason I love seeing our women in the Jennifer Archibald work. But I do think that the act of learning this art form, there's hardly anything ... You go through those layers of details and you have to have a certain patience. There's *so much learning* inside it.

Just think of the concept of... you have this perfect idea about a *développée à la seconde*, for example. Just because the idea's in your head doesn't mean you can do it. You're thinking of all that detail: you're thinking about how the wrap goes; you're thinking about how you press that arch, and how you keep that knee out, and how you don't lift your hip, and how your shoulders are down, and how your spine is long, and how the knee lifts first, and how it presses forward because you're hanging onto that turn. I mean, there's *a hundred* things that you are thinking about and eventually, maybe it's a month later or maybe it's three years later, but that whole concept about having a vision of something that doesn't exist.

This is *important* in life, that we can *see* things that don't exist. Dance teaches you that in a really big way. I do feel that I was lucky enough to ... When I think about the transitions that I made and the leadership that I would say, more came to *me* in some ways versus me coming to *it*, it was often based on something traumatic in my life that I needed to change, that I needed ... I *felt* a dissatisfaction — and a *deep* dissatisfaction. So, I think not being afraid, in some ways, of those places that are dark.

I think we as women, and I've heard this, that you have a classroom and the professor asks, "Okay, who has the answer?" And guys hands will go up right away, and they don't *really* have the answer, but they have the confidence. Women will often wait until they know for sure that they have the answer. So, I think this thing about fear of failure, it's something I think we as a gender have — and really *fighting* that, and really truly in a deep way understanding that *failure* is your path to success. So, the art form serves it on many levels — absolutely serves it, and also kind of holds it back.

CF: Did you ever see Jerome Bel's interview with Veronique Doisneau of the Paris Opera Ballet?

VM: Oh, yes.

CF: I mean, she talks in great anguish about the pain of being in the *corps de ballet* in a way that I think is so illuminating. Anyway, I just thought of that when you were talking.

VM: Yeah, no, absolutely. Stretching into new places and feeling like you don't want to be a failure, it's our specialty I think.

CF: Okay. I will reluctantly release you to the rest of your day, but I think we could talk for a long time, even on just that last subject. Congratulations for what you're building here.

VM: Thank you.

CF: — have built and *are building*.

VM: Thank you.

CF: — and fighting the good fight through the pandemic.

VM: Must, yeah, it's been pretty rough I have to say.

CF: It's been rough for everyone, really terrible.

VM: Yeah.

CF: Thank you so much for your time.

VM: Thank you.