Interview
Crystal Pite and Lane Czaplinski
Recorded at On the Boards, Jan 27, 2011

Lane Czaplinski: I figured out that this is I think the third time you’ll be coming to On The Boards in 5 seasons -

Crystal Pite: Yes, sounds about right.

LC: Yeah - do you think your work’s changed over that period of time, and if so, how do you think it’s changed?

Crystal Pite: I’ve been thinking about that, it’s hard to say really. I mean there’s obvious things that are different - like, now I have seven dancers or six dancers on stage instead of just the two, and you know in each work that I do there’s different subject matter or different things I’m exploring so it changes anyway depending on what it is that I’m chasing. There’s a lot of things actually that have remained the same - which is my fascination with with dancing itself, which is actually with movement trying to do a good job of actually choreographing - like actual choreography - on the body, and then mixed with that, you know, my theatrical sense, like my sense of using text and and props, and set elements and costumes and things to deliver whatever it is I’m working with in different ways... So, some ways I’d say that things are very much the same. But if anything’s developed I would, I would hope that it’s just being more practiced.

LC: Is Dark Matters your most theatrical work to date?

CP: I think it would be fair to say that, it came out of a series of things I was working on starting with a piece I made in Stockholm for Cullberg Ballet in 2008 I made a piece called Matter of the Maker which was very theatrical as well, and had this big collapsing set and some big cardboard characters and things that became kind of a model for Dark Matters. Also the subject matter was the same. That work was quite theatrical and I think … you know, depends what you mean by “theatrical”, but I think you mean...using elements, like set elements and costumes and props and… text and maybe more of a narrative sense. So yes, I would say that Dark Matters is definitely one of my most theatrical pieces, if not the most. And actually Act I is really just pure theatre - it’s very physical, but – it’s mostly just pure theatre. It’s a puppet show and so its not really choreography in the sense of dancers moving in space, its really telling a story and then Act II is really dancy, you know, it’s choreography, its more abstract movement and and really really physical and virtuosic in that way.

LC: Is it - it’s kind of a Frankenstein story, isn’t it?

CP: Kind of is, I mean its that story that we all know about, about, somebody creating something that ultimately destroys him, or consumes him, changes him…in some way or another. And it’s a story about loneliness, and about obsession, and about the danger of creation, you know in that way it’s a story that we’re all very familiar with. It’s funny because when I made Dark Matters I knew that I wanted to do this puppet show for Act I, I knew I wanted it to be a narrative, I knew I wanted it to have a beginning and a middle and an end, and I struggled for the longest time about - “OK, so what is the story?” Like what is the story going to be about and I know I need a story, but I just don’t know what story it is. And I labored over that for months and months and months, trying to
figure out what the heck kind of a story (laughs) should we tell? And then finally when I realized…
that it had to be this story I just couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it before it just it just seemed so
obvious. It was just a no-brainer how I couldn’t have thought of it before. But for some reason, I
couldn’t. And I think one of the reasons I couldn’t was that I was thinking about the puppet, who’s a
very small little thing, it’s you know maybe knee high. And I was thinking of the puppet as being the
protagonist of this puppet show. And I was thinking of a larger evil you know, like something that
was larger than the puppet that would be in some kind of danger, like the antagonist would be, would
be large. But when I realized that actually that the puppet itself could be the antagonist, that the
puppet could be this, you know the source of all the conflict, then everything, everything kind of fell
into place but there was some kind of struggle in me where I couldn’t picture this tiny puppet being
such a destructive force. Once I figured that out, things really started to flow.

LC: What was it like choreographing for a puppet? I mean, I mean you move dancers around,
but what was it like conceptualizing space with an inanimate object?

CP: I love, I love the puppet, I love choreographing the puppet, – so beautiful and and it’s
amazing to see like the folding mechanisms in its little body like just the pure folding mechanisms
and coordinations and also that its, its being puppeteered by four people. I think there’s something
really beautiful about watching four people work together on one body make it do stuff, and so
there’s a real energy and a real spirit that comes with that. And the puppet itself is profoundly
beautiful. I don’t know if you’ve seen that quote that I always include in the program but it’s from
Heinrich Von Kleist – he’s talking about grace. And he was saying that he feels that grace, appears
only in, in something that has no consciousness…at all. Like a puppet. Or infinite conscious like a
god. That really…resonated with me, because there’s something with the ego completely stripped
out of this little character and you can just watch it move, and it has no self-awareness, and no
consciousness, somehow you see movement in a very different way its more, it’s got this incredible
grace, and and I don’t know, this purity, that’s very hard to achieve with a real person.

LC: You described each half of the evening as being really really different, one from the other
stylistically, and even, even in terms of discipline, what was your thinking about making that kind
of a bold switch?

CP: I did it partly out of just logistics - like it was impossible to kind of deal with the set, and to
kind of get it off the stage and move it in the dark you know between, you know, blackouts! I had
dancers hauling - oh, it was awful for a while - I had dancers hauling set elements around in the
dark to try to clear the space, oh it was just, it was a nightmare. So I almost for logistical reasons I
thought, “well, maybe I should just have a first act and a second act and when I had that realization
another door opened.  And OK, so then basically I’m gonna tell the same story or look at the same,
same ideas in two completely different ways…and see if I can unify that into an evening.  So I think
that’s kind of what the show does. The first act really explores this idea of manipulation, and unseen
forces and dark matter, and the sense of of being controlled by things we don’t understand and can’t
see. And also that whole story of creation. And then Act II really deals with the exact same material
the exact same subject in terms of manipulation and being danced, being pushed around and
manipulated by unseen forces and but in a more choreographic way. So the physicalities we’re
working with in the more abstract second half are really around, looking like you’re being danced,
as opposed to dancing. And really focusing on manipulation either of your body like you yourself
moving your own body, or, or moving another body, or being moved invisibly. So we’re looking at a
lot of those same puppeteering things like folding mechanisms and things,

LC: To a lay person, if you were describing your approach to dance making, what are some things
you would give them to hang their hat on?

**CP:** I’ll tell you what happens towards the end. What happens towards the end is: I’ve been working with a particular subject or some kind of thing I’m curious about, like for example *Dark Matter,* and I work on building choreography and material - I’ll talk about that in a second - but I’m like, “ok, now I have this arsenal of choreographic material and ‘dance moves’, basically, that I’m ready to work with”. It’s almost like I’ve assembled that stuff the way any artist would assemble their colors or their paint or their surfaces or whatever, so I’ve got this material and I’m ready to work with it. And at that point I usually ask myself, “OK so what can the body say about this subject that nothing else can? Like why do this as a dance?” And I can almost always find an answer to that question. And if I can’t I’ll do it some other way, I’ll use text or music or a set element, or some other way of attacking a particular idea. But usually I can find a way to approach it through the body. So, in the case of the dark matter idea I was thinking about, what does it mean to be moved by something we can’t understand, and can’t see? And what does that look like physically? And so we would, we took some of the movement that we’d made and we would apply it in a new way on the body. So you’re going to do that piece of choreography but you’re going to do it as if someone is making you do it, as if some invisible puppeteer is forcing you through this choreography. So there’s an element of surprise that comes into the rest of the body, as you know, someone kicks your heel out, the rest of your body is not necessarily prepared or engaged, in order to deal with that force, or that idea. That’s just an example, of how I might take something I’ve created and apply it to an idea. And the other thing is that I usually start with choreography, just by focusing on the dancer that’s in front of me and what their abilities are, and really just go with the flow. I just say, OK, let’s just let the knees collapse and as were falling let’s...you’ll try to recover from the pinky finger and umm...lets swing that left arm back and slide into a long deep lunge and then pop the heel up and then let’s lead with the back of the head backwards and the neck is gonna twist and then lets slowly descend that entire image to the floor but while we’re on the way down we’re gonna turn and (laughs) and that kind of thing. So this kind of coming up with rapid fire ideas, just pure physical ideas. You know try to work with things that challenge them, and things that are unexpected. Sometimes I feel like I just work on the defense, like OK, I’ve already done that, so what’s the opposite of that? Or: oh crap, I’ve already done the opposite of that, OK so, what’s, what does nothing look like? You know it’s...sometimes its really challenging to come up with new movement but I get a lot of help from my dancers.

**LC:** You spend a lot of time in Europe. And...you know your “dance moves”, as you call them, (laughter) are – it’s so kinetically rich, there’s a lot going on some people would call that athletic as opposed to a lot of standing around, pedestrian and whatnot. Do you ever get into conversations with people over there where they become almost, do they ever become dismissive of that as just merely dance?

**CP:** Yes Absolutely. I try to, I don’t really have those conversations I mean I, you know, there’s sort of a movement, or there has been a movement, let’s say, away from dance, away from choreography, away from physicality, and certainly away from virtuosity. It’s just not me, I have a fascination with the body and I feel like it has so much to say and I really - it’s just something that I really enjoy. It’s usually my way into, just like I was saying earlier, its my way into a subject, or a way of exploring something. I feel like the body teaches me so much about what it is that I’m trying to learn. I’ve learned about things, I’ve learned about loss, I’ve learned about disappearance, and I’ve learned about control and manipulation and all kinds of amazing things through just working with the body, seeing how it moves. And I trust in that. I mean, you know it’s like apples and oranges right, I’m making oranges, and other people are doing apples and neither thing should, I don’t feel, should take anything away from the other. Its just different. Different aesthetic, different needs.
Umm – yeah I’ve encountered this “Oh you’re still doing dance? You’re still doing choreography like, like its somehow sort of old fashioned or...I don’t know.

**LC:** Sometimes I think that people that say that aren’t as aware conceptually how you can approach research and development within a movement platform, and always assume that that needs to happen in something that’s more, you know, a practice maybe that comes from visual arts or theatre or some sort of other - you know, and again, just the kinetic research ends up being a lesser pursuit. Some people I hear say that and it always bothers me, because sometimes I feel like then you get a lot of the (French accent) *non-dance*, people are standing around and they’re still calling it dance but they’re saying, “oh, but this is pushing things?” and you know, it’s just really interesting to look at all that together.

**CP:** Well for me I get, I’m frustrated with the term “conceptual dance” just because it makes me feel like that those of us that use dance don’t have a concept. You know what I mean? Like it’s as if we don’t have a concept because we use choreography or we use dance to do what we’re doing...I think the body has a whole lot of intelligence, and I think that’s what I was trying to say earlier but not very well, I feel like there’s so much to be learned from that unspoken wordless language of the body. And I find that endlessly fascinating and illuminating.