

# INTERVIEW

**Dayna Hanson and Heather Kravas**

**Recorded at On the Boards, Nov 11, 2010**

**HK: I was going to just start at the beginning and just have you speak to your initial inspiration for this work.**

DH: My initial inspiration for this work came when Dave Proscia, who is one of my collaborators in the show, was driving through Seattle one day and he saw this bumper sticker. And it said “engaged for 27 years”. And he was puzzled - it was like a homemade bumper sticker. And he passed the car, and he passed the car and he saw 2 women in the driver’s seat and passenger’s seat, and they were with their own little bumper sticker. That was their way of telling the world that they didn’t have the right to get married. And that little - it was just at tiny little incident, not even an incident, just an observation that Dave had that triggered a lot of conversation between him and me. And that’s the initial kind of grain of inspiration for this whole work. We started thinking about why it is that marriage equality is not a given at this stage of the game; why it is that we still deal with racism and poverty to the degree that we do, given the rhetoric, given the kind of principles that we all grow up hearing, in terms of what our country was founded on. And I remember at that moment he was really angry, kind of indignant and riled up, and it unleashed a whole lot of exploration and research about what happens if you do go back and really look? And I’m not a historian; none of us in the group has any of that.

**HK: Do you remember a time when it went from being a kind of conversation about politics and the state of this country or the state of marriage - when it went from conversation to “I know I actually want to make a piece, make a performance about this”?**

DH: It was really quickly - I really tie that - him telling me that little story to then this idea of, here we are, and we’re kind of like - you can trace it back, you know, we’re the great-great-great-great-grandchildren of those people who founded the country, and it’s a continuous thread. And so immediately we started thinking of how that would translate into a performance. And I think Dave had a certain set of ideas that were not very much like what we’re doing. But they were very clear, you know, and they formed a part of the basis. And I came at it from my whole angle of like, mixing media together and -

**HK: That’s something I wanted to ask about. I’m curious, having known you for a long time. And people throw out a lot of labels, like “she does dance/theater...” - I don’t know how useful those are, but you do incorporate a lot of different elements into your performances. There’s dance, and there’s theater, and there’s music - I wondered if you - like when you first started thinking about a new work, if it came to you first in any of those categories, if you started seeing it like through more of a kinesthetic lens, or if you heard it musically, or if you started by writing...**

DH: Right. That’s a really good question, and there was a phrase of movement that I associate with that time that was kind of my starting point choreographically. And I struggle sometimes because movement is not often literal, I mean, it can be anything, but in this case it wasn’t like this phrase of movement was inspired by soldiers marching or anything to do with the

Revolutionary War, but it was something that - and it still is really a part of the piece, it's a thread that is woven through - we have a name for it, we call it the "musket material". But it really is quite abstract. (laughs) And so I have a hard time answering, "what does that - maybe there's an essence of something in a passage of movement that -

**HK: - can't be communicated in another way.**

DH: Yeah, and how does that it link? Well, maybe the link is very mysterious and abstract, but - so there was that phrase of movement early on, and I just started playing with it in different costumes, and different kind of dramatic settings, and...but there were a lot of images too, that were there earlier. Some of them have stayed and some have gone by the wayside. And then in terms of, if you think about the theatrical elements, with some of those we really started from scratch. Once we got into rehearsal. Some of these are so big. The Declaration of Independence. Like, how are you...I mean, I had no preconceived notions at all, no images in my head about how to bring that to life. Which is frightening.

**HK: I wondered, too, and you're kind of answering this, but I wondered how much during this process you were kind of trying to rein yourself in and stick with the original ideas and the themes and how much you let yourself be kind of tangential.**

DH: I'm a pretty tangential person and artist, I think. So that created certain tensions within the working process. Like, well, where are those really clear, pure, initial ideas? We're not doing certain things that we talked about doing because I'm going off on tangents. And I guess as an artist I tend to find in the mistakes, in margins of the process, that's often where the really good stuff is. So the accidental discoveries, I like to be really open to those.

**HK: I remember reading something, I think it was an article about Trisha Brown, and she said that inspiration comes from the side. I think you can be looking and looking and looking and trying to move forward with something, but it'll hit you from the side. And I thought that was really beautiful.**

DH: I think that's true. I find that the rehearsals that feel the most exciting, where there's a sense when you walk out of the room like "Wow! We really discovered something!", that those are the times that, as I'm walking in, I'm trying to empty out my brain. And I guess I have my agenda, I know what we want to accomplish today, but just - the more open I can be to surprises and accidents, it feels like it correlates to a more productive rehearsal experience. Yeah...that's a nice one. That's a good quote. So is the one - I've heard from you before - was it John Cage? Something about the critical and the creative mind?

**HK: Oh yeah - not to let them be engaged simultaneously.**

DH: Say that again?

HK: That one can't or shouldn't be creating and critiquing simultaneously.

DH: I've thought about that, the critical and the creative, especially in the last couple of months, when I've taken a stronger directorial role. And I've never been kind of in that position with this large a group of people. And it can be really daunting. Especially when we began in a kind of

more democratic style.

**HK: They're all really strong, beautiful performers that I'm sure you have a lot of trust in, too, but you still have to kind of be the authority.**

DH: I had to kind of turn off that kind of - like, kind of "I'm coming in, I have an idea, it might seem kind of weird, but just turn off the critical part to see what it actually is". And not get too caught up in judging it or anticipating what other people in the room might be feeling or thinking about it.

**HK: Do you feel like this piece and this way that you're working, do you feel like it's kind of a continuation of how you deal with your form, or do you feel like it's departure?**

DH: It feels kind of like more of a departure than a smooth, logical next step. Because it feels like it's been a jump, more - and it's provided a greater challenge for me. I'm probably learning more out of the process than I did - you know, the last piece I did was for 5 people. And the subject matter was a little bit more contained. The near-death experience was a part of what I addressed in that last piece, and I think that both the content of this work - it's really vast, the Revolutionary War and how the Revolutionary War, the ironies of that time, how they inform where we are today, that's huge, you could make 5 pieces about that!

**HK: Maybe you will! Like, your next decade!**

DH: Maybe it is! I sometimes really like to think that way, like this is the beginning of a series. I've struggled with, you know, just the scale. It's a lot of people to have in the room. But the reward is so great.

**HK: You like knowing what's challenging. I mean, it's all challenging, right. You find yourself alone in a room and it's challenging. But it's interesting to know what the particular challenges of this work are. I don't even know - I have another question and it's about narrative, and I'm not even sure how to address it exactly. It's like, I've observed in your work that you deal with a lot of narrative. And a lot of dance doesn't. And to different degrees, I'd say. And from what I've seen of this work, you're again dealing with narrative, but it's kind of within the content as well as a part of your process. Like you're kind of dealing with how we make narratives of history.**

DH: Yeah.

**HK: And I find that really interesting. Like, you're doing that in terms of "how do I make the piece?" and you're also addressing that within that kind of historical context.**

DH: It's true. And I hope that all of those levels of the treatment of narrative and the concept of it can nest together in a way that has some resonance and some kind of explosive power. You know, there's even a mention within the text of the notion of the master narrative, and how we learn history, how we learn our own story - well, it's flawed and it's limited, and yet that's the authoritative, that's what we all grow up - so there's kind of that big thing and trying to get that and pick it apart and dismantle it in a way that is not completely dark and dreary but is maybe playful at times. But then, you know, alongside that, looking at some of the narratives,

you know, some of the sort of smaller forgotten stories, and elevating those, and seeing what's in those. Like the story of woman who at age 18 or whatever, joined the continental army and fought as a revolutionary soldier. And how that resonates now, and how it kind of, when you realize, like - "what?! this teenage girl dressed up as a man for 2 years?" and like...what the hell? That's not a part of what -

**HK: - we get taught.**

DH: No. And yet it has a lot of interest in itself, and it's completely fascinating. I just kind of want them all to kind of talk to each other.

**HK: Yeah. It makes me reflect on kind of what you were talking about earlier, and how you had this kernel of dance that really was the jumping-off point. Like, oh, where's the kind of drama in that, and where's the - how does that serve the piece overall, and I know that it does, I just find it pretty interesting. Do you know Mary Overlie?**

DH: Yeah.

**HK: I think about Mary Overlie and the kind of, what are they, there's kind of 6 - she talked about kinetics, time -**

DH: The Viewpoints.

**HK: Yeah, The Viewpoints. And how they've been flattened. And leveled and spread out. And how you can basically shift them around and re-tell and reconfigure. And I see that a lot in your work. Like, ok, here's where narrative is really the center. And then it won't be.**

DH: Right.

**HK: In a breath. It'll be the music. Which is really time. Right?**

DH: Yeah, I like that. That's a really interesting way of looking at it. Some of those decisions are very tricky to make, about why - like why is narrative the focus and then (snaps her fingers) just like that -

**HK: You just kind of have to trust your intuition.**

DH: Exactly.

**HK: I don't know why, but this is what happens.**

DH: This is what needs to happen. Especially you're creating and we're not, like, writing a 3-act play. And you also don't want to, kind of - I've seen contemporary experimental performance pieces where it feels as though there's just been a template that's just been laid on the material. "Ok, we're going to have a chaotic section right here, and we're going to lip sync over here" or you know, whatever -

**HK: The whole arc is already blueprinted out.**

DH: Yeah. Which is - not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that, there are effective forms, you know? But I always find that it's just so much trial and error. And that's what we're doing right now, re-sequencing.

**HK: And do you find that pleasurable or excruciating?**

DH: Both! I guess. Don't you think?

**HK: Yeah. I do too.**

DH: Yeah. I feel at this point, you know, after we had the whole experience of just assembling all of our material and presenting it in the sequence that made the most sense at the time, at the TBA Festival in Portland, and getting all this feedback, and going back and then making a series of much more intentional decisions about "why this" and "why that" and "let's take this out completely and put something else in". But with the intent of creating more focused, comprehensible work.