

INTERVIEW

Pat Graney and Marcie Sillman

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Marcie Sillman: I have to tell you, pat, that I sat in that rehearsal, watching *Faith* after 20 years – is that right? And even without the lights and without any of the tech – ‘cause you guys just kind of did it, right – and I think KT Niehoff was running over and changing the music –

Pat Graney – I think she was!

MS: Even with that, it still to me held up. Because I have to tell you, that dance was seminal in my life.

PG: Oh!

MS: This is the gushy part of chatting with you! Which makes me wonder, for someone who is creating new work, what propelled you back 2 decades to these 3 dances?

PG: Well, initially it was a conversation with Hallie Kuperman, who owns the Century Ballroom here in Seattle. And she was talking about “oh, there’s this generation” – she was talking about younger dancers who hadn’t seen this work, and how great it would be to mount these 3 works. And actually Hallie had been our tech director, she’d toured with us on a couple of the pieces. So it was this sort of pipe dream and we sort of – we went back and forth and tried to apply for sponsorship – anyway! The long and short of it was: how are we going to afford to do it? So I applied for a bunch of different grants, one of which was American Dance Masterpieces, which we got, to revive *Faith* – but I didn’t really apply, like “can I apply for the 3 1-hour works one?” People are just applying to that program for, like, a 20 minute piece! So I just could do it (laughs). So, I decided to take that money and put it into the whole *Triptych*, which has been really helpful.

MS: Now, I saw each of these dances when you made them. And it’s interesting to think of them as a whole. So, I guess my question is, when you made *Faith* originally, were you envisioning that it would have *Faith Pt II*, which is *Sleep*, and *Part III*, which is *Tattoo*?

PG: I didn’t really, I think, you know, when you’re making a work – I just came back from Oberlin College, I was there last week, setting a part of *Faith*, actually setting the heels section – it’s the only thing that really kind of stands on its own. And we talked about the kind of – the inspirations and the paintings of Francesco Clemente, and all the stuff that inspired that particular section. But you know, when you’re making something, you really never know where it’s going to go or what it’s going to be. I think even when I made the first section, the Caravaggio section, in my mind I thought, “oh, that’s going to be the end. People are going to walk out into darkness. Because it’s about faith”. Not knowing where that was going to lead me, and not knowing that it was going to lead me someplace quite different than I had thought.

MS: I should stop you here, because *Faith* is really about – it is based on visual art, on still paintings. It’s not a movement-inspired work necessarily. I guess people are going to have to see that for themselves to really know what I’m talking about – but how do you – I always

wondered that with the Caravaggio, because of course they look like Caravaggio paintings, sort of – people have to come, there's a twist, your own twist on it – but how do you translate something that you see in 2 dimensions into this movement?

PG: Well, I think we use the tableau form (laughter). I mean, I think prior to doing Faith I was doing very athletic work that was – I would say that my work has always been primarily more visually based, because I'm more of a visual kind of person and more of a formalist in that way. But I wasn't really sure how to do that, I just thought "I'm going to put these things together that I think are really beautiful". And in the old days, in terms of how people talked about composition, it was very, very different, like "your transitions are your most important thing!" And I thought, "I don't have any transitions!" And I don't! I mean, there's transitions, but the reality is it's just moving like your eye moves around a painting. It is – you settle on one image, and instead of moving on one music cue, you think it's going to move on, it moves on another music cue and you sit there for longer, you get to look at the lighting and the people and development in an active sense of the visual.

MS: So, is it 6, 7 years later that you made *Sleep*?

PG: 1991...1995 or 6.

MS: I'm forgetting!

PG: 5 years. I think it was 4 years, but anyway...it takes a long time. 3 to 4 years, minimal. In *House of Mind*, which is the most recent piece, the movement part we just put it together in 3 months, which is not something I've ever done. But the visual art and all the planning took a lot more time. But it was great to have – also, you know, we're, you're talking about a time, not that there was an enormous amount of money available for dance, but there was more money than there is now. And you could imagine having a 3 year process and being able to pay people – I mean, not a lot – but to rehearse for spring and fall, spring and fall, for a couple of years. And that does not exist anymore, that time is gone.

MS: And here's the...what's the word...the reveal: I was on your board somewhere in between all these things happening. And I have watched your rehearsal process. And you, at that time, and those particular dancers, you really involved them. Your process was not a choreographer coming into a room and setting movement on people. The dancers were – especially for *Sleep*, I think that was true – were developing a visual language. Isn't that right?

PG: Yes. That's such a great way of putting it, I might add.

MS: Well, it's true!

PG: No, it is. I think that through the making – I was much more controlling of all aspects in *Faith*, and then in *Sleep*, the artists, of course the individual artists dancing became much more involved and fully-fledged collaborators, in a way. Because *Sleep* – we had dream journals, we recorded dreams, we interviewed our mothers – Ben just found the tape, because I didn't have it – and there's that place during intermission, we're going to play that. Because everybody interviewed their mother about getting married, and it's beautiful. It's really beautiful.

MS: As I remarked to you during the rehearsal, those are two very heavy emotional – at least for me – very emotional to watch. At the time that I saw them originally and again the second time – even though they are sort of "of their time" in terms of issues that women face and talk

about – you know, it’s the era of feminism – to me they were very timeless. You know, in seeing them again.

PG: Well, one hopes that they’re timeless! (laughter)

MS: Tattoo was made then, another 6 years – 2001?

PG: Yeah, and in between that I had made a bunch of other dances –

MS: Yeah, I guess they really are 4 or 5 years apart. I was thinking 3, but

PG: 1991, 1995, 2001 – so it’s a ten year period.

MS: A decade of making dances. And you had said to me, when I came to that rehearsal, “oh, the *Tattoo* people will get to chill out”. Because these are each evening-length works on their own, very emotional. And then you said, “well, *Tattoo*’s not as emotional”. But I’m curious, then, in your mind, how it forms the third part of the *Triptych*.

PG: Well, I feel like in some ways, you know, it continues on with the, sort of the celebration of women’s code of communication, of being in the world, of visual image and representation. And I think that there is a coolness to it in a way, because it is a lot more complex rhythmically – but I feel like, again – that piece was based on a piece by Marilyn Lysohir, *The Tattooed Ladies and the Dinosaurs*. And – which, the emotional read for me, always thinking about this sense of genetic memory and at the time people were talking about using your limbic brain, and these were sort of primitive animal person and how do we access that – and I thought immediately, like “ok, I can see my 4th grade history book, and I’m looking at primitive images, and they’re all men. So where do I fit in?” Where do we access that as women? And that really is where *Tattoo* came from. And so there’s all these rituals that are very funny and kind of goofy/clever, but hopefully there’s a poignancy in there that makes the code or the language of women into a real thing. And I feel like at the beginning there are two people walking through a field. And at the end. And there’s a sensibility of the passage of time. And it refers back to *Faith* in that way. Where it has nudity, but it’s decorative nudity. And you’re really referring back to all the pieces there. And I don’t think it has – I don’t know – for me, it has a very deep impact – it has the emotional and it has the mental, together.

MS: I have to just say again, you know, seeing *Faith* originally – and I believe I saw it at the Moore theater?

PG: Yes.

MS: It was one of those dances that is still kind of indelible in my mind, even though I couldn’t describe it, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you about the high heels or the balls or any of that. But when I sat down, what kicked in, the memory to me weren’t the visuals necessarily, but it was the music. And I was thinking, in fact of all your dances, you describe yourself as kind of a visual artist, but music is definitely woven in there, it’s kind of inseparable. And it’s kind of – it would not be the same, none of them. And that’s definitely true of *Tattoo* as well. They wouldn’t be the same without the music that you chose. So how are you thinking about that – you know, you’ve got the movement, you’ve got the visual – how are you thinking about the music when you select it?

PG: I think the music – well, it depends, some of it is found music, some of it is commissioned

music. Like for instance Rachel Warwick's score that she did for the nudes in Faith is so stunning. She's got 17 overdubs of her voice. She worked and worked and worked. I just got a hold of her. I haven't seen her since – I don't know – 15 years. I didn't know she lived here! She's coming to the show, I'm really excited about it. But that is a piece of brilliance. Now Rachel also did the score for the 1990 Goodwill Games, so I knew a little bit of her there. She doesn't compose much, she doesn't compose anymore, I don't think. But if that's the opus, I mean, my god, that's an amazing piece of music. I've never had people ask more about a piece of music than that, actually, ever.

MS: It's very transcendent.

PG: It is transcendent, and how she was able to do that – and I kept thinking, oh my gosh, it's too much at the end, it's too much, it's going to turn into, like, a Broadway musical – it wasn't, and it isn't. But I think, to me, I'm always working on an emergent sensibility with the works. There is a visual, and auditory, and lighting. There's a kinetic sense and a vulnerability of the body that makes something out of it that emerges and is not any one of those things singularly, it's everything together, and that, to me, is – you know, whether it's successful or not in every single piece – that's the premise. And I think that's very unconscious on my part, I think it probably is for most artists. Because you're seeking to find, and you're desperate to find that inside thing. And you do everything you can to find it. And then when you discover it, you know what it is, but you don't know how to get there. So I think that's the key -

MS: The key that you're looking for, in a sense.

PG: Yes, the key that's the bottom of the piece, to me, that pushes you to the top of the piece.

MS: So this is gonna be – let's just say we should plan on, like, 4 hours of being immersed in Pat Graney when we come to On the Boards. And so I guess, just to end, I'm wondering what you – how do you want us to prepare, those of us who are coming to sit on the other side of the lights?

PG: I think just prepare to enjoy and participate in what way you can. And everyone who has seen the pieces will be bringing those old ideas with them. And I know Nancy Burtenshaw, one of her friends is coming and they're bringing all their girlfriends because they all went together, and they're going to have this big ritual and spend-the-night party – which is amazing, you know - and I feel like, there's an emergence of the 3 works, there's something that floats above all three of them that connects them. And I think that's what people will experience and I think none of us have seen that before and I haven't seen it either, because I haven't seen them performed! So I have no idea! That's what I'm hoping. That's the surprise for the audience, and also for me.

**ON THE
BOARDS**