

THE BRIDGE PEOPLE : PART 1

interdisciplinary performance making

By Krista DeNio

Kinebago | Issue 1, May 2011

Part 1, in this series, focuses on the dilemmas & some commonalities of the interdisciplinary performance maker.

Part 2, will unravel various tools & discoveries that have kept these artists engaged in bridging performance territories.

Part 3, will take a look at the E|MERGE residency, as a model and source for study, re: the needs & various working conditions of the Bridge People.

After two years of co-curating, producing and participating in E|MERGE, an interdisciplinary artist residency at Earthdance (www.earthdance.net), in Plainfield, MA, it was time to have some conversations with some of these artists. E|MERGE encourages cross-disciplinary collaboration toward forging new creative relationships, skill sharing, and shared resources that bridge known and unknown territories between the artists & their engaged disciplines. The (10) day residency, includes a workshop exchange between the artists (also open to the public), followed by intensive project work, which ranges from groups of artists who are curated to collaborate in the context of a specific project (with 1-2 lead artists), as well as, collaborative pools (groups who are put together to innovate & create something from scratch during the residency), as well as, other formations of interdisciplinary collaborations, labs, practice groups, dialogues, impromptu showings, and other spontaneous creative engagements that emerge, throughout the residency. The final weekend culminates in a 1-2 day performance marathon, when site-specific, installation-based & more traditional proscenium style performances occur.

I wanted to take a moment to dig into the process of interdisciplinary performance making with a few of these artists, as well as, some local, Western MA based artists. Some of them are fellow collaborators, some of them new (to me) colleagues, and all of them brilliant...if I do say so myself. We talked about (and some wrote about) their own artistic discoveries as interdisciplinary creators, during the residency, and of late; the experience & process(es), for them in creating interdisciplinary work; and the affect of a container like this residency, on them individually, and the process/ products they participated in.

Meet the artists:

Emmy Bean (Chicago, IL and Montague, MA): theater artist, musician & puppeteer
<http://emlynbean.blogspot.com>

Davina Cohen (NYC): makes performances in theater & dance, actor, yoga educator
www.davinacohen.com

Katarina Eriksson (San Francisco): Interdisciplinary, improvisation-based work, Contact Improvisation teacher
<http://momentsnoticeimprov.blogspot.com>

Rythea Lee (Florence, MA): dance-theater creator/performer, director & musician;
www.zanyangels.com

Sophia Remolde (NYC): is a theater, film, dance, and puppetry artist, who writes, directs, performs, designs, sometimes dresses as a lobster, and always loves to collaborate.
<http://vimeo.com/rocklobster>

leaf tine (Stockton, CA): collaboration, serendipity, improvisation, ritual practice, traditional media: composer, choreographer, performer, muralist, illustrator, poet, master teacher: snpl, qtt, mfa, qwerty, ascii, rotfl
www.leaftine.com

On the Art of Interdisciplinary performance making: Just what IS it? And what ARE you?

It seems a common theme, for those of us in the world who bridge different conversations, fields of study, genres, methodologies, etc., that we often find ourselves explaining (or attempting to explain) repeatedly why we are doing what we are doing. Whereas in scientific fields, scientists are expected to experiment, in order to learn, grow, develop their theories and groundbreaking, life saving, solutions-- artists who step outside of our traditions or known & established forms, to work between disciplines, to investigate and experiment with different languages & media for our artistic expression, seem to need to explain our reasons for doing so repeatedly to the mainstream audiences, who often want to know what it is they're getting themselves into when committing to any length of performance event/experience. At the least, I think it's fair to say that our reasons for doing what we do, are often in question to begin with as artists. To then go beyond one's realm of primary training, knowledge or an arena/ tradition/form that is identifiable to an audience, can leave us as artists standing in a sort of no man's land, where neither our audiences, funders, educational institutions, nor the society at large can get behind us and/or into our work. So, why do we do it? And what exactly does interdisciplinary performance making mean?

Davina Cohen: *"I've been asking myself: Am I an interdisciplinary artist? I clearly like to work interdisciplinarily. I think theater is inherently interdisciplinary: movement, writing, speaking, singing, constructing of props, lights, sound, can involve technology. So, I suppose this is tricky. I was talking to Amii (Legendre) the other day, and I was describing her as someone whose work and interest has gone beyond the convention of her original training and designation. So I think that's the definition of an interdisciplinary artist."*

Davina went on to discuss the particular location she's arrived at, in her career:

I think that's why I was so delighted to go to E|MERGE---I was thinking where in the world are there kindred spirits? This is what was so satisfying about the E|MERGE residency. What I love about E|MERGE, is that somehow there is an environment where it does not feel like a contest between exploration and rigor, it instead feels like a marriage between exploration, freedom and rigor. Maybe rigor is not exactly the word that I mean, but I mean that you can sort of slide in and out of the spaces that you know and the spaces that you don't and there is a collective agreement that everyone is doing this and that's actually great to be doing!

Then I wonder ---why does that feel so separate from my life as an actor? It feels like an experience of great artistic freedom, which I need, as an artist. So, I feel at this point in my life artistically free, but pedagogically & professionally confused. I feel really unclear about what I'm doing, besides making work. And, I feel like that should be enough, but I'm not clear on what I'm doing...it's not that I'm out of the game, or not exercising my creative impulses, or not producing work..."

No—she's definitely not “out of the game”. Check out her website for verification of her many projects, work as an actor, dancer, yoga educator.

Meanwhile, Davina suffers from similar confusions that many carry with us, as we cross disciplines, trainings, and attempt to make ourselves proficient in multiple fields in order to increase the capacity with which we have to express and make work that defies boundary- yes, maybe, but most importantly—really conveys what we are trying to express.

As an actor who has always had a huge physical life and many trainings, Davi has also recently begun delving deeply into dance training. Now seeking to develop herself as a dancer, to the degree that she already has developed herself as an actor, she finds herself in one of those no (wo)man's land gaps between MFA dance conservatory training programs, who don't quite get someone like her, with immense skill sets, physical training, history & rigor, but still too far (in

these institution's eyes) afield from a traditional dancer/choreographer. She finds herself struggling in the realm of theater, with the traditional director model, where her vast array of skill sets often are barely tapped, or maybe not further pushed/developed, by whichever director's hands & work she's placing her instrument into.

I listen to Davi talk about her struggles and respond back: "Me too. I understand. The same thing happened to me. I know. It's so confusing," more times than I care to hear myself repeat. From my own experience as a dancer/choreographer first and theater performer / director second, with an emphasis on original, experimental work and a trajectory that includes tapping into Buddhist philosophy and an attempt toward sustainable living... there have been no straight forward pathways. Or even close really...but that wasn't our point was it? We weren't ever looking for the straight way. We're the explorers, the scientists of our fields, conducting experiments in what it means to speak multiple languages and interchange, sometimes intertwine them toward our best creative directives.

Katarina Eriksson:

I've always seen myself as a bridge person - can't follow one path. I'm always interested in combining paths - and these are the kinds of people who are interested in interdisciplinary work.

I'm always interested in combining paths, and these are the kinds of people who are interested in interdisciplinary work. To do this together, you have to somehow stay open minded. You can't have too many assumptions. I really enjoy being around other people who have their own ideas, and are passionate about what they do, but there is an openness, willingness to hear one another's ideas.

There's less of a wish to conform or make another conform, but there's more interest in a true diversity of ideas. To really co-exist in diversity, be there & be different and really hear each other.

Katarina is not only an interdisciplinary artist working between forms of Contact Improvisation, Action Theater, and Somatic driven physical exploration. In addition, she's exploring her own, unique form of 'directing, without directing', which involves working extremely collaboratively with her performance collaborators, who then help her direct them, based on their own interests, work, areas they are seeking to develop.

You could think –this is all going to become one soup of a thing, but it's not true. If you remain really committed to both, what you're passionately exploring, and also wanting to work with others' ideas, then something truly idiosyncratic and unique can arise. Coming to E|MERGE, I was feeling like—I'm scared of all these people with fancy bios and letters after their names- highly intellectual people with clearly articulated ideas and minds. When I discovered that these people were just like myself interested in the body, non-verbal communication, somatic experience and investigation as much as in philosophy, "the big picture" and how things related to one another—It was kind of like coming home.

While Katarina has always trusted an intuitive path in her own artistic journey and development, she spoke of some of the challenges:

It doesn't fit in boxes. Might not fit into frameworks, like dance or theater festivals, when you're forever not wanting to define yourself. Is it dance, theater or dance-theater? And then I have the improvisational thing going too. It's kind of hard to fit in, when you're looking at applications and forms. It's hard to describe what you're doing. Well I

do different things, but I'd say: I do interdisciplinary improvisation-based work. See! It's not a very fun sentence to say. It's a heavy thing, for something so light. It's not necessarily discouraging, but it's challenging.

So why do we do all of this work to undefine ourselves and our work again?

leaf tine:

One thing I LOVE about interdisciplinary work is the redirection of focus from medium and technique to process and content. That's not to say we eschew quality. Well, we might. If we DO, we're doing it consciously as a practice, a tool, a device. We give ourselves permission to include anything that works, be it a traditional medium, a piece of fruit, or a roll of toilet paper. We become explorers and adventurers: technically trained, creatively driven, and delving into our own new frontiers, whatever those might be.

YES. Thank you, Leaf!

New frontiers....that's what we're after. So, from dance to puppetry, from theater to Contact Improvisation, from music to film to becoming a lobster, what threads of commonality bind us and/or propel us toward these frontiers?

leaf:

I use movement to access non-ordinary reality. If I move like a wolf, I start to think wolf. If I move like a ball of string... the metaphor unwinds. Story-telling, painting, music, they're informed by the flavor of the propulsion. Before I perform a service (e.g. marriage ceremony, ice-breaker, participatory performance) I often find a spot to be alone and move, following hints from self and surroundings, dropping in to a kind of open, tenuous connection with...? Spirit? Awareness? Interconnection? If I do it right, I become more present to the moment, my sensitivity is heightened, and I'm engaged on what feels like a profound level. These movement meditations inform the way I dance, teach, walk down the street for days afterwards.

Emmy Bean:

I found I needed to be grounded in my body in order to reach outside of it, to connect with other people, and to go inside enough to create alongside other people as well. I remembered that it was a joyful thing, and a vital thing, to be in motion and to engage in movement as an experience and a research methodology. Movement releases my voice in bigger and more dynamic/flexible ways, movement wakes up my spirit, movement puts me in touch with the physical space I'm in enough to inhabit it more boldly. If I'm ever stuck on an idea or a feeling of inertia, doubt, or total insanity, I give it over to my body and try to move through it. I can move about it, or move around it, or just keep fucking moving until it starts to feel different. This is literally my best practice for overcoming my roadblocks, for getting out of my own way.

Rythea Lee:

For me, movement is passion. Movement is life force and creative spark. I use movement to say energetically what I cannot say OR understand in words, in thought. It punctuates what I mean and what I feel in a universal way. I like to use movement to support my relationship to rich verbal content, to accentuate a state of mind or emotion that goes with or in contrast to what is being said. Though I enjoy theatre and writing theatrical skits and plays, for me, the movement brings a whole other level of communication and engagement and hopefully for the audience. It brings layers of connection. Your words can be saying "I loved him so

much" and your body can be saying "I despised him, I lost him or I can't remember him."

Katarina:

It takes us back to where we all started, as babies: un clever intelligence. Moving and studying movement and challenging ourselves in that form, cultivates alertness- to be in the body, alive & present---here now. Especially when you work with image, word, content that can take you way out in philosophical and abstract places, there is something about movement that always brings us right back here, and grounds what you're trying to do.

AHA! So, this is what I knew...of course (sneaky little laugh)!

This is what I would propose, as a mover, dancer, performer, as a director, writer and a human: Movement underlies everything, and is ultimately—no matter what forms we are developing, colliding or transmuting—the bottom line.

Being conveniently located in bodies, we seem to have movement as the underlying truth of every breath, every moment. One of the things that contemporary theater is recognizing and pointing to is the use of the body as the first medium (underlying all other mediums). There is a growing understanding that how we train and inform & direct the use of our bodies & physical energies directly impacts how we can relay information otherwise, emotionally, narratively, psychologically, through the written word, intellectually, visually, aurally, etc.

Having witnessed and participated in the interdisciplinary processes at E|MERGE, as an artist & producer/curator, it has been remarkable to witness the ways that artists of many media find themselves coming together (often) most readily through physical languages and training, as the shared foundation. Even for those collaborations whose products (if you will) have been delivered via film, or photo, installation or other forms not based in live performance given by performers—one of the common threads or languages has been movement.

But it's not movement alone that we can point to as the common thread between all of us. We could say that there is another, layer of inter-connected consciousness that is perhaps even more foundational or universal than movement itself.....perhaps?

Sophia Remolde:

I have been beginning more and more in my life and work to deal with the issue of awareness.

I am becoming of the mind that it is possibly one of the most important tools we have. I hope that this is not too amorphous of an answer. But I think it is a tool. And one that needs to be developed and cultivated like any other technical skill. The art of practicing awareness is not one that appears to be highly valued in many aspects of our capitalist,

consumerist society. But I believe in its ability to help generate a higher level of consciousness. Which is what art often strives to do, right?

There is so much to take into account in any given moment. But I think in order to be able to fully respond to those things, one often has to let go of preconceived perceptions and ideas. It is great and necessary to have artistic goals and aesthetics and plans. Without them, we can't dream of making art. But we also have to be just as able and willing to let those go. To stop and take a look around you and say, "Look at all of this information that I have at this exact moment. How can all of my own knowledge and talents and needs co-exist and collaborate with this new information?"

Speak it Sophie! (and she'll have more to say next round too)...

So—there is this ongoing attention to presence/ awareness. Presence in the body-mind, and how choices are made from here, our original palette, the canvas we must always begin with. It's comforting to recognize the foundations that we all have in common, when we find ourselves standing out in the no (wo)man's land, straddling various forms and genres, and searching around (what sometimes feels like blindly) for the next best form for our present expression to take. It seems that we can always come back to real time, present body and awareness as a tool itself, to give us access to the many channels or avenues we might pursue from there—allowing a greater ease in the choice making and trust in the creative process itself. From here we can cultivate our own abilities to speak different languages across disciplines, and to navigate the various territories within our multi-faceted creative beings.

And on that note, we'll take our **first *intermission*** here.

-END Part 1-

**Krista DeNio is a choreographer, performer, director, writer and educator.
She was the Executive Artistic Director of Earthdance from 2009-2013: www.earthdance.net
where she co-founded, co-produced, and co-curated the E|MERGE Interdisciplinary Artist Residency from 2010-2014.
www.kristadenio.com.**