



OREGON ARTSWATCH

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DANCE

DanceWatch Weekly: Helen Simoneau and "Closer"

Oregon Ballet Theatre ends its season at BodyVox with an intimate program, led by Helen Simoneau's "Departures"

MAY 23, 2018 // DANCE, FEATURED // JAMUNA CHIARINI

This week [Oregon Ballet Theatre](#) closes out its 2017-2018 season with "Closer," an intimate showing at BodyVox Dance Center of new works choreographed by OBT rehearsal director Lisa Kipp, OBT company dancers Katherine Monogue, Makino Hayashi, and Peter Franc, alongside [Helen Simoneau's](#) *Departures*. Simoneau's ballet was commissioned by OBT in 2017 as part of OBT's Choreography XX project to discover new women choreographers in ballet. The works by OBT dancers will be accompanied by commissioned musical compositions from Grammy award-winning remix artist, [Andre Allen Anjos](#).

Additionally, OBT artistic Director Kevin Irving will rehearse the dancers in a [Nacho Duato](#) duet, live, as a means to open up the creative process experience for audiences to see. Each night—and there are eight of them—will involve a lottery to choose which of the company dancers gets to dance in the open rehearsal that night.

Last summer I sat down with choreographer Simoneau, to learn about her work, her process, and her dance company. Included in my conversation with Simoneau were questions I had at the time about how Portland State University's shuttering of its dance program would affect the Portland dance community, how she defines classical ballet, and where ballet is headed.

Simoneau is an independent choreographer, dancer, and teacher, who, at the time of our interview, lived in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and directed her own 12-member dance company. Helen Simoneau Danse had a yearly season in North Carolina and seasons every other year in New York.

Since I spoke with her last, Simoneau spent the rest of summer 2017 at the Banff Centre in Canada performing in a work by Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Chekaoui, provided choreography for a Joan Baez music video performed by New York City Ballet dancer Claire Kretzschmar, worked with LA-based company BODYTRAFFIC at The National Choreographic Center in Akron, was a Fall Fellow at the New York University Center for Ballet (where she created a new ballet on pointe for six dancers), toured her evening-length work *Land Bridge* with her company, created and restaged works for the students of University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Goucher College in Baltimore, and for Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. She is currently an artist-in-residence at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and now lives in Brooklyn, NY, while maintaining a performing season in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Simoneau is an incredibly inspiring artist, to me, and one of the few people I know actually making a living full-time as a dance artist. Our conversation unfolds below.

Performances this week

[Closer](#)

Oregon Ballet Theatre

Choreography by Peter Franc, Makino Hayashi, Lisa Kipp, Katherine Monogue, and Helen Simoneau

May 23-June 3

Amjad Ali Khan, Master of the Sarod
in An Evening of Indian Classical Instrumental Music with
Amaan Ali Bangash & Ayaan Ali Bangash on Sarod
Anubrata Chatterjee & Nilan Chaudhuri on Tabla

Saturday, October 27, 2018 at 7:00 pm
First Congregational Church, 1126 SW Park Avenue, Portland OR 97205
Tickets: \$40 advance, \$45 at door (open seating) at www.kalakendra.org
Special pricing for 2018-19 Friends of Kalakendra & Members
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Richard F. Lack: The Interior Journey
Paintings, Drawings, and Studies

The Portland Tap Dance Festival Faculty Showcase

8 pm May 27

St. Mary's Academy 1615 SW 5th Ave.

The Portland Tap Dance Festival, founded in 2015 by Pamela Allen, Erin Lee, and Kelsey Leonard, will feature classes and a performance by faculty members and leading names in tap from Portland and beyond. The faculty—Sarah Reich, Melinda Sullivan, Jason Janas and his company Co.MMiT, Bril Barrett, Elizabeth Burke, Jessie Sawyers, and Jillian Meyers will perform alongside residency student to Portland jazz musicians David Goldblatt on piano, Adam Kessler on drums, and trumpeter Farnell Newton.

Interview with Helen Simoneau



Choreographer Helen Simoneau. Photo by Todd Turner.

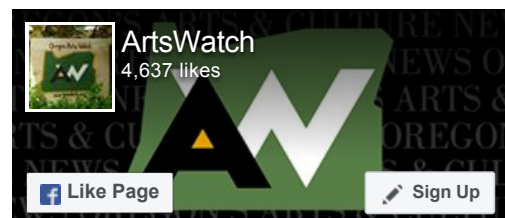
Can you describe the first day audition/rehearsal, and how did you pick dancers out of that scenario?

The first day for me started during the audition. I came in like I usually do. These are things I like to do coming into a new process, especially with new dancers. Just go to the different steps of the process that I find have always worked for me. And one is to come in and have a phrase that I have already developed in my own body and to teach it and teach it with as much specificity as possible to see which dancers are able to capture those details. And in this case, I was definitely looking for fluidity in the movement and an ease of going into plie and a dancer who pays attention to the transitions.

I talk a lot about not showing the seams, and that is the dancer's job, to smooth out that seam. So I look for that. And then I gave them a task of pairing up with someone and making a complementary phrase.

So the first phrase we called the "root phrase." And that is the root phrase because all the material for the piece will come from that phrase, that's our starting point. That allows there to be a sense of continuity and a sense of one source. So they paired up and one person was doing the root phrase and the other person is creating new movement that complements, somehow decorates, or accentuates that phrase. But it's not unison. We worked on that for a while and that developed a whole set of material. And then we did the post-it notes you saw. [There were six pink post-it notes that had different body parts written on each one].

We had the post-it notes on the wall, and they each wrote different body parts on them and then they connected those body parts, and then we created material in between those connection points. How specific those connection points are is no longer important at a certain point; it just becomes about the movement. It just gives us a more specific task so that we are not regurgitating things that are familiar in our bodies. [...] A task like that also allows both partners to be more equally engaged in the task. There's not one person who's going to dictate how it goes.



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Helen Simoneau's notebook that she is using to chronicle the making of her new work, as part of Oregon Ballet Theatre's Choreography XX commission. Simoneau creates a new notebook for every project. This helps her keep a record of the choreography and her ideas, translate the ephemeral nature of dance to the stage, and remind her of the behind-the-scenes work involved. Photo by Yi Yin.

What is the name of this piece?

I'm thinking of calling it "Departures."

What is the music?

The music is by David Schulman. He's based in D.C., and the second track you heard is a piece he already created. It's funny—the title of the piece is called "Acts of Arrival" (Helen is laughing), but I'm thinking of calling the piece "Departures."

Part B was already created. I heard it through one of my friends who had used a section of it for a work she was making. I loved the structure of it and also that there are spaces in it that have a lot of leeway. There are moments that are very counted and have a very clear flavor, and then also a lot of openness. I spoke with him about creating another section that would match, that would complement. I was thinking the piece would be about 15 minutes. So he created the first track you heard, especially for this process.

How long is the piece?

I think it's going to be 14 minutes, exactly? [Laughter]

Is it all going the way you envisioned it? Is it OK if it doesn't get finished in the way you imagined?

I think I didn't have such a strict idea of how it would go. I find it really difficult to decide ahead of time when I don't know the dancers, because they are such a big part of inspiring the piece. And so even though I knew what the root phrase would be, generally what the material would look like, had the music already, and a sense of the energetic flow of the piece, I really didn't decide much more than that because I wanted to leave it open for them.



OBT dancer Xuan Cheng in Helen Simoneau's Departures. Photo by Yi Yin.

How does the dancer dictate what you do?

I think it's more that they inspire what I do. The way that a dancer might choose to interpret the phrase work first of all, can inspire. So, I can see a lot of different people do the same material and just be like, "No, no, see how this person's doing this? That's interesting to me." And I didn't know that was interesting ahead of time. [...]

I find that the dancers who are less precious are the ones I am drawn to, and then I start making for them, or in conversation with them. [...]

I enjoy a process where the dancers feel comfortable enough to try something that they're not 100% sure is going to work out. Then we're all in the same space of not knowing, not having an answer all the time.

I've been in some processes where people at this stage of the process doubt that I know what I'm doing, because I'm not 100 percent [sure] on what I want. I don't know what I want sometimes until I see it. In this process, that has not been the case. I feel like they are comfortable with that. [...]

I like to leave a certain ambiguity sometimes, because that's when the happy accidents happen, and that's where dancers will make a choice where they thought I meant something else, but maybe what they do is more interesting than if I had decided ahead of time. The confusion can lead to some really great discoveries.

How did you develop as a choreographer and how did you develop your choreographic skills?

By doing it over and over.

I think early on, I realized in my training, that choreography was a stronger suit for me than maybe even dancing for other people, and also where I found myself to be most fulfilled. And so I focused on that really early on. It was prominent in my training at NCSA (North Carolina School of the Arts) when I was doing my BFA there in dance. But then when I graduated, I started right away to choreograph. I was living in Montreal at the time and dancing for another choreographer, but also making my work in my down time.

That practice of making never stopped. I always continued. I always would finish a piece and then as that piece was being performed here and there I would already start something else. There were certainly moments in my life where there was less happening, but I always had that practice consistently of making. And within that developed some of my own methods that I can rely on. I'm always trying to find new ways of building new material so that I'm not making the same dance over and over.

Are you a modern dancer, or are you a ballet dancer. How do you fit into his whole scheme?

That's a tough question. I think I'm just a dancer. I definitely have more experience in the contemporary.

If I had to pick one or the other, I would say I am more of a modern dancer, especially my experience as a performer is as a modern dancer. I did not perform for a ballet company, but I trained in ballet almost as much as I trained in modern in terms of the conservatory where I was.

That's all in my body and in my experience. I don't feel the need to pick one or the other, I enjoy both. Where I did my training at NCSA there were two majors, like a lot of places, and I had friends in both and we would choreograph on each other and it didn't really matter what your major was. So for me as a maker, both are exciting. Both offer something different and some overlap, and both have a specificity that is unique. Like in this case working with these dancers, who are really capable working on pointe, I don't get to do that all the time, and it's an additional skill set that I'm enjoying having access to.





Helen Simoneau's Departures. Photo by Yi Yin.

I'm trying to figure out what ballet is. It seems like ballet can only go so far and then they have to look and see what the contemporary dance world is doing.

I think that there is a sense of tradition in ballet that is really wonderful and joyful, and I can also see how it could limit choreographically what you think you are allowed to do, or can go into. And I have to say that being here, Kevin [Irving] has not restricted us in any way. It was really up to us whether I wanted to do pointe work or not, how many dancers, if it was an even number of men and women. None of that was prescribed. He made it very clear from the beginning that he trusts us, based on our experience already and what he's seen, to make the right choice.

And that's wonderful to have that trust. The dancers are the same way. They are very open and willing to try anything. I definitely can tell what my movement choices are: there certainly is a modern dance influence, and I don't really care, I don't worry about that. I haven't yet watched the piece and said, "Is this ballet or is this modern?" It hasn't occurred to me to contain it.

I think that line is getting more and more blurred. I think dancers that are training now have to be well versed in all of it, I think more so than ever. If you're dancing in a ballet company you are going to be doing a lot of contemporary work, and you may be dancing in bare feet, at some point. And you have to be comfortable with that.



OBT dancers Hannah Davis and Kimberly Nobriga performing in Helen Simoneau's Departures. Photo by Yi Yin.

Because Portland State University just axed its dance program, I am curious to know how having universities that have dance programs in your area influences what you do. How do they feed into what you do?

For us the relationship with NCSA is crucial. I could probably find another dance department, but I don't know if I could find that quality of studio space. But it's more than studio space, the relationship with that school is one that is mutually beneficial. [...]

Since 2004 I've been teaching as an adjunct faculty member and more recently I do a lot more guest choreographer spots. I've been doing something with them almost every single year. I really care about that program, I care about those students. We've offered a lot of apprenticeships to graduating students from that program, because I get to know them when I set works on them.

There is a gap there because the program is not in New York or a major city. Those students don't have access to professional dancers regularly. We have an open door policy so when we rehearse, any student can come and watch, and see the process. And it is a different process. If you're working with a seasoned 32-year-old performer it's a different process than a 20-year-old. And I think that's been helpful.

For us, the (company) dancers get to take class, any class they want from these amazing faculty members. But they dance alongside the students, and what that does, especially for the graduating students, is it just pulls them up a little bit more when they are having senioritis—if they can go across the floor with one of our company members, it just really pulls them up. It also introduces them to people who are currently in the field and who are just a little bit older than them. There's been a lot of networking or asking questions.

Often we will have an informal pow-wow and talk about life after graduation, and realizing how much pressure those seniors have and how stressed out and anxious they are about entering the professional market. Sometimes having a conversation with someone who is three years further in, is really helpful.

Upcoming Performances

June

- June 1, #INSTABALLET NO.25, artistic directors Antonio Anacan and Suzanne Haag
- June 1-2, J (O) Y by Leralee Whittle and a work-in-progress by Mizu Desierto
- June 2, Passages-The Journey of Our Ancestors, presented by the Tamburitzans
- June 2-3, DanceAbility, Mexica Tiahui, and Aerial Muse Collective, Hosted by Wilsonville Festival of Arts
- June 3, Shobana's Trance, presented by Rasika
- June 8-10, Up Close, The Portland Ballet
- June 9, Wakily Kúkátónón Showcase, Kúkátónón Children's African Dance Troupe, Special guest performances by Habiba Addo, Habib Iddrisu, and the Obo Addy Legacy Project
- June 10, Coppelia, Bolshoi Ballet in Cinema Live from Moscow
- June 14-16, World Premiere – Ihsan Rustem, MemoryHouse – Sarah Slipper, This Time Tomorrow-Danielle Agami, NW Dance Project
- June 15-23, Waters of the World, Heidi Duckler Dance Theatre/Northwest
- June 15-17, New Expressive Works Residency Performance
- June 16, Dance Film Double Feature: Standing on Gold and Moving History, hosted by Eric Nordstrom
- June 22-23, Waters of the World, Heidi Duckler Dance Theatre/Northwest at the Faired-Haired Dumbbell Building
- June 22-23, Recipe: A Reading Test (1983) and Raw Material (1985), Linda Austin
- June 24, Salem World Beat, Rainbow Dance Theatre, Salem
- June 29-July 1, Risk/Reward Festival of New Performance

July

- July 6, #INSTABALLET NO.26, artistic directors Antonio Anacan and Suzanne Haag
- July 19-21, RELATIVES // apples & pomegranates, Shannon Stewart and Tahni Holt
- July 27, Rejoice! Diaspora Dance Theater presents UPRISE, Washington Park Summer Festival

August

- August 2-4, Galaxy Dance Festival, Polaris Dance Theatre
- August 3, #INSTABALLET NO.27, artistic directors Antonio Anacan and Suzanne Haag
- August 3-12, Art in the Dark: 10 Laws, A-WOL Dance Collective
- August 10-12, JamBallah Northwest
- August 12, India Festival, produced by the India Cultural Association of Portland

September

- September 1, #INSTABALLET NO.28, artistic directors Antonio Anacan and Suzanne Haag











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