

SIDE ONE

BDG: December 3, 2008 and I am doing my first phone interview for the Joan Myers Brown project with Bebe Miller who is in Seattle. So, Bebe, may I begin by asking you and I hope I catch you off guard, with this one – what’s the first impression that comes to mind when you think of Joan Myers Brown?

BM: She’s fierce!

BDG: Fierce. O.K.

BM: And dedicated. Has a mission and has been steadily, steady on the mission.

BDG: Do you want to elaborate on any of those: fierce, the mission, or whatever the other one, do you want any elaboration on any of those?

BM: I don’t mean fierce to mean, with fangs. But I feel that she is one of a group of African American female directors of companies. Who had

BDG: ---Listen, don’t worry, I’ve heard this from everybody in some form or other.

BM: And a lot of it, its part of the urban myth and it’s also mixed in with the “strong black women” it’s mixed in with a lot of cultural stuff that may or may not apply. It’s not that she is...she’s NOT a bulldog. But it’s like when speaking of a collective rather than a person, I think, often. Who are the four? Joan Myers Brown, Jeraldynne and Cleo Robinson, I forget the Dallas Black woman, Ann...

BDG: Lula. Ann

BM: Who I don’t really know. But they, when I kind of became aware of that group, and it was well after I started making my *own* work, I felt their presence more as a ...like a collective presence more than individually.

BDG: Ah. Okay. Then what is the first impression that comes to mind when you think of PhilaDanco? The Philadelphia Dance Company?

BM: Fierce. Determined kind of...has an agenda. And, again, it’s almost like the company is the person and vice versa?

BDG: Yes, yes.

BM: Perhaps that has a lot to do with her success – their success is that she has really build this from a very personal place, it feels.

BDG: It is true, yes. When and how did you meet Joan Myers Brown?

SIDE ONE

BM: I don't know. I know that it was after, like I said, I had been choreographing a while having started working in the more alternative part of the discipline, I would say. They weren't on my radar and I wasn't on theirs – it felt. I mean, who knows. Let's see, in 1988, I made a piece for Alvin Ailey rep and that was before, that's maybe when I started hearing about the group. The group of four. But since I didn't come out of the Ailey or Horton or that particular kind of classic modern background, they weren't present to me in terms of my own early inspiration or working process or habits.

BDG: Okay, alright. If I am not, if you don't hear me respond I'm trying to not say, um, hm, or whatever, so that this is as clear as possible for the transcriber.

BM: That's fine.

BDG: I'm being as quiet as possible.

BM: That's okay.

BDG: So you're not sure then how the contact with JB came about, but how and when did she engage you, commission you to work with the company?

BM: Well, I think it was soon after I made my first work with for DCDC? That would have been 1994 – ish I believe. 1994. I would say around then, I'm not sure. But it seems that by the time I did make a piece for them, I had known her for several years. We would see each other at occasions and what was REAL interesting...it's so many things. You know the myth a bigger thing than the actual presence and I remember a sense of...wait, let me back up for a second. I had an impression that the whole IA – I don't know when the whole IABD started...but I

BDG: And that's the International Association of Blacks in Dance. About 1988, I think.

BM: Okay, so I wasn't present for those first few years at all. I had never been. You can come back to that if need be, but somehow, somewhere in the early 1990's I remember going – this is a very long, roundabout answer...but I remember that there was a meeting called Black Folks Sitting Around Conversating, do you remember this?

BDG: I think so, yes.

BM: Yeah, and it was eye-opening, groundbreaking, wonderful, all those things because it was Marlies and Ron and I can't remember who else was instrumental in making it happen, but...Laurie Carlos was there. It was a gathering of about twenty-five or thirty Black Artists who had dispelled the myth of uptown/downtown.

BDG: Ah, yes.

SIDE ONE

BM: And the IABD folks are really what we were considering uptown. They weren't really at the meeting but it was a younger generation, but I felt that it was the first time there had been some real, honest, direct connections between what was perceived as the alternative, new choreographic voice and the more classic, traditional voice of African American dance. And so, somehow there's this borrowing that seemed to happen all around which is when I hooked up with DCDC and then soon after that PhilaDanco. I don't know if, it's not so much whether I met her, Joan first or she met me, I felt that there was a shift in mutual perceptions and availability and interactions a few years in those early 1990's that I felt were really significant.

BDG: So then if you can pinpoint, the circumstances under which then Joan asked, commissioned you to do – and isn't it just one piece that you've done for the company, Bebe?

BM: I think it's just one, I was trying to think that, but because it seems to take a lot of time. So I don't know if I went back on two different occasions. Or was there was a first piece and a second piece. I think there was just one piece: MY SCIENCE.

BDG: I think so too. I do know that I interviewed you for the Black Dancing Body, I think in 2001. So, and I don't know if you were re-setting it on the company then or if that was the first time.

BM: I have reset it.

BDG: Okay, because that's when we talked before, so now what were the circumstances that made this come about? So this was choreographed on them? Or this was...

BM: Only on them.

BDG: Alright.

BM: Otherwise I wouldn't have done it.

BDG: How did that work out? I'm sorry I spoke over you...only on them...and then you said.

BM: They are the only company who has performed it.

BDG: Oh! Wow. Okay. That's like Ron Brown's GATEKEEPERS.

BM: Yeah! I guess so.

BDG: Lovely!

SIDE ONE

BM: So, I don't know how it came about but it was one of those things, and kind of going back to that whole hist(ory) of perception where suddenly we were talkin'! And suddenly she said, "Well come and make a piece." And I said, "Well, okay." It felt very easy.

BDG: Well then, what would you say or would you say what is unique about Danco?

BM: I think because it has a home space in a community that the dancers teach there, they live around there it feels very anchored.

BDG: Anchored! Yes, good word.

BM: I think it's like, and that's an interesting lesson, just about how real estate fits in with identity. [Laugh]

BDG: Yes.

BM: So there is a *home* there, there is a refrigerator, a studio and a locker, and the school, all those things combine to give them a sense of themselves. I think it could also be argued that, with a lot of institutions, institutions are harder to change than people are, so the question that goes with me is that How much of PhilaDanco is self --- what's the word, self –

BDG: generating? No.

BM: Self-defining. In terms of the work it looks for. You know what I'm saying in order to stabilize that, the image of PhilaDanco, how...what does that mean in terms of Joan's aesthetic reach or, or maybe the dancer's sense of their aesthetic reach. I think Joan's aesthetic reach may be a different question than how the dancers perceive it.

BDG: Well, gee, I would love to talk about both of those things if we might.

BM: I think that Joan, by the time that we started working together, she, I may be...am I making this up? That's what I'm asking myself. A sense that she's there: "Do whatever piece that you want." Kind of "Just do it." And I'm like, "Okay." However, so that I think that as a director would be, have an investment in moving the company forward in lots of different directions...

BDG: YES!

BM: I think the dancers have different sense of their own profile as highly physical, strong, tough, all that PhilaDanconess...sensual...might be in the way, in terms of making new work.

SIDE ONE

BDG: Hah.

BM: Or, it may be more outside of their current process. Does that make sense?

BDG: It does, yeah.

BM: So, I think it's an interesting phenomenon of who, how the heart of a company is carried. And I think that dancer's carry a particular kind of heart and an investment that maybe has to do with what has been confirmed and the director might have different set of experimentation (I think she means expectation) and where she thinks the company is going.

BDG: It's almost like the difference between a tradition or a legacy and a an agenda for moving forward.

BM: And I don't know, I don't think that that's just something to be said for PhilaDanco, but just companies in general, I hadn't really thought of it that way before but it occurs to me that Merce is always making new stuff....

BDG: And I'm just saying for the transcriber, Merce Cunningham.

BM: And, just thinking ahead, that it's the dancers that keep that visible in the Cunningham body.

BDG: That is so interesting. And, again, what you were just saying about the real estate...of being in one spot, also begs the question...like dancer's bodies being a kind of real estate.

BM: Hmmmm. Hm, hmm.

BDG: And on that line, this is how I've written these questions, so I'll read it out to you: 1) What's one of your memories or stories from the past about working with Danco and if, you dare, please be frank. A favorite memory may have some "suffering" in it but still have led to a hopeful outcome.

BM: Oh, some *suffering*.

BDG: And I'm only saying that, that I know that working and freelancing as a choreographer brings up various kinds of things, but in a sense, any "suffering" is like an obstacle that can be a teacher.

BM: Hmm...mmhmm.

SIDE ONE

BDG: Not that this is going to be what you want to talk about as a favorite memory or story but I do not want to discourage that. I don't see anything as negative, in other words.

BM: Well, there is a really harrowing instance, with a company and that I thought about a lot. An accident in a rehearsal and someone dislocated their elbow...it was a partnering thing between two men and one, the larger man was lifting the smaller man who was still pretty tall but thin, and somehow threw him down in a way that...the guy broke his elbow...dislocated it. And he fell right there on the ground. And we were looking at him, and he was there writing in pain and it was horrible. But what was so interesting to me was that I felt that. A lot of my work deals in partnering. That's kind of what we're known for, there's a lot of inherent, there's a lot of contact improvisation history in the work that I've made there's something in the language. It doesn't mean that you have to have contact improve to do it. But I developed a language with the people that I work with in my company that encompasses that technique. I also am very invested in articulating as verbally NOT through compact improvisation-speak but kind of figure out how to get what I'm looking for even outside of that discipline. So I felt in working with PhilaDanco that the hardest thing was softening the body to body connection.

BDG: Softening you said.

BM: Softening it and listening to that the listening aspect was one of those release technique works of how do you *hear* what another body...

BDG: Right, right. And, I'm sorry Bebe, just to clarify. The first thing that you said was softening.

BM: Yes. And so, this accident was an instance I felt kind of a disregard of the, one, the physical properties of body to body, how do you take care of someone who, I mean, the line between taking care of and being responsible for and agency in partnering...on the one hand, everybody is responsible for....yourself. On the other, you also have to be very attuned to what is outside of...meaning, you can't throw somebody.

BDG: Right, right.

BM: It's not their fault if they land funny.

BDG: So, gee, what happened, then? What was the upshot?

BM: Well, I don't know, they went to the hospital. The upshot in term of the work...we kept on making work and kept on partnering. But what I also think is, you kind of want to take care of the people around that...an accident, so that everybody is not gun-shy. I totally believe in that...you gotta nourish the kindness of it. And I think that one of the

SIDE ONE

challenges in working with PhilaDanco is that part of that fierce, “I GOT IT – Hard body.” Has to kind of tone down in order to survive the process.

BDG: Right, right.

BM: And I’m also telling that to myself, what didn’t I say, how could I have...in the creative process there’s a lot experimentation. There is a lot of trying things. And they were all trying stuff – everybody was game to kind of *try*. But, but what’s the balance between the dialogue between people which may be different than your own personal skill set and sense of yourself. Of, “Yeah, I can do this, I can lift!” “This will look great!”

BDG: Question, did you also have the opportunity to give them classes or were you simply working through everything in rehearsal.

BM: In rehearsal. Classes...I did not teach, as I recall. And I think that was also a time thing, I was coming down from New York even though I stay over sometimes in their apartment. I really was there for rehearsal.

BDG: Alright, alright. Is there anything unique about the way, the rehearsals and of course, you conducting your rehearsals, but did you get any sense of any particular way that Danco rehearsals are conducted. Or was that all up to you.

BM: Well, there’s a wonderful woman whose name I can’t remember who was the rehearsal director.

BDG: Yes! Deborah Chase Hicks.

BM: Yes! Deborah Chase! I could not have done this work without her. She was the filter, between my ideas and their capabilities -- wrong word, because they are completely capable, but their execution.

BDG: So, Deborah Chase is the filter between your idea and the company’s execution.

BM: Yes, yeah.

BDG: Okay. Interesting.

BM: And we did have a number of kind of more workshop, oriented rehearsal period where we would just be playing, they’d be making stuff and I’d be guiding that...kind of how that guy got hurt was that kind of exchange which was not setting steps but really generating things between us. So, I think that Deborah got really invested in the work. I think that she probably always gets invested in the work but from, and as their teacher, she also could point out strengths and challenges for the dancers to *me*. So, it’s funny.

SIDE ONE

At a certain point, I think their work process was more, was lots faster than I was used to...

BDG: Ah! Okay.

BM: I found myself kind of in the position of well, geez, they ran out of steps – okay here's more steps. And making things harder, and harder, and harder just to keep up with their interest. It's funny.

BDG: And do you think, that had – that kind of work process, was integral to this kind of Danco style? Even though...

BM: Completely, completely so. Yeah. Here's the interesting thing to remember before we get so off on the Danco *style* I think that good dancers – the dancers that I am drawn to no matter what the discipline they are the ones who have a physical interest beyond their own sense of their style. Oh, you know, "How does *that* work?" Ummm "That's nice." Ahhhh. "What is that?" There are those dancers and then the ones who just kind of make everything look like it looks good on them...no. And so, I found that, oh! Danco had both.

BDG: Yes.

BM: But, and I can't remember names right now, but I think that Joan did manage to gather a group of movement scientists, researchers who could up to their capabilities or up to their experience well they could increase their experience, they were interested in that.

BDG: Okay, Alright. I do want to speak a little bit about this idea of a Company style and I don't mean a set thing. Because I think that one of things that is interesting about Danco is how many different "styles" or approaches that Joan tries to bring in. And that they do these concerts that have, like SIX pieces in a night. Or, whatever. I'm wondering if you have a sense of how and I can't use another word, I don't know how to say it, HOW a company style is instilled in a company member. And Danco in particular.

BM: How it's *built*?

BDG: Ah...instilled.

BM: Oh, instilled. Ah. Well it's interesting I think that and I haven't seen a full Danco concert for a few years. I saw them at the Joyce and they did my work and I can't remember who else was on the program. But the question that I pose is...what's the difference between a company's style and a choreographer's aesthetic? And what's the meeting point between those. Because I don't know if six different pieces means six

SIDE ONE

different styles. I don't think so. I think that there's a way, that there is a... even if, they could have vastly different dynamic ranges, but there is a style of *approach* to movement that I feel is consistent through in Danco and different, say, than in my own company. And...then may necessarily...even there might be very vastly different choreographers represented. I mean this is the challenge for any repertory company.

BDG: Yes, right.

BM: Because at a certain point it is THE DANCO style.

BDG: And I think what I'm indicating also here is that it's not Ailey. It is, they aren't the same. And I'm trying to get a sense of people who have worked with them, and of course it it's not anything else what's...what is this style or what is this thing?

BM: Hmmm.

BDG: And I mean, you have worked with both of these companies and I guess it gets infuriating for Joan that she's always compared...it's like she's Ailey II or something and her question is, if you're going to talk about *me* than how come you're not talking about...I don't know...Paul Taylor or whatever else. And, that, also the fact that the four women that you mentioned that all of these dancers and the ways in which they move, even though they use, frequently the same choreographers, Ron Brown or Talley Beatty or what have you that they all have their **special** place. And maybe this is too complex, maybe you didn't have enough contact with them but I'm just trying to tease out from you if I can anything that you sensed that is specific and integral to Danco dancers as a company as opposed to any other dancer.

BM: I don't know if, how I can answer that fully because I think that I had a very specific experience and I haven't been a Danco follower since then. You know what I mean? So, beyond, and it's not that I don't ...it's that I don't see them regularly enough to answer that. I think that that problem...the Ailey II question is real and it shows more about our lack of exposure and reference.

SIDE TWO

BDG: This idea of Danco *as* different than Ailey though you haven't seen them recently, but the sense that maybe it's about frame of reference I believe that you were saying?

BM: No, my reference points are fewer. I don't see Ailey all that often either. So there is something similar in my *mind* in terms of "Oh, yeah, Horton-based, fierce, extensions, high technical level..."

BDG: But Ailey is not doing MY SCIENCE. You choreographed...

BM: Oh, no, no, no. Ailey is not doing MY SCIENCE.

BDG: You choreographed something different for Ailey as opposed to Danco. Why and how?

BM: Well, I choreographed something for Ailey in 1988 and I was a younger choreographer and I don't think it was a very successful piece. So I have to...rather than just thinking it's the difference in the companies I think it's the difference in my own choreographic method. Better choreographer for PhilaDanco, and so that I...that's really important to emphasize. That I see *me* as the growth point between an experience my own sense of myself as a choreographer and with that my own ability to articulate what I'm looking for to figure out what they're doing and how I can capitalize on that. I felt that I met PhilaDanco AT PhilaDanco.

BDG: Got it.

BM: The question for me was, "Oooo, they can do that!" So, whoa, lets try that. And *build in* a certain fierceness, spirit, technical prowess, that I don't do in the same way for my own company. I mean, I define the technique very differently.

BDG: Exactly. That's helpful, thanks. Thanks. Two questions to wind up. And the title of this study is Improbable Hope: Joan Myers Brown and Philadelphia Dancing A Biohistory of Art and Race. So the last question is, how do race and/or racism issues affect your career at the present time – if at all.

BM: Oh, man. How much time to we *have*?

BDG: As much as you wish, my dear.

BM: Yeah. Well, of course they do. And I'm very aware that we're speaking kind of in the Obama era now.

BDG: Yes.

SIDE TWO

BM: And just that sort of exhale that all of us feel without necessarily anything demonstrated but it's like, "Whew! Things are different now." Which translates as more of a range is allowed. And, I think for myself as a choreographer, I'm *well* into mid-career, kind of, I'm there. I don't feel like I'm...people...I'm not a mystery. Except that I make mysterious dances, as somebody said in the Times.

BDG: You sure do.

BM: Yeah. So, but that's a known fact what is interesting to me now is almost how race shows up in, with the young dancers that I teach at Ohio State who are kind of being taught...young African American dancers who generally are coming out or headed towards PhilaDanco-styled company, headed toward repertory companies. So their encounter with my work I feel has all kinds of subtleties about race going on. So I think that's a large change, it's less of that I need to convince an audience of my take as an African American on what choreography is; but rather, on a working day-by-day level what is that exchange of how, how do we read the body. I'm kind of expounding here, but...

BDG: No, this is good. Also, I would like to then interject to complexify it a little bit, how has this changed in terms of dealing with white students, black students, brown students over the years?

BM: There's a term that I used back when we were doing a lot of touring and we often go to magnet art schools which was kind of code for inner city African Americans and where there was dance. I'd call it the milla-skinned body, the sort of...hard-skinned, project to the high balcony.

BDG: And what was it called, the milla-skinned (sp?)

BM: Yeah, milla-skinned. Remember it's that fabric, that shiny unitard fabric. That's how they dressed, and it was about how the body worked and you want to see lines. It's all about the "look" thing.

BDG: And you talk about magnet schools, being like middle schools, then.

BM: No! Often high schools, generally high schools. Often inner city, arts, dance, I'm thinking Portland, Dallas, all over the country. And there was more of this phenomenon of Ailey-esque hard bodies and I pushed and I felt that what I was presenting was a kinder, gentler, softer more released an eye-to-eye exchange between performers that could still be riveting. So, I think that now, actually teaching at Ohio State I still have to make the kind of hard sell, that I often feel like I'm still making the sell that that's valuable.

SIDE TWO

BDG: So that has not...so the dynamic of that has not changed say, over the last twenty years?

BM: Well, I think it takes while to sift down, to sift through, I'm thinking of one of my favorite students, one of my undergraduate students...African American who just graduated and I'm told that one of her most life changing course was not *mine* but was taught by Abby Yeager of the Trisha Brown company and this young dancer kind of resisted but then completely got into that sense of articulation, specificity and ease. And it was like a light bulb went on. So maybe its just that I'm not the only one offering this information for them to take in and that they are able to take it in...

BDG: But what is interesting is that I'm assuming that Abby Yeager is Caucasian.

BM: Yeah, yeah, she's white.

BDG: And, it seems like, that there are certain things that you can hear better, from someone who is white than when somebody black is doing it. Like when for Robert Farris Thompson to have said certain things it was more easily acceptable than to *hear* black people saying it but they couldn't hear black people saying these things about African Art until somebody white said it. Just a thought.

BM: And, also just to be clear though, I don't do what Abby does. I'm not teaching the same kinds of things. I feel like my aesthetic is, definitely has that kind of reference. I don't know, I think that...what I see still in students, white and black, is that their concern is where is this releasing stuff going to take me, if I need to get a job. So there larger economic issues at play as well. What's a sellable body, particularly for those students who are not going to be choreographers on their (softly) own but are looking to be repertory dancers.

BDG: Yes, right, right.

BM: So, it still is complex, it's nothing solved. It's just differently complex, which is great.

BDG: Do you think that race or racism has any play in the commissions that you get?

BM: Well, I have gotten a commission in a while, maybe. I don't know. But my last big series were through DCDC, PhilaDanco, uh. Yeah.

BDG: Isn't *that* interesting it's almost as though those "Black Companies" have owned you or somehow once you are recognized by them your credibility with downtown, or I don't know, or Liome (?)

SIDE TWO

BM: I don't know, before we jump there, I don't know that this...I haven't been seeking them out. I don't know what that is...my other commissions have been through ballet companies, I just don't do that so much anymore.

BDG: Thank you for pulling me back because I tend....

BM: Yeah, I mean, I...it's an interesting thought though. I hadn't considered it that way.

BDG: Well, I shouldn't either, but it's a worthwhile question to ask

BM: -- I think it's a great question!

BDG: Without jumping on it.

BM: But it's just that I'm not asking it yet, and maybe I should. I don't know, I don't know, and I'm trying to think about what I did *before*. To be honest, I have had, okay, three ballet commissions on mainly white companies, the PEW for DCDC and PhilaDanco, in South Africa. It's sort of... the Cunningham folks are not calling me. And...so I don't, maybe it's...I don't know.

BDG: So, okay, listen, let's move on, to the last little bit and again, if you feel like you can't answer these it's alright. In your opinion, how does the Philadelphia dance scene fit into the larger dance picture?

BM: I can't answer that specifically, not knowing enough about that, but what I feel is that we are in an era where regionalism is becoming more...I don't know, there are stronger regional dance centers than there had been sometime and I'm not sure if it's the same in Philadelphia. But there is a regional aesthetic, I'm thinking Portland, Seattle, that's not really true in Boston, but I think there, because Philadelphia has a certain amount of Philadelphia funding or Pennsylvania funding has a visibility that makes it because besides PhilaDanco, there's...is Headlong still there?

BDG: Yes, there's Headlong, there's the Pennsylvania Ballet, there's Tania Isaac, there's a whole group of African, Afro-Caribbean dancers...there's Tania Isaac, there's Charles Anderson.

BM: Tania, although I hear she just started working with David Dorfman, so

BDG: -- I didn't hear that!

BM: Yeah, maybe, I don't know. But that's what...I heard so. But she was one of the ones who I think, here's a new voice, that's not in New York and how fabulous that is.

SIDE TWO

BDG: Exactly, right, and that was her choice that was one of her reasons for leaving Urban Bush Women because she wanted to be based in Philly.

BM: Hm.

BDG: So that's interesting. Okay, I think that is it for now. And Bebe, I'm so sorry that we were not sitting face-to-face...I miss that. But I thank you so much for this. I may email you if there's any parts that the transcriber couldn't understand or for some names or whatever to look at when I review the transcript. But this is it, for now.

BM: Do you want me to send a hardcopy of that letter? What do you think?

BDG: I think we can hold off...well, you know, why don't you just do it so that I'll have that.

BM: Yeah, I'll send it in the mail.