

Stephanie Skura
in conversation with Lana Wilson (Part Two)

Filmmaker and Performa curator Lana Wilson talks with Stephanie Skura, a Seattle-based choreographer whose new work, Two Huts, is being shown this weekend (through March 18, 2012) at Roulette. This engagement marks her first return to New York in 20 years, which Critical Correspondence is celebrating through this two-part interview series. In part two, Skura and Wilson discuss the making of Cranky Destroyers (1987), Skura's seminal work set to the music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and Two Huts (2010), an experiment in collaged language and movement.

Interview Date: March 9, 2012

Lana: I love this quotation from you, from an essay you wrote right after you made *Cranky Destroyers*: "My basic desire with dance is that it be more like life: multilayered, complex, sometimes interrupted, frequently ambiguous, filled with feeling, filled with thought, awkward at times, occasionally confused and even hesitant, showing attempts and failures as well as accomplishments." What made you say that?

Stephanie: I think I was interested in showing human consciousness—all the ways we really are—through movement. I also felt like I didn't want everyone to all be the same. Unison had become the default. In some ways it still is. Why does everything have to be unison, and why is that the only way that people can relate, by imitating each other? Why can't we all be different, but still connected? I wanted to find methods for people to relate to each other without having to do the same thing. And I wanted to find tools to help people show their whole selves on stage, to bring out their power and totality as performers.

Lana: So how did you get at these ideas in rehearsal?

Stephanie: In the early 80s I started working with a concept I now call "flux," which is a very free associative way of improvisation, where it's basically a series of non-sequiturs. You go on tangents and just keep interrupting one idea with another, always following your impulse. A stream of consciousness. I would give people a concept—like collapsing, or not concentrating, or changing directions without slowing down. Then they would use the flux technique with the idea, and you would look at them and think, "Wow! I'm watching them think out loud with their bodies." So this idea of flux became a foundation for my improvisation work.

Lana: And it probably also led to how, in your choreography, there's such a range of styles. There's abstract dance, there's highly referential material, there's very stylized movement, there's pedestrian gestures, it's all in there. There's no distinction—or at least the dancers aren't inhibited from going into any of those areas.

Stephanie: Yes, the dancers can just use everything. But you can also use flux with what I call limiting your parameters. Cunningham did flux, but he did it with a specific vocabulary—those quick changes of direction, and then you're jumping, and then you're turning, and then you're switching to something else. It doesn't make sense if you're thinking about development and follow-through, but it certainly made sense to him. There have been other choreographers who called it different things. I met someone who danced with [the early modern dance choreographer] Bella Lewitsky, and he said that she called it "changing your mind."

Lana: Changing your mind. That's great.

Stephanie: I think it's just one way of getting at presence. Some people get at that by doing deeper and deeper into the same thing, but I get at it by constantly shifting. It's like if you're

always changing channels on TV, you might tune into channels outside your normal viewing habits.

Lana: So how did you turn these flux improvisations into *Cranky Destroyers*?

Stephanie: I used a videotaping method I had first done with a short section of *Chase Scene* [1984]. I would tape the dancers improvising. Then I would go home at night and watch and log everything that had been recorded.

Lana: So then you would pull out certain moments from the video, and have the dancers learn them just by watching those parts in the video over and over?

Stephanie: Yes.

Lana: So it was like constructing a collage.

Stephanie: Yes. And I continued to work that way for years. Because it gives you the abandonment of improvisation. When you improvise, you change state. Whereas when you have to remember what you just did, you can never change state.

Lana: It must have been difficult to learn from videotapes.

Stephanie: Yes, it was very cumbersome because I didn't really know what I was doing. We had six people, four monitors, and four VCRs, all of which were very heavy to move around. It's arduous learning movement that way, both on your eyes and on your brain. At one point, the dancers almost rebelled!

Lana: But you had the freeing quality of improvisation, as you say, plus then you could very specifically control the structure and arrangement of the parts. Were you listening to the music as you did this?

Stephanie: I didn't use the music, Beethoven's Fifth, during the improvisations. Well, except for one time when the dancers really wanted to improvise to it. It was really corny and awful. Never again, I said. I played all kinds of other music for rehearsals instead. But then later, I would listen to the music and think, "Oh, that duet could go here," envisioning how our material could fit into it.

Lana: Almost like filling in a jigsaw puzzle.

Stephanie: Yes—and I actually love doing jigsaw puzzles. But it was challenging. I had to watch all of the footage with an imagination of what it could turn into. This person's arm movement, but adding in something for the legs. Or this person's movement was too busy, so editing out every three movements. This duet was really great, but there's a lift that almost happened, let's fulfill it more. Sometimes when you're improvising, things could happen, but don't quite, so I was looking for those sort of springboards.

Lana: Why did you decide to use Beethoven's Fifth?

Stephanie: I wanted it to be recognizable, so I thought, maybe one of the Beethoven symphonies. I listened to all of them and they were mostly either too long or too depressed. The Ninth Symphony was *really* depressed. That was when he was going deaf.

Lana: You wanted high energy.

Stephanie: Yeah. When he wrote the Fifth Symphony, he was being influenced by the French Revolution. And I thought that could work for the piece, to capture a society of strong individuals

moving forward together. I loved the music, and it was the right length, half an hour. But so many people told me this was a terrible idea. So many people.

Lana: I'm sure. What did you say to all of them?

Stephanie: I had learned to just do the opposite of what certain people suggested. The New York State Council on the Arts, for instance. If they say to do one thing, I should do the other. So I just stood my ground.

It's funny, though, because I had always thought of Beethoven's music as being very structured. But I read some reviews of his symphonies from when they first came out, and they said that his symphonies lacked structure and needed editing.

Lana: That's so funny.

Stephanie: Because before him, it was all about theme and variations. Beethoven broke the rules. I realized this as I listened to it more and more closely. There would be a little Pizzicato section, perfect for Benoît, I would think, but it only lasts for three seconds, and then something totally different happens. Not at all what you would expect from classical music. And it was interesting, because I felt like Beethoven's fragmented mentality, which comes across in his music, was similar to what I was doing with movement. And people say the same thing about my work—that it doesn't have structure and needs editing!

Lana: I guess if you're on the same path as Beethoven, then you're okay!

I was thinking about *Cranky Destroyers* earlier, because last night I saw the Batsheva Dance Company at BAM and today there's a review in the *New York Times*, where Alastair Macaulay rants that it looked like "a study of institutionalized psychosis." And I thought, did people say that about *Cranky Destroyers*, or about your other work? I imagine they would.

Stephanie: Definitely. When I teach flux in workshops, there will almost always be one student who says, "I feel like I'm in a mental hospital."

Lana: But when I'm watching it I think, that's just the human condition—that's who we are, for better or for worse. In your new piece, *Two Huts*, you also use a style that feels like it's been collaged together, but using text and the voice on top of movement. And to catch us up to how you got there—when did you move to Seattle, and why?

Stephanie: I moved to Seattle in January 1993. It was partly just a quality of life thing. I never bought a loft, so I was living in a crappy tenement in Red Hook. I was touring a lot, and wherever I went just seemed like such a lovely place to live. And then I felt like I was coming home to a toilet bowl [laughter]. My mailbox was broken into, my bicycle was stolen, my car was stolen...I just wanted to get out of the city, and was craving the mountains and woods.

Lana: I can definitely understand that.

Stephanie: But in hindsight, I think I also just needed to shake things up—maybe even *screw* things up—a bit. Sometimes I regret it, because when I moved, I moved away from the dance center, and it was almost like I stopped existing in the dance world. But I just needed to have a life. To slow down a little bit. I started by getting a dog.

Lana: And what was the dance scene in Seattle like? There were a lot of choreographers and groups working there in the 90s—Pat Graney, and D9 Dance Collective, 33 Fainting Spells...

Stephanie: There was a very active scene there, which was great. But getting any sort of financial support was very difficult. I didn't want to become the kind of director who was spending 90% of

my time schmoozing and fundraising and getting mentally and physically unfit. I didn't know exactly what I wanted, but I just knew that I didn't want to go down that road. And the pressure of keeping a company, and having the organization always expanding...I needed a break from all of that.

Eventually, I started working more with outside companies, which I still do. I regularly make work in Italy and teach in New Zealand. Then I started teaching at the University of Washington Professional Actors Training Program. And then I started working in at Juniata College, teaching alternative theater, and having the chance to make large-scale work there without having to fundraise. So I began to take all of those opportunities, and then started to write poetry. In 1999 I began integrating movement and writing, using the same free associative approach to writing as I worked with in dance.

Lana: Which is what you use in *Two Huts*. So the writing in that performance isn't collected from different sources—it's all your writing?

Stephanie: It's all my writing. For several years I co-hosted an informal group called the Seattle Surrealists. We were influenced by games like "Exquisite Corpse" and "Simulated States," and eventually started integrating movement. We found a book of theater plays written by poets, which is a long tradition that no one knows about, because those plays never got produced. Artaud wrote scripts, with characters like "Blood" and "A Nose," and a talking refrigerator, and a character who suddenly appears but then is gone forever. It's a very freewheeling approach to theater that really inspired us.

So I practiced writing in this way for several years, and finally felt ready to try making a performance in that style with Juniata College students in 2009, *The Corduroy Prayer*, based on the first script I ever wrote. That show worked so well in the end, that afterwards I wanted to write another script.

Lana: *Two Huts*. Where did the idea for it come from?

Stephanie: About twenty-five years ago I had an idea for a piece. All I knew was that there would be two women, and two huts side by side. And that was it. That's all I knew. Sometimes they would be doing the same thing, and sometimes they would be doing different things. An iconic image.

Lana: Alone, together. When *Two Huts* begins, it almost feels to me like watching a stereotypical anthropology video. You imagine these thatched huts the two women are in, and then when the two men walk across, wearing suits and talking directly to the audience, they're like the narrator of the video—this awkward guy wearing a dusty suit in Peru. He doesn't fit in with the community at all. But then you break all of that down.

Stephanie: The men start entering the women's world. I wanted to suggest how membranes can dissolve between different worlds, letting us merge a little bit, but then we go back to our own worlds. Sometimes we're in alternate universes, but don't realize it.

Lana: And that's a connection I see between *Two Huts* and *Cranky Destroyers*. Both works have individuals each doing their own thing, but sometimes colliding and conflicting, and sometimes even forced together. And all the time everyone is trying to communicate so much. In one piece only with movement, and in the other piece with an enormous amount of words.

Stephanie: It's my hope that people will let the words be like music. Not wondering, "What does this mean?" But just letting the images and the words wash over you. And as the piece goes on, the language will become less and less familiar-sounding, and ultimately you'll just let go of it.

Lana: I keep thinking of the oracle that spoke to you when you were 22—Pearl Lang on the phone, telling you not to wait for anything. Looking back on everything you've accomplished, what would you tell a young choreographer today, if you only had a few seconds to communicate whatever you think was the most important?

Stephanie: I do a lot of teaching, especially of college students, and I feel like what people really need, and what they're not getting a lot of, is being able to trust their inner wisdom, that everything is there. All humans are creative, and have ideas—we're born that way. We all understand about dancing, and our voices being open, and creative process, whether you're an artist or not. But there's so much stimulation and so much pressure to learn what's going on out there that sometimes people don't trust that there's anything inside them at all.

Lana: To look inside.

Stephanie: Yes. It's all there. Wisdom and guidance, but sometimes we don't know how to access it, whether it's for making work, or a major life decision. My favorite thing is to give people experiences that will open them up and let their own ideas start flowing. I do it in my teaching, I hope to do it in my work, and I love when other people do it with their work. If I'm sitting in an audience and I feel like I'm unhinged in a really good way, then it's a great gift.

Lana: So you want the audience to go through their own creative experience as well.

Stephanie: Yeah. Rather than talking down to the audience, and saying, "It's about this," and "Remember, it's about this!", overestimate their intelligence and creativity. If some people don't like it or don't care, that's okay—I have the kind of sensibility where I don't need to be loved by everyone. I mean, that's not a bad thing.

*To read part one of this two-part interview, please go to:
<http://www.movementresearch.org/criticalcorrespondence/blog/?p=4737>*