

Carolyn Hall in conversation with Sarah Maxfield

Sarah Maxfield: Hi Carolyn Hall!

Carolyn Hall: Hi Sarah Maxfield!

Sarah: Okay. So, we'll get started. You are often an originating performer in choreographic work. How would you describe that role—and does it vary from project to project?

Carolyn: Hmm. Over the years it has varied. I think what I am mostly, now—I am a dancer, not a choreographer—but I am a collaborator, and most of the people who I work with want collaborators: they want people who contribute movement ideas to the piece. I actually think that's how a lot of companies work at this point. It's rare that I'm in a process, anymore, where it's like, "Here's the movement, learn this movement." It's so much more based on a process, an improvisation with just the choreographer, with the other dancers; even if it's a solo for me that doesn't involve anybody else, it's still that same process although it's always *directed*—it's always very directed.

Yeah, I would say that at this point, it's pretty consistently like that across the boards. I work with such a diverse group of people whose ideas of what kind of dance or performance they want to create, is really different. Some are still really "dancey-dancey" and some are much more raw, theatrical.

Sarah: Do you feel like that creates any sort of tension in terms of who has "the rights" to the end performance? Or, do you feel what you end up giving in rehearsal is so based on inspiration from the choreographer's direction that it's clear who is "the creator"?

Carolyn: In some processes, there've been ownership...ego....it's a fuzzy line. When you create it on your body, if the choreographer is less experienced in directing with a firmer hand or idea, there's time for you to get attached to what you've made. Then it's tough to let go of your idea for the good of the piece, or, for the choreographer's idea of what they're looking for—as opposed to what feels good.

Yeah, there've been a couple of situations where dancers' frustration has arisen because it feels like the piece was as much their creation as the choreographer's. But, not in recent years—it really hasn't. I feel like that is a topic that has come up *a lot* in my ten years here in New York and I think that that is something that was really trying to be hashed out with the compact...

Sarah: Right, the Dancer's Forum compact.

Carolyn: Yeah, and all of those series of meetings. I think that has come up more and more as the company structure has dissolved and projects are more independently based upon time, or money, or opportunity, and you get the dancers who you can together.

I think the problem came up because of that, and that's why it was confronted by the Forum. In my personal experiences, a lot of that has been solved with the choreographers who I work with and most of the people I know who are working with choreographers have confronted that with them.

Sarah: Right. I almost wonder if it's particularly an issue in this field because it seems to me that choreographers are given so much more attention than dancers. Whereas in theater, for example, actors tend to be more of a star than a director, or a writer...

Carolyn: They're more background.

Sarah: Right. And in terms of the public attention, or curatorial attention, it is more often, in dance, given to the choreographers, and you wonder if that's why this issue of ownership comes up so much more.

Carolyn: Yeah. I think that, actually, it's still an issue. When you think about how much space is given to a review in the papers (and it isn't much, and it's constantly being reduced) and the things that go... I'm hoping that the reviewers would include the dancers' names—but you know, half of the time, if not more, there's maybe a dancer mentioned if it's in a specific, highlighted role. And I think there's been an effort to get the dancers' names in the paper, get the dancers named properly in the programs with their full bios. That started coming up when I first moved here. There was another dancers' conference that I participated in about ten years ago, and I was so green, and I remember people saying, "We need to be recognized more!" And I was like, "Woooooa!" It hadn't even occurred to me to question that stuff yet, and obviously it was an ongoing issue already—because dance started a long time before I got to New York!

[Laughs]

In terms of financial support—was that the other part of your question?—I think that there... I mean, I don't know that many grants that are given to dancers. I remember asking a friend of mine about them once when I started to ask friends to make solos for me. I did my own sort of mini solo project, and I remember asking some people about grants that could be given to dancers. There are a few, but there really aren't many, and funding, of course, is shorter than ever.

Sarah: Right. I think that's also part of the issue—that it's so difficult for everyone; that everyone feels kind of starved and it makes it even more of a tension, in some ways. Not in everything. I don't mean to create this sort of "battle" between dancers and choreographers, but there is some sort of issue there, I think.

Carolyn: Yeah. The choices I've made about who I work with—I like, and want, to work with people who challenge me and who creatively sustain me, but I also work with people who I like and who I respect, and they respect me. Most people I know in my peer group have been making those same choices. There are still people who take dance jobs for "jobs," and that's completely valid—especially if it's financially based, I totally understand. But, I made the choice for myself that finances weren't what was most important and the person I was working with, as my choreographer and director, was. So, a lot of these issues that we're talking about I can speak of what I've heard and talked to others about in the world. But, personally, I feel like I have created situations with people who I work with that have solved that for me in terms of how I feel about the movement I create, and how I'm treated as a dancer—as opposed to another choreographer, or some other relationship within the structure.

Sarah: At what point in your career did you feel like you were able to start making those choices? Was it just in terms of getting to know yourself as a dancer, and what you liked, or was it some sort of combination of that and getting known enough in the field that you could—that people were seeking you, as opposed to you trying to...?

Carolyn: This sounds probably ridiculous, but it still amazes me that I am considered "known in the field"—I know that sounds ridiculous, but it does still amaze me—so, putting that aside.

Sarah: —just answer the question Ms. Hall!

[Laughs]

Carolyn: Yes!

Sarah: I'm just teasing.

Carolyn: I feel like what happened was I was dancing with *everyone*—like, I went through that phase of going to auditions, and thinking I wanted to work with these big choreographers, and basically not getting chosen. And, you know, that makes some decisions for you, and you have to change your approach to your career. I knew I didn't want to choreograph—it wasn't a passion for me. I feel like choreography is a really tough road, and you need to have a passion for it. I love collaborating, I love the process, I like performing, I like being in that community, but I didn't want to choreograph.

So, after saying yes to almost any project that came my way (because I just wanted to be working, working, working, and performing, and being more in the community), it was probably about five or six years ago when I hit a wall of being overscheduled to a point where—and I think this happens a lot in the dance world anyway—I didn't have any space between the rehearsals I was doing and my other life with Kelly, my friends, or just having time off! Which didn't exist! I really hit this wall. As a dancer, I had no control over my schedule. I mean, to some extent you can say, "I'm available these days," but in the end, if you want to work with a choreographer, and they are arranging a schedule amongst many people, that gets really difficult and you need to be really flexible in order to fit schedules. I really wanted to figure out a way to have more control over how I was running my life. I think that these changes in how I approached the choreographers, and how I became more definite about, "I need this," or I am going to be gone on these days—and that's not flexible. I think setting my own boundaries and learning to stick to them came about that time, when I couldn't keep up the pace I was doing.

Sarah: In addition to the scheduling issues and quality of life, I would also imagine that styles of work informed who you chose to continue working with. I'm curious about what type of choreographer or what type of work-style do you enjoy and try to seek out, within this new framework of you being a little more in charge?

Carolyn: Well, I like trying to push myself to remain diverse in what I am capable of performing. So, there's some work that I do, like Allyson Green's work, which is sort of "traditional" modern dance—it's dancey, it comes from an emotional place, you leap, you turn, it's *dance*, and there's an emotional story behind it. And, it feels really nice to do that once in a while, and I like seeing it once in a while. I saw Alan Danielson's concert and it's beautiful Limon. Beautiful, it's still beautiful when you see dancers who've been steeped in that—they're gorgeous!

Okay. So, that is something I like to keep. Whereas Amanda Loulaki's work pushes me to find a more raw, theatrical place, a really personal rawness that I still have to keep pushing myself to go to. I used to be really scared of it, which is partially why it's like, "Yeah! Okay! I want to work with you." I was really glad she asked me, because I could see that she was going to challenge that, in me. It's been a really fantastic journey to keep being pushed there—and it's really important to her, it's part of her process.

So, those two are pretty opposite ends of the spectrum, and what falls in between are people like Lionel [Popkin], who has a really dedicated study of how the body moves—how your movement travels through the body, initiation (there's a lot of Trisha Brown in that). He wants to understand the origins, not only of the meaning behind it, but where it is in your body, and how it's coming through your body. It's great because if something hurts, you change it, because that's not part of the process for him, that's not necessary. As I get older I appreciate that! But he's just as diligent in involving *why* we go from A to B, both movement wise and logic-wise, whether it's a linear story, or not.

I actually like working with people who each have a really different focus. I like dabbling in everything. I like pushing my sense of ability and performance and challenge in all of those different directions.

Sarah: As you said initially that you had no passion for being “a choreographer”—I wonder if part of that is because you have such a broad scope, and you want to pick at every little thing that is there, and as a dancer it gives you more...

Carolyn: This is something that I've told a lot of young dancers who've said, “I don't know if I want to choreograph, I don't think I do...” And I've said: well, if you don't, then go take broad, expansive classes—go to auditions just to see what people are doing, because in the work today it's so difficult to get into one company and work in one style—and so, to make yourself marketable (financially, or no), for the work of more choreographers, it lays on your ability to be diverse in what you can do performance-wise.

It's served me really well, and it came out of a natural inclination, I think. Yeah, it's something that I actually encourage in new New Yorker dancers.

Sarah: Definitely. Let's talk a little bit about the work with Lionel you are doing for Danspace. You started to talk about his process: the way he initiates work—and you can talk more about that—but I'm also curious if it changes. You are basically working with people who you've worked with for a period of years—and we can all sort of imagine how that would inform the work—but if you'd talk a little bit about that specifically. And also if you find that it is different to work with someone who is also performing in his own work, than to work with someone who is not involved in that role. That's a lot of questions!

Carolyn: Okay! Lionel and I are kind of unique because we've known each other for a really, really long time. We met in college, and so we were both in this beginning, high energy stage of creating when we met, and we worked together in college a lot. And then we disappeared from each other for a while, and went on with our own lives, and reconnected creatively about—oh, about when I moved to New York—so about ten years ago. That longevity has fed our relationship: dance wise, a *lot*. I would be kidding myself if I said it didn't. He was the first person I asked to make a solo on me when I wanted to get some more control of my life. We made a duet together, where we cooked onstage, and that process, and therefore the piece, was *very much* about a relationship—you know, you can say it's a marriage, it's a friendship, but it was an intimate relationship, and we probably made it through that process because we knew each other so well.

It's invaluable to know someone that well. In essence, to trust someone that much—and that goes both ways—and I think that's, again, because of the structure of our world, financially and whatnot, it's really hard to create that—you can't maintain the sense of a company! Now, a lot of choreographers have maintained long-term relationships with dancers, and that's the way it is now. You can *tell*, you can see when a choreographer has been working with a dancer for a long time: there's an innate understanding of the work.

But I don't think it's mandatory for a work to be beautifully understood and performed. I do think, though, that it feeds a depth to the work, and to the process; it certainly helps! With Lionel, it's like any relationship: we know each other's buttons, we know each other's patterns, and we can cut to the chase when you are hitting one of those places where you think, “Uh oh, there could be trouble in the studio!” And instead, it's like, “ALRIGHT. You don't need to go there, I know what is happening, let's circumvent it.”

Sarah: Right. Also, I was thinking as you were talking, that it must allow for these short cuts through the process, because there's so much that you've already worked through on different occasions, so you can kind of plug in to various situations.

Carolyn: Yeah, it's mainly good. Sometimes it's bad, 'cause sometimes you try to short cut and you realize, “Oh, shit! We have to go through that!” But mostly, it's not that it makes it more “efficient,” but it makes you deal with less of the tangents, and you can go a little deeper and

explore the murkiness of what you are actually working on, rather than having to go and deal with something off to the side and then come back. Does that make sense?

Sarah: Yeah!

Carolyn: There are multiple parts to your question...

Sarah: Is it different working with a choreographer who is also performing with you?

Carolyn: Oh, yes! You've experienced this being in one of your pieces. Yeah! It's funny, I want to speak about it from the choreographer's point of view, just because Lionel and I have talked about it so much—and other choreographers and I have talked about it: he needs to try and be an outside eye, as well as a dancer and live inside, so he can feel it, and also so he can see it. As the other dancer in the piece, or as another dancer in the piece, you can tell when they are in a "choreographer-head" and when they are in the piece. That happens even as much as they don't want it to! It happens in performance sometimes. I do not envy that position.

But when a choreographer is able to be completely outside of a piece—and chooses to do that, rather than it not be a choice—then I think there's a clarity that is there for the process as well. So, what usually happens when the choreographer is also a performer is that you balance the two roles in the process, and then it comes to performance, and there's this screeching of the brakes on one, and the putting on the gas on the other, and they have to change gears. And I know that that is tough.

Sarah: Does that create pressure on the rest...

Carolyn: I would say that, across the board, with almost any choreographer I've worked with, when it gets to that point there's usually a readjustment. Some people handle it better than others.

Sarah: Right. Do you find also, as a performer, that when that's the case... Do you get pulled into the choreographic work as well, because there's no one diligently watching from the outside? Does that role start to get shared, or is it more that the choreographer/performer is the only one juggling those two, and you're waiting for them to come fully into the performance role?

Carolyn: Again, it depends on the choreographer. For example, with Lionel, we're doing a trio, and Jenny Dignan is in it as well—and we exchange these roles. Whoever wasn't involved in the "core part" of the choreography would step out and watch, and give feedback. All three of us would. And it's not like he was asking me, or Jenny, to take over the direction, or the choreographing of the piece: he needed a chance to be in it, and have someone else see it and make comments on it.

Do you become more of the choreographic process? Maybe in the sense that you are more actively being involved as an additional outside eye...

Sarah: Right, that is sort of what I meant. Do you become more responsible for more of the watching?

Carolyn: Yes. As a direct result of that, perhaps more...opinions come up, or suggestions come up that may or may not be helpful, but it happens, and if it is helpful, then I guess you are contributing more to the choreographic process from the outside position. But I also don't feel like I am therefore the "choreographer" or "director" at all.

Sarah: Right.

Carolyn: I feel like it's a very equal collaboration in the sense that opinions and thoughts are all valued equally. But the piece is still the idea of the choreographer, the director, it's still *their* vision.

Sarah: And they're still responsible for the decisions.

Carolyn: Right.

Sarah: The solo project that you were talking about—I didn't know that was how some of those solos came about. I'm curious about how that idea came for you, and who you approached, and what that process was like: you being the originator, in one sense, but then asking choreographers to make work on you.

Carolyn: That was an interesting period. That was that wall-smashing period!

[Laughs]

I realized that I was unhappy with the situation of my schedule, and my lack of choices in how my life was spinning. I also wasn't in any performance situations, where someone was making a solo for me. It's not that I had this burning need to have a solo, but it was another instance of, "this would be an interesting challenge." Can I hold the stage by myself? Can I do that? For even a short period of time, and not in a group piece.

And plus, just being me and a choreographer, it's only two people's schedules to organize, and by my saying, "I'm commissioning you, and in discussion we'll figure out the schedule, and you will get paid, and if we have original music, the musician will get paid and it is my responsibility for renting the space, and getting the space"—I hadn't done that! As a dancer, I hadn't done that.

So, Lionel at the time was dancing with Trisha Brown, and I knew that his creative side was a little stymied, but he was in New York, and I was in New York, and I asked him first because of the trust-issue, but I also knew that he would want to push me in directions he hadn't seen me go. I *knew* that. And that was really great. It was really, really satisfying, I think, for both of us. What I realized, though, was that solo—and the creation of that solo—sort of encompassed everything I wanted to feel.

I also had another solo with Carrie Ahern, which ended up being a completely different process, and also truly satisfying, and a really, really different kind of solo, because they are so different. Ideally, when I first drummed up the idea—and when I talked about it with other people—we spun this, "Oh! You'll have an evening of three solos, and they'll be by different choreographers, and you can shop that around!" And I thought, yeah! Great! And then, what I realized I would have to do to accomplish that is to give up the deepening relationships with certain choreographers who I did group work with. Having a solo is great, but you don't have the community, and the studio, and I love that.

So I struck a balance: I did the solo with Lionel, I did the solo with Carrie, and I performed them both numerous times in different situations—sometimes in Lionel's evenings, sometimes in Carrie's evenings, sometimes as something I pursued. And that was agreed upon, ahead of time. But what it did for me was it opened my eyes to a true one-on-one relationship with a choreographer. It made me get on the stage, by myself, for more than just two minutes in a group piece—for ten to fifteen to twenty minutes—and be present the *entire time* and I'm the only one! And that was scary, but really exciting also.

The other thing that came out of it was that Allyson Green had a solo that she had done ten years ago, and she was asked to revive it, but she didn't want to dance it again. God, she was in amazing, amazing shape when she made it [laughs], so even my learning it—because I didn't

train like she did—was challenging. It was a twenty minute challenging solo! She was like, “you’re doing these solos—do you want to learn this?” And I was like, “YEAH!”

So in the end, I did three really different kinds of solos, and it was a very satisfying experience. And it came out of that thing, “Can I have more control over my life as a dancer?” And it turns out you can! There are some things that you give up, but then I realized I had to find a balance for that.

Sarah: I have a somewhat silly question, but I think it will be interesting. Which do you like better: rehearsal or performance? And why?

Carolyn: I like rehearsal better. Because...huh...because I *love the process!* I mean, I’m sure many people who read this will know that I’ve been saying that I’m leaving dance—at least for the past couple of years—and when I leave... I’ll miss performing, but I’m not going to miss it nearly as much as rehearsals, and that process, and being in a studio and moving together, and talking about it, and talking about what comes up, and how that feeds the process. You know, it’s so satisfying! It’s so personal, and yet the process is...it is personal, but you are also headed towards a professional “goal,” and that journey towards that goal, and how things get created and then teased apart, or just totally discarded and more gets created, I *love it!* I love it. I love that I’ve found myself in so many rich collaborative experiences, because I’m always really bad at keeping my mouth shut!

[Laughs]

Sarah: And thank god for that!

Carolyn: But yeah, rehearsal. Hands down.

Sarah: I did want to ask you about the “career transition” that you are making, and the way that you just talked about rehearsal—it is very similar to research, and I’m wondering if there is any overlap in your going into the scientific field: that similar kind of exploration, and that way of teasing things apart and finding what is underneath, and what that transition is like for you.

Carolyn: I think I’m just now discovering that there will be that community connection, but it’s not physical. In the “scientific world”—they aren’t necessarily comfortable with you just coming up and bumping them! [both laugh] I’m really used to being able to do that to my friends. BUT, what I have found is that there are—and this is just in the past year-long exploration of doing internships and taking classes, and now that I am actually in the process of applying for grad school, and talking to more people and putting myself out there—what I have noticed is partly my need to, but also my comfort with being personal. You know, not spilling my daily life woes and such, but being friendly—more than just friendly.

Sarah: Honestly present with someone.

Carolyn: Yeah!

Sarah: Your whole self.

Carolyn: People respond to that! And these people are...well, not all of the science world is awkward, but there’s a lot of them out there! I’ve realized: the science world needs more people who are easy with the outside world. I hope that that’s a role I will take with that. Yes, if you are working on research, and if it’s a team of people working on a project, you go out on the boats together, you’re sleeping in the same bunks together—I mean, you’re up close and personal, and you have to get used to that. I know it does happen, but you’re still not rolling around on the floor.

It'll be an interesting transition, and I know that it exists out there. I've talked to a couple of grad students about their lab partners and such, and it's a real community—it's a *real* community. And I am looking forward to that, because I am going to miss being in this one all the time.

And so how to find something....it will be different, but at least a community that has that same kind of level of comfort. And it's based on being involved in the same kind of thing: we're all in this community because we're involved in performance, and dance—that's what brought us together. But what brings us closer is the way we have to *work* together. That's what I hope to find also in that community. I'm sure it's there. It's just, on the outside—you go to these conferences and I'm like, "Ugh! Do I have to get a suit?!" It's just a different...it has this outside veneer of...especially when it's a mix of environmentalists, and fishermen, and the government folks, and conservation organizations, and you see this mix and they are all trying to deal with each other, and you feel like the boundaries...Come on! Come on! We all want the same thing at the very base of it! So we'll see.

Sarah: You're going to single-handedly unite the world of ecology! [Laughs]

Carolyn: If I could do that?! Oh my god! Then maybe we could actually, you know, slow global warming!

Sarah: Do you think that the kind of career transition—and not necessarily specifically into, you know, ecological science—but some sort of transition is inevitable for a dancer? Or do you think that is just a personal choice?

Carolyn: No. I don't think it's inevitable. I think it is a personal choice. Lots of dancers teach and—

Sarah: —that doesn't seem like a career change to you?

Carolyn: Well, it's a change in your focus, but you are still in the dance field. And you are still involved with dancers in the studio. Maybe you are not creating a piece that will be performed, although if you are in a college environment, you often are. Again—and it wasn't quite the same as choreography—I didn't become a dancer because I wanted to teach, and a lot of people don't, but it never came up as something I wanted to do. I pretty much defined what I wanted to do in dance, and part of it was because I personally wasn't looking at dance for financial rewards of any sort; that was definitely a personal choice. I was willing to not need my dance field career to pay my bills. That's *absolutely* a personal choice, and so I've worked a lot of part-time jobs to make that happen. And, you know, that doesn't work for everybody.

Sarah: So the reason you are making this change is solely—or at least largely—out of a desire to try this other thing, rather than a need to, for financial or other reasons, leave dance.

Carolyn: Yes. I've always also loved biology, and I didn't think I'd be dancing this long. I never did. I am so happy that I have, but I knew the inevitable draw, too, of environmental biology in one form or another would come with, I guess, age and more body crankiness. It's not financial. Again, it's not financial, and I'll keep doing random part time jobs to keep our household running—but it's... It's just this other part of me that needed to speak up again. It's time. It's really hard to leave the dance world—it's really, *really* hard for me to leave the dance world. As a friend of mine said, "You'll just find new ways to stay in it." I hope that's true. This year, I'm dancing with anyone who I've worked with who said, "Want to do one more piece?" And I'm like, "YEAH!" Because I hopefully will be starting school next year, and most of my time will be on the other end of Long Island, so... It's not that I wanted to leave *dance*, it's just that I wanted to do this other thing.

Sarah: Is there anything else that you'd like to add? Your process as a dancer, or any other comments?

Carolyn: I feel like I've talked to so many people about this...off the record!

Sarah: Well, this is on the record. [Laughs]

Carolyn: No. Thank you for choosing to interview me. No...I *do* have to say something! Ok. When I got a "Bessie," it *shocked* me, but something that came up repeatedly was: a dancer who is not in a company got a Bessie! I don't think I was the first one, but I feel like it was few and far between, and Hristoula Harakas just got a Bessie, and she deserves it so much, and she has worked so hard with a variety of choreographers—I believe it was specifically for her performance in Maria Hassabi's work, and she is gorgeous in her work, but she is gorgeous in everybody's work—and she works *so hard*.

And so I just have to say that I am thrilled that these hardworking, multi-choreographer dancers are still being recognized, and that needs to continue.

Sarah: Absolutely. I mean, that goes back to what we were talking about earlier about there not being this star power behind dancers for some reason. Which seems strange. And that when a choreographer is getting a certain amount of attention, by extension often the people who dance with them also get a certain amount of attention that is perhaps greater than people who are moving between lots of artists and seem to float below the radar, even though they are doing fantastic work.

Carolyn: I think it is harder to get a consensus of people to go see more of the emerging, independent work. Everybody is busy, and everybody has to make choices about what they go to see. But I just think it is very important.

Sarah: Do you have any advice, or ideas, about how to improve that?

Carolyn: My comment is about making sure you keep looking; that the awards committees, whoever they are—whether they are the Bessies or any others—you just keep going to the independent stuff. And if you keep seeing a performer's name on a bunch of stuff, find out why so many people are using that person.

Sarah: Or even as an audience member, and not even necessarily limited to the awards committees—although they are the ones with the power to grant a recognition, right? Which is why I spoke of it specifically.

Carolyn: But no, I mean, just as importantly—although I do feel that dancers who are doing good work, and independent work, are recognized at the level of the our peerage. We all admired and respected Hristoula, and I can name *plenty* of other dancers (and I am thinking of one in particular) who deserve that recognition on that community level. But — there's a lot of work out there! And it's tough to see everything, but if you hear a whisper about a performer—even if you don't know much about the choreographer—go! Check them out! That's my advice.

Sarah: Well, thanks Carolyn, it was really great talking with you.

Carolyn: Thanks for having me! It's always good to see you.