

**Michelle Boulé, Jeanine Durning, Alana Elmer, Catherine Legrand, Amelia Reeber and Ros Warby  
in conversation with Rebecca Davis**

Deborah Hay's *If I Sing To You* program notes:

The dancers have the option to appear in a male or female costume, and will decide (individually and without prior consultations with either the choreographer or the other dancers) which costume to wear for every performance, thus multiplying the dynamic of the choreography through an illusion of momentary contexts and changing structural patterns.

“The dancers’ choice to perform much of the choreographic material that determines *If I Sing To You* requires catastrophic acts of perception. ‘Catastrophe’ in this sense refers to the magnitude of former behavior that the dancers need to dis-attach from in order to permit themselves to enact my choreographic directions. It is loss of tremendous proportion.” – dh

Rebecca Davis: So, lets begin with each of you just quickly introducing yourself and telling the readers of Critical Correspondence a little bit about yourself.

Ros Warby: I’m Ros Warby. I met Deb in 1996 and have been working with her through the Solo Commissioning Project and the ensemble works since that time on and off. I have a solo performing practice and present solo work in Australia and internationally.

Catherine Legrand: I am Catherine Legrand and I met Deborah three years ago, I think. We made a version of “O,O!” in France, in French. I am a dancer.

Rebecca: Are you a choreographer as well?

Catherine: No, not at all. Just dancer.

Amelia Reeber: My name is Amelia Reeber. I started working with Deborah in 2000, somewhere around there. I did a couple of Solo Commissioning Projects and then a trio later called Mountain and this work. I live in Seattle and I do solo work of my own. I dance and I choreograph.

Alana Elmer: My name is Alana Elmer and I am from Toronto, Canada where I dance for Toronto Dance Theatre. That’s how I met Deborah. Artistic Director Christopher House commissioned her to do a work on the company, called Up Until Now, and we hit it off and she invited me to come and do this work here in NY.

Michelle Boulé: I’m Michelle Boulé. I live her in NY and I perform and teach and I think Deborah saw me perform with Miguel Gutierrez and he actually recommended me to her for this project. I proceeded to do a Solo Commission Project that was some of the material for this piece.

Rebecca: What was the name of that one?

Michelle: *The Runner*. I think it was 2007.

Jeanine Durning: I’m Jeanine Durning and I’ve lived in NY for almost 20 years. I teach and perform in other people’s work as well as make my own work—solo and group. I’ve been watching Deborah’s work since the late eighties and I officially met her about 4 years ago when I did “O,O!” That was the fist project I did with her, but prior to that she contacted me for *The Match*, because I think Wally recommended me, but I couldn’t do it. So, she then asked if I could do a duo.

Rebecca: Interesting to me that a lot of you have done the Solo Commissioning Project. I am wondering to what extent this group process is similar to that? For example, for the readers who don't know that for the solo projects you have to sign a contract saying you'll do the process 5 times a week for a minimum of 3 months before you perform the work, and then anytime you take a break you have to do the work daily for 3 weeks before you perform it again. So, how similar is that? How do you all enter in? I know there has been some cast changes, so how do you begin working together, for how long?

Ros: I think she approaches it slightly differently. The Solo Commissioning Projects are open to anyone and on these ensemble works, *The Match*, "O,O!", a couple of others ensemble works like *If I Sing to You*, she selects the cast. Then there the process in making is different. She spends longer with the group. Like it's ten days for the Solo Commissioning Project, but four weeks—this was six weeks, right? The process with the dancers is much more intense, longer and expanded, even though she still comes in with the score.

Rebecca: That was my next question.

Michelle: She asks for a lot of our feedback. In the six weeks that we were making this piece, I think we learned the piece within three days, then we would run it, then we would talk. She wanted to get notes from each of us, and I think the score with our notes now is close to forty pages long. And she continues to re-write it. Before this show, she was sending us emails with notes. You know like, three weeks in advance maybe. And then sometimes she might come up to one of us before even a performance and say, I thought of a new word for your sexual solo or something, you know, 'vanishing girlish gestures.' So, then you get more information often through language.

Rebecca: So, you would say you all had a hand in shaping the score? Or filling out the score, perhaps, making it more specific?

Ros: I think her approach to ensemble work is that she is really very interested in performers, she selects and trusts them, and thinks they are fabulous and is very, very curious about their input and so truly, just completely curious as to how those performers can work their material. So she then, with the structure she sets up in the four weeks or six weeks in making it, she will come in and she will teach you the dance in two or three days, like the Solo Commissioning Project, like every work, that's the same, but then she pulls it apart and puts it back together endlessly and is just so curious as to what is going to come out. She's chosen and lets that totally affect the shape of the dance, the direction of some of the language, she undoing it and redoing it and rewriting it constantly through that process.

Rebecca: So it sounds like you all had a pretty clear understanding of her work before joining the project? Catherine, how familiar were you with Deborah's work?

Catherine: Before this project, I did "O,O" and before I saw *The Match* in Montpellier, France. The Match and a pair of solos, they were doing and Deborah also, that's what I knew from her. And I heard about her too, because "O,O" in France was a command, that is correct this word? Command?

Amelia: Commission?

Catherine: Commission from a French choreographer and two other producers in France because there was an exchange of producers—American and French, yeah? So, the cast of this "O,O" France, French "O,O", was a proposition from a choreographer and she chose the dancers so when we began to work, we didn't know anybody of the group.

Rebecca: Oh, that is interesting.

Ros: But this project is different to *The Match*. This project she wanted everybody in the cast to have some contact with her; that was my understanding of it from the outset. Whereas *The Match*, I was the only one who had contact with her on some sort of working process. The other three performers she had seen perform.

Rebecca: Has it still brought up surprises for you or a new experience? Like, even though you've entered into the project with familiarity, has it still surprised you?

Jeanine: I find that it's a living thing and even though the score is the same, it grows and slightly changes—my experience of it changes every time that I perform it. Time passes and your life changes, your person changes, and paralleling your experience with the work, there is still, always, room to find new things. Also, in the microcosmic view, there is always a new way. Being in the present, there's always a surprise at some point where just when you think you've run out of options, a new one appears.

Michelle: She's been using the word mystery lately and that's how I have been feeling about the run of the show this time around. What is this mysterious piece? I feel like there is a way that her work, well all work, you know when you interact with it, it becomes sort of a mirror for something or for yourself, but this work in particular, is like an extra crazy mirror or something! Or I feel the directives she has given us are super specific, but at the same time, we have nothing to do necessarily and she is constantly saying it is not about what you are doing. I feel like in her works you can feel that place when, 'Oh, I am just doing this thing', or I am not inside the impossible question that she asks. It is an impossible question, so I feel like the dynamic space is just that engagement between a question and an answer, that's where it feels like the work exists. We're never getting anywhere, or we're continually shedding, and that's what's exciting and frustrating and I feel like there is space for failure in this work and that too is okay, sort of. And then you know feelings like, oh! I found something or surprising yourself—I feel like that is part of the work too. So, it definitely stays alive, but we have to step up to it. And it's not like, okay, I have this movement, because then it just gets sort of torturous and boring, like getting lost in a swap or something. I think it's built into the structure that there's this physical action or engagement that is just about like Ros was saying, curiosity, her curiosity, and how she can put us in a space of being curious.

Ros: I think she's the most rigorous and inspired director I know because she won't excuse anything. She's incredibly intelligent and generous with how she directs, which gives each performer enormous potential to exercise or practice what she is suggesting, offering or challenging. That is the greatest gift I've got from the work, her consistent ability to pull the rug from under my feet or just know exactly what's right, and she doesn't have to say anything. It's very clear. She's very clear with her perception of what's going on. And to have that watching you is brilliant.

Rebecca: Is she present for every performance?

Cast: yes...

Amelia: She actually left us, we've had two weeks of performances up until now and she was only there for the first week, which was weird. It was weird not to have her there.

Jeanine: She had someone help or assist in this piece. He was at Berlin and that was the only piece of the run she didn't see. But she's in the audience every night.

Catherine: She is very present.

Rebecca: You were both just touching on this, but I am wondering what other practice, movement or otherwise, has best prepared you or from which you draw on the most for entering this work.

Jeanine: I actually find that there is nothing to supplement this practice. I mean being in the practice of this practice is the only thing that prepares me for it. And in that way it's very mysterious, so in a way there is no real preparation for it, you're either inside of it or you're not. I think that is also why she is very specific about the commitment for the Solo Commissioning Project. You really have to be committed to this three-month process. But that may be very particular to me.

Ros: I agree with that but at the same time, you know, she has that book, *My Body The Buddhist*. She says she is not a Buddhist, but there has been a lot of parallels people recognize in the work in relation to Buddhism, and I would definitely say meditation and Alexander Technique are very present in my body as a vehicle to help me be available. But I would agree with you Jeanine, there is nothing else that can prepare you for once you hit the floor with the practice, then that's it. But in terms of having a whole body at once available to actually have a go, those two have definitely...

Rebecca: Provided a foundation.

Amelia: Brain Gym helps a lot.

Rebecca: What is that?

Amelia: It just helps with your right and left side of the brain, turns them on, kind of. Then there are certain exercises that stimulate both sides of your brain to help you, well, it's for tons of different things, but it helps me particularly for this piece because I feel I can see all of them with different parts of my body more than just vision. Actually I've never talked about this, so I am not sure I am explaining this very well.

Rebecca: Can you give an example of a Brain Gym exercise?

Amelia: Well if you were to concentrate directly on your thumbnail and without moving your head create figure eights and then reverse it and you can do it for a long time. It's pulling focus but it's expanding my vision because we tend to skip parts of our vision. If you were to look around you, you would skip over certain things, can be like a certain emotional block for your brain has turned off certain triggers. And I find that really helps and I can feel people from all over. All of a sudden I can see Michelle from my shoulder, and it opens my peripheral vision.

Michelle: I agree with Jeanine, you know, just doing the work itself it's the only way to prepare for me, but I also bring with me what I bring to any work that I do: my ongoing dialogue with my body, with my experience, with keeping my senses open and available as much as they can be, and permission and invitation.

Ros: This reminded me of one of the very first workshops I did with Deborah, when she was still doing the very large workshops in Australia. There were fifty people in the room. I remember dancing with a lot of people and her and after that two-hour experience I felt for the very first time, everything that I couldn't have imagined feeling simultaneously. I felt beautiful and happy and miserable and revolting and sexy and vulgar... It was an epiphany. I had no idea that was possible. Why I'm being reminded of that is that the work has the potential for you to bring everything that you have from your dance history or whatever history to the floor and to fly with it.

Alana: It's true. I feel everything, the excitement and also the exact opposite, constantly! It's such a fine place to exist, feeling sexy and hideous all at once. I think that's really exciting because I don't know what else has ever made me feel like that. When Deborah came, my career as a dancer had been still quite short. After school, it has been maybe only four or five years. But without even realizing it, when she came to work with us, she reminded me that I love to dance and perform, and I honestly hadn't realized that I had forgotten. I think it gives you this sense of aliveness in this really interesting special way.

Rebecca: Has it changed how you approach other work that is not Deborah's?

Michelle: I remember I performed in Austin this piece from 2005 with Miguel Gutierrez and Deborah came to see the show and we were like, shoot! Deborah was there and you know, this particular piece—it was Miguel's solo and a trio for three women—it's super frontal, and Miguel and I expressed a similar sentiment in having to perform that night with Deborah there. We were like, wait, this is not a Deborah Hay piece! But then, what? It just created confusion. After experiencing this, when watching performance, my viewing has shifted. I feel that is something I have taken from this too, and used in other work and in my teaching. She's raising consciousness and she is asking us to transform. There is some really beautiful language in the program notes about the catastrophe of perception and of letting go of our patterns and habits and that is like enlightenment as she doesn't want to say, and yeah, we are not going for that, but that's kind of the beautiful thing about the way she looks at the work too. It's right here, there is no goal, and it's the experience of now and also at the same time surrendering right now. Wow! You know?

Jeanine: It is. You know, I can't say I directly used the practice in other processes, but I think significantly what has shifted in me in working within this practice and having the experience directly through Deborah is challenging a sense of readiness, what it means to prepare for, and transcending that block of what it means to be ready to do something. That, in and of itself, has completely shifted the way that I teach, the way that I perform, the way that I go into the grocery store! It's not just about dancing. I don't feel that I am dancing out there and yet, it's fully more, it is dance, but it's more than dance and so, it has this very transcendent experience, without getting, you know, oh my god this is transcendent! It is just what it is, too.

Amelia: Through her language and her precision with language bringing in concepts that have meaning for her, she can create work that comes from that, that is such a back door to other experience and a back door into narrative, into emotion, into consciousness, to a whole living organism.

Ros: In 2001, I made a solo program with three works, one of them was Deborah's *Fire*, from '99, one of them was Lucy Guerin's work, with whom I was still dancing with at the time, and another one was my own. I remember the experience of that program was that I could practice this performance practice across all three. It was simple and clear. Obviously Lucy's work would have been the most sort of outside the realm of the approach, but at the time her choreographic vocabulary was so detailed and rigorous in it's own way, there was no room for going outside what she set, it was very detailed. So, your execution of the detail of what she had offered was the work. Once that material was there, to work with this practice over that, in that, with that, was fantastic.

Rebecca: Did she notice?

Ros: She's noticed, I would hate to quote her because it is so long ago, but I think she has seen me perform in choreographic works a long time ago and she would notice and use that word transcend the dance, or transcend the actual form that is there because of her perception of what's happening or the performers. I experience that when I watch some performers. You know, you are clearer watching the performance, not the material, not the choreographed movement.

Michelle: It's a beautiful way of talking about how the performer's perception creates the experience, also. I feel that is something related to Body Talk in terms of consciousness and how we create things through out sense. There is something that is really scientific and philosophical about it that puts us as a performer in a really favorable position. Like, how can I use my perception to give me an experience that is getting what I need. I love that: getting what you need, get what you need. And what Jeanine was saying reminded me of the ready, fire, aim that she says, and also this time, the sort of short cut that she is using for no hesitation and no

reconsideration. I can count multiple times every hour when I am either hesitating or reconsidering.

Rebecca: In performance?

Michelle: In my life! In performance, sure! You know, all those modes of, those habits of, those patterns of performing and having someone watch you, I love that. She's been using that this time around, no hesitation, no reconsideration, there are no apologies.

Ros: Lately when I am teaching or in a coaching situation, even if somebody is working with a choreographed material, I've been encouraging someone to work with the practice. These are the people who are familiar with the practice or who have worked with Deborah, so they are not coming in cold. But to throw this language out there, on the floor, with someone who is working with choreographed material, you see them step up, so to speak. It's very different.

Rebecca: I agree. I found when I came back from 2008 SPCP, I expected this from every performance that I saw and then I saw dancers with this fixed thing. And I am demanding that everywhere, to have the same approach.

Elena: We watch dance differently, for sure.

Jeanine: It is amazing though how you can feel and perceive fixity all around you after doing this. In your relationships with people, in your communications with people, it's really a kind of holistic and global way of perceiving the world, not just in the theatre. It's pretty wild.

Rebecca: I am very curious how the choice of gender affect your internal experience? Is it subtle? Is it dramatic? And also, on a larger scale, how do your individual gender choices affect the overall texture of the group?

Jeanine: I have to say that I am personally not even thinking gender. I am going to try and be articulate in this because I think it's an important subject. I think in terms of how it affects the moment-to-moment choices for me, it is about texture. It is different to have pants on than to have a skirt on, you know, the texture or the feeling is different with hair or wig. But I don't think man or women necessarily and I don't see Ros as man or Catherine as man necessarily. There is so much else to be working on from moment to moment that, it slips in and out, but it's not like this is the character or this is the thing I am playing out.

Rebecca: I'm definitely being loose with the term. That is why I was curious, I had a feeling it was kind of a subtle experience?

Michelle: But even as you say you are not thinking gender, the texture, the clothing is gendered, this is men's clothing or women's clothing and I feel that created another experience. I don't know if we can fully escape from the social and cultural implications of clothing and how they affect us.

Jeanine: But I think that is also sort of what Deborah is playing with: that perception and how that shifts people's perception if there are two men holding hands or women playing men holding hands.

Ros: And the way she set up the dancers' choice just before the show, which costume they are wearing, there is a very light getting into the costume in that sense. It's not a loaded 'I am preparing to be a man tonight'. It's a costume and that's it.

Rebecca: Do you notice tendencies, performance tendencies?

Ros: No.

Rebecca: It doesn't affect you?

Ros: I've only done it this season so I don't have as much experience or range as the others, but my experience this week has been exactly what Jeanine is describing. I definitely am more comfortable in this costume than that costume because pants feel better on my backside or whatever.

Rebecca: I think the audience is experiencing it differently.

Ros: I watched the piece for a time in Melbourne and I read it exactly how I am experiencing it. I didn't read it, man/women. I could see it, but I was just seeing it. I didn't really experience them as male/female.

Alana: You kind of get over it quickly. You see it and then you get over it. I noticed that on the video. People would ask me about it, they would say, oh you mean the one dressed as the guy or whatnot and by the third time of even watching it, I was like, what now? No. No. No.

Jeanine: On Monday after the dress someone came up to Michelle and I and she was saying, oh you know the thing about, it's such a strong statement on gender. And it was interesting because it hadn't occurred to me but I could see where it could really read out like that.

Michelle: Someone can bring those issues to the piece very easily, but we never had discussions on gender in the piece. And the reason she says this happened is because she could only find women to work with or she was interested in women. The men maybe were too busy or something. So then she thought, I just let the women choose to be men or women each night and that is as simple as it was.

Rebecca: Something so practical, this problem-solving thing has added this whole other layer.

Michelle: I feel like she watches the piece with such fluidity and she has seen us as men and women so many different times, so then is just like another simple choice.

Rebecca: So then, the choice for you is totally arbitrary? If you don't feel a real difference, it's not like, oh I feel like being a man today.

Michelle: Sometimes it's practical, it's like, I don't have enough time to do the man make-up tonight!

Ros: Or my hair is just washed.

Michelle: Yeah, or my hair's clean. Practical. And now there is a rule, it used to be just one man or woman and now it's two. So, maybe if you're last to get into the dressing room to decide, a decision may have been made for you.

Rebecca: I think that is mostly what I want to cover. Is there anything else you wanted to share about the process, that you wanted people to know?

Michelle: I think her work asks for a different way of viewing and that is exciting, and I think it's challenging for people. I mean it's surprising, sometimes I think a non-dancer is not going to be able to access this work but that is just me with whatever my brut thoughts going through my head. I feel like that is what continues to keep her work contemporary. It can be challenging to watch. We are not giving it to you and I have been feeling this run in particular, that it is work. We are working. I said to Jeanine the other night, it almost feels like doing a difficult math problem. I mean that's one perception of it, that's how I was feeling at that moment. I guess I say that because I have gone through my own experience as an audience member watching some of her different pieces, like oh I don't know what I am looking for and that is the problem, that I have

been looking for something. So I have felt it transform the way I perceive her work. I didn't always, I haven't always gotten it, I don't think in the way that she intends for it to be perceived.

Jeanine: It makes me think that there is really no release in the doing of the work or in the watching of it. There is never really a moment where you land on something. Where you are like, oh, I got it!

Ros: She has always said she doesn't like the audience to have handles, love handles. She doesn't want the audience to have a grip on it.

Alana: Yet, I think it's her talent to be able to get people almost there, before it sort of switches that keeps even non-dance audiences interested. It is almost something recognizable and then it's gone. And then you are kind of on to something else, so that if you are willing your mind can stay active throughout that whole time.

Ros: She asks you throughout the practice that as soon as you recognize where you are, let it go. The moment of recognition is the moment of abandonment.

Rebecca: I think that is so similar to meditation.

Ros: But you know, then she will say, but this is a performance. It is a performance meditation practice, not a meditation practice. And it's true, it's a very different practice. And how you articulate the difference, I don't know. This language, this current language, that is the beauty of it. I cannot see her for a couple of years and she comes in with a whole... you know, I thought her work was about perception and awareness and now it's about relationship.

Rebecca: Thank you so much.