

**Ursula Eagly & Rebecca Davis**  
with Sarah Maxfield

**Sarah Maxfield:** I often see you performing in each other's work, yet you choose to make separate pieces, rather than collaborate on a single project. What about that framework is appealing to you?

**Ursula Eagly:** I think both of our processes are somewhat collaborative, but they're not total collaborations. I say that the work was created by me in collaboration with the dancers, so I bring in all the ideas and the questions to work through in rehearsal, and I ask them to figure out solutions to these problems that I bring in. They play with them, and then I can pick and choose from the material that they create, but it's all my questions and my decisions.

**Rebecca Davis:** And, I have my own questions and decisions. I enjoy getting some material from the dancers, but I like to have control. (Laughs) The overall shape of the piece I like to be responsible for.

**SM:** So, when you're working on projects like that, since you both have that directorial/choreographic role in some of your work, is it ever difficult for you to work together, having that structure where one of you is the choreographer and one is the dancer, and then reversing that?

**RD:** I have no problem with it. I think that's one of our strengths as friends. I have no problem with her bossing me around... she's not very bossy, but it's very easy for me to slip in-between our different roles in each other's lives. I think because I make my own work, it's very satisfying to have that other aspect of yourself just to show up and be told what to do, so I like switching back and forth between those.

**UE:** I agree with that, but I think this piece is the first time that I've been in your (Rebecca's) work since... a long time.

**RD:** Yeah, I'm more often in Ursula's work than vice-versa.

**UE:** I think I had been in some pieces that Rebecca did in 2001 or something.

**RD:** Those don't count.

(Laughter)

**UE:** So, it was new for me, and I find it sort of relaxing to not be thinking about those big decisions. I was focusing mainly on creating my own work for a long time, and just recently have been working with other choreographers. I think, for me, it's given me a lot of information on how to better be in the directorial position. Being a dancer for someone, I get a better perspective of what it's like to be presented with something that you're working with... and wanting to fulfill expectations, and wanting those to be clear. I didn't really think about those concerns when I'm working on my own work; I only think about the work. I think that it makes me a better choreographer to have a greater consciousness of the role of the person who's just showing up to confront these questions for the first time.

**SM:** The two pieces that you each presented together (*The Birds are Here, I hear them* and *Nobody Try to Be a Hero*), and are remounting again at The Chocolate Factory, seem to me to contain some similar elements, even though they weren't at all the same. They had similar childhood inspirations and gifts for the audience, and I just wondered if when you worked on them, was there any dialogue between the two processes, or were they totally separate and coincidentally ended up having these threads?

**UE:** I think we worked separately on the pieces, but obviously since we're working so closely, things end up informing each other.

**RD:** It was crazy how that kept happening. It was definitely not intentional. I think it took me a long time to realize the connection of the birds, even. I had this idea for a bird solo a long time ago, and meanwhile we had been working on this bird solo in Ursula's piece, and I don't know, it took me a long time to even connect them. I think just because I was so in my own head with my piece. Yeah, I think it's coincidental. Maybe...

**SM:** a more subconscious connection than anything in particular?

**RD:** Yeah.

**SM:** You've talked a little bit about your processes; each of you talked about bringing questions for the dancers to explore in rehearsal. Could you talk a little more about that and if you have particular tools that you use in rehearsal for any piece, or for these pieces in particular, to actually build the work?

**UE:** I usually come to rehearsal with 50 different ideas, and I'm very impatient, and I play with all these different things, and plow through lots of different ideas, and I think this piece in particular is much more conceptual than craft-based. I think the things that you do see in the final piece... I definitely spent some time investigating those. For example, I had this idea of using the "kid Haunted House," where it's pitch-black and there's Haunted House music playing, and... Oh, shoot, I don't know if... I don't want to give it away for anyone who might read this before seeing the piece...

**SM:** That's up to you.

**UE:** We can deal with that later. But, I had come in with these ideas of kid Haunted Houses, and I was interested in texture and the dark, and playing with other senses that people could use to experience performance. We did play around with lots of variations on that and ended up using the very traditional objects and things that you associate with that. I think each of those sections did have a certain amount of exploration, but there were millions and millions of ideas based on those similar themes that you didn't see, but I guess we spent a lot of time in rehearsal not dancing. We spent a lot of time feeling things, or making lists of questions, or playing with gestures...

**RD:** It was a very fun process.

**UE:** It was very fun. Do you want to talk about...?

**RD:** Your process or my process?

**UE:** Oh, I don't know. Your turn.

**RD:** I think I had different processes for each section of the piece. Each duet had its own rules... its own logic. The bird solo came very much from this book that I was reading. I can't remember the name of it right now, but it's about the [Kaluli] people of Papua New Guinea and their extensive taxonomy system for birds, and their connection to humans. I read a lot. I improvise a lot. I videotape, look at it, go back, and strip away...

**SM:** When you say you read a lot and you improvise a lot, do you mean that it's just you who's reading and improvising, and you're watching yourself on the video, or are you giving that material to the dancers as well?

**RD:** Both. There's some that's just my movement, and then I gave the dancers some directions. We created these memory maps. That was something I was very interested in for a while. One of them was Sarah's first house that she grew up in, and I thought it would just be a 5-minute improv, and it was this really detailed 45-minute thing, and it was so captivating, and so amazing, that I couldn't... I didn't want to stop her. I just let her keep going. So that became... that was the material for one of the duets, and we just kept stripping it and stripping it. It's a convoluted process, I guess. The bird solo actually came out of watching one of the improvisations... how I ended up organizing the movement in the tiny pieces was from watching the video, and watching it in slow motion to try to re-learn the material, I became more interested in seeing it in slow motion... what do you call that in a film, when...

**SM:** Stop-motion?

**RD:** Stop-motion. It was like stop-motion, and I didn't originally think of it that way. It came out of another part of the process.

**SM:** Can you talk a little bit more about your initial inspirations for these works, and how they changed or grew as you began development? Did you stick to whatever that original question was, or did it morph into something different?

**UE:** I had wanted to make a piece based on the idea of the Stockholm Syndrome, which is when a hostage falls in love with its captors, and it's based on a bank robbery that took place in Stockholm in the 70s, when bank robbers held hostages for 4 days, and afterwards the hostages refused to testify in court against the captors, and they felt very protective of them because they had this bond... Patty Hearst is a famous case. I had this idea of using the Stockholm Syndrome as a metaphor for the relationship between the performers and the audience, with the performers being the captors and the audience members being the hostages of the performers. I wanted to make it a bunch of years ago, and then I ended up getting this grant from The Queens Council, so I had to make a piece that was related to Queens. So I made that, and that was a year, so I wasn't able to start the other piece, and in the intervening time there had been a lot more, new information about hostages. When I first had the idea it was before Daniel Pearl and before Abu Ghraib, and it felt like, when I came back to the idea there was a lot more really serious and relevant material to contend with. Another thing that really interested me with those ideas was... one thing I'm always interested in is this idea of honesty and the performance. What's actually going on? It's not a pretend-something-else; so one of the big questions for me was how do you deal with these themes that are really serious in a situation... I'm using it as a metaphor, and I can't actually hurt the audience members, and they know that, and they feel totally safe. Maybe they're a little embarrassed or a little grossed out, but they know nothing bad is going to happen to them. I remember when Felix Ruckert did a piece a number of years ago at Joyce SoHo called Private Dances. You got to choose one dancers, and they the did a private dance, and someone was telling me about the dance that he got... there was this dancer that was holding a needle really close to his eye, and he just thought it was so stupid, because he knew that it was a performance at the Joyce SoHo and she couldn't poke out his eye... it just wasn't going to happen, so it felt really fake-y, and so for me, with this piece that was a big negotiation... how to create a power dynamic and play with that without it seeming weird and fake, and how to deal with these serious issues. Then finally, one of the other major ideas... I feel like I see... working for a dance presenter, I see a lot of dance, and I feel like there's a certain amount of burnout, or as a viewer becoming more passive, more quick to judgment about something. I feel like that's something that's changed for me in the past couple of years, seeing many performances every week, and I feel that I got into contemporary dance because I had these amazing, transformative experiences as a viewer and I feel like I'm losing that, and I wanted to make a piece that would address my failures as a viewer of dance.

(Laughter.)

**UE:** I wanted to make something where nobody could be passive. There wasn't a member of the audience who could be passive, or sit back and think about the piece while it was still going on. I wanted them to be completely involved and enveloped by it, and controlled by it.

**RD:** In the beginning, I get images, and I don't know where they come from. I knew there were going to be hugs, and I knew there were going to be kisses, and I knew there were going to be birds. I didn't know why. Then, when I start to... because I'm at the end, it's so hard to go back to the very beginning, because it has gone through all these different things. I love doing... it's a very intuitive process, I guess. I just start reading. I started reading all this stuff about chocolate, and...

**UE:** You were reading about birds.

**RD:** Yeah, tons and tons of stuff about birds, and I bought the DVD *Life of Birds*, and in there, all these little things... some things stay, some things go, and the things that stay inform other things, and it's all good for a while, and then in the middle I have all this stuff, and I have a little meltdown, "What is all this stuff, and how is it connected?" But, the more I do this, the more I trust the process, because certain things I'm not drawn to. In the end, everything did make sense; there's nothing extraneous. Everything is connected, and I just have to trust myself that it's this little treasure hunt, and I'm just trying to find the clues, or it's some kind of puzzle. I don't start out with an overall big idea; it's more things that I want to try with movement, and just one or two images.

**SM:** Both of you use the audience pretty actively, in different ways and to different extents, but I wondered if either of you worked with an audience to develop the work, or if that aspect was all on the line for the actual performance. Was that the first time it happened with an audience?

**UE:** My piece before this one, which Rebecca was also in, was called *You are Responsible Forever for What you Tame*, and this was the Queens-related piece... and it was based on all these stories of these elderly people I had talked to about their experiences at the World's Fairs in '39 and '64, and so there was all this fantastical, zoological imagery, and I wanted some way of conveying little bits of story to the audience, and I also had this idea of... From talking to these people... they were elderly, but they were having these memories of when they were kids, and I wanted to create that feeling of remembering your childhood. So, in that piece we used the children's game Telephone, where one person... in this case it was the performer would whisper a sentence to different audience members, and they would pass it down their row, and one person whispers it to the next. That was my first experience with using... manipulating the audience, and I really liked the way it changed the dynamic. Suddenly the room felt really alive, and people were giggling, and they were watching but also doing something, because the thing they were doing didn't take that much attention away from the dancing. In this piece I wanted to go further with that, but when we rehearsed, I didn't actually bring in audience members, but we would try things out on each other. I had this one idea about interrogations, and we would interrogate each other, and try different ways of doing it, and make lists of questions to get certain types of answers. Also, we had a work-in-progress before the final performance that was... The first time we did this piece was in October at The Chocolate Factory, and it had a work-in-progress showing in June, so that actually was really helpful. There were certain things that we were still

unprepared for. In the final performance in October, people were screaming and losing their heads, and that didn't happen in June. It was smaller, and we didn't have music in that section, so there were definitely things that were still surprising, which is one reason why I'm looking forward to this upcoming performance. We've already done it once, and we know what to expect. It won't be so shocking.

(Laughter.)

**RD:** My interest in working with the audience, or involving the audience is directly related to working with Ursula. It's never been something I'd been interested in, in the past, but again, I really liked the way that it enlivened the space, and it felt more charged. Also, I agree with what Ursula was saying earlier about being a passive viewer. I see tons of dance as well, and I tend to wander off a little bit. I just wanted... because dance is so ephemeral; I wanted some kind of ballast, in a way. So I was thinking of the objects. I wanted to involve more of the senses, but also give the piece a little bit of an anchor and hopefully create a more memorable experience for the audience. I didn't practice any of the audience involvement beforehand, so it was different from night to night. I thought... I was very worried about it beforehand, and I tried to think of all these different solutions, and problem-solve, but still I was surprised every night how the audience reacted, but it's exciting. Now, I don't always want to involve the audience, but I also don't want to go back to a situation where you control everything.

**UE:** We should just randomly shock them to keep them paying attention.

(Laughter)

**RD:** It's very exciting, and definitely as a performer. I love performing in Ursula's work. I feel like it's the most alive I ever am... well, so far anyway. It's a very interesting border... engaging with a stranger is very... we got so comfortable doing the stuff with each other, and in a way I was not prepared at all for the first performance of it. Again, I got very nervous, and I didn't feel as in-control... well, I wasn't as in-control...

**UE:** There's a sort of manipulation section, and we had it rehearsed and everything was very nuanced... doing these gestures on each other... certain ones were very harsh and certain ones were really sensual, and when you're confronted with someone you've never met, and they're shocked and uncomfortable, it's really hard to stick to your guns and be able to do these different qualities...

**RD:** I know; I always feel like I'm hurting them or something. I always want to find them after the show and apologize, "I'm so sorry; I hope I didn't hurt you or embarrass you, and I hope you had a good time," but with Ursula, who cares?

**SM:** Anything else that either of you would like to talk about related to these particular works, or anything that you're working on next?

**UE:** My next piece, which is going to be very far away, I'm going to be collaborating with a perfumer, and I'm looking... I'm starting to think about where to perform it. I need an unusual place, so if anyone out there has some kind of unusual situation that would hold smells well.

(Laughter)

**RD:** (making a gesture) These are smells in my piece, you know that?

**UE:** No, I didn't know that! Wafting up...

**RD:** I can do mine anywhere... so far. I'm in the very beginning stages. I have no limits.