

Juliana May
in conversation with Tamar Rogoff

Tamar Rogoff: Where does your work spire from, or where does the first inkling of it land in your mind?

Juliana: It starts from the body and from a social experience with my dancers. We're a fairly tight-knit group. Some of them I've been working with for eight years, some of them for three or four. We've worked on being a group and part of that is getting to know them. That's like a thing, in order to teach you I have to know you. I don't think of myself as their teacher, but there is a certain teaching that goes on both ways. I feel taught by them and I think I teach them as well. Knowing absolutely informs the content of the work. Our group as a community and then how we are inside of our bodies. The way I am inside of my body and the way they inside of their bodies, which is two very different things.

Tamar: Do you make the vocabulary from looking at them in particular and their bodies?

Juliana: I think so. I don't really think about it like that, but when I'm next to them that's what happens. The way I choose dancers too is that I feel a kinship physically. I've gotten some of my dancers through auditions. Some of them through watching them perform. There is always a chemistry that's really felt in order for me to feel like I can put movement on them and be inspired by how they move.

Tamar: This is one of the few times that you yourself are dancing. How does that work for you, to be dancing in your own work?

Juliana: Well, I didn't make the work dancing in it. Nicole Mannarino, who is amazing, originated the role last spring. She hurt her ankle so I had to step in. It was made with an outside eye. I haven't danced in my work in five years. To experience the work from the inside is totally different. I could no longer look at it. I felt really blinded by it; I just had to be a dancer. It was really hard. It was important to just be inside of the structure because I think I would actually do some things differently just from being inside of it, timing wise.

Tamar: I saw a certain kind of, almost abrasive asymmetry within your body and the part that you did, which sat on you differently than sat on the other dancers. I was really interested in how it went through your body. It seemed that you really *owned* it in a different way and there was an asymmetry and a kind of intenseness that went up through your body, into your face that seemed to knock you askew, which was more so in *you* than the other dancers.

Juliana: That's interesting. I probably just gave myself permission to do it. In the process of learning Nicole's part she was really patient in teaching things that were really set, and we talked about the fact that I would change things that were different because my body is different than hers. For instance, she did this *developé*, which I just don't have the facility for. I swapped that off to Anna Carapeytan. But I think that I give all of my dancers room within the material to play with quality and timing, effort and shape, even tone. I give myself that same permission.

Tamar: Which is interesting because they are very individual in their approaches and they come out as different qualities even though, when they do the unison, they are very, very together. There is something about the unison and what I felt in this piece—the unison was very connected, like a community. It registered in an emotional way because there wasn't very much touching, so unison meant a lot.

Juliana: Yes. The unison section we called the Tai Chi section and because it is synchronized it feels satisfying to watch in a lot of ways. But I think also, because the nature of the movement has some sort of Tai Chi movement qualities to it. It has a very meditative tone in the body: the way that the muscles are toning, the way that we think about the skin and the bone in that section, which is true of other, parts too. It all has different nuances. I actually think that in that section we all do it very differently too. It's a unified moment, but we are all sort of approaching the movement in a different way.

Tamar: I felt, again compositionally, a sense of community. When I looked, you were sort of flanking movements. Sometimes you were sitting at one end of the room and then I looked at the other end and someone else was sitting there. What was happening in between was something that was almost held by your being at the perimeter of things.

Your compositions are emotional. Do you know what I mean?

Juliana: Yes... I haven't really thought about it that way. It sort of comes across that way because the duets or the movement that's created are created in solos. Everyone has solo material that they are going to use across the whole piece at some point. We splice and dilute and mix and match.

Tamar: You make solos for everybody?

Juliana: Yes. It's not solo from start to finish. It's material. I just make material for them.

Tamar: And then you split it up?

Juliana: Yes. They're not phrases. We work on sections, and usually duets and trios and quartets are basically just solos interfacing.

Tamar: So you get the essence of each person for real without diluting it.

Juliana: Exactly, and without creating a duet, with a capital D.

Tamar: Right. So you're making one plus one. You're not making two add up to less.

Juliana: Right.

Tamar: That actually makes a lot of sense. But what I'm saying is your sense of safety is in your composition, which makes it emotional to me.

Juliana: Safety?

Tamar: Your sense of like, I know what I'm doing.

Juliana: I know what I'm doing. These are the tools. Yes.

Tamar: I would almost say that your defense system is built by composition. You sort of sure up your sensibilities so they don't go all over the place, and there is something about that containing within a structure that makes me feel that you feel safe and then you can really explore and that's really why your composition sense to me feels emotional.

Juliana: Okay, I understand what you're saying.

Tamar: Because you depend on it to do...

Juliana: I push off of it. Yes.

Tamar: Watching your work after so many years -- it used to be that you looked for a usual moment to express what you were. You looked for some gesture or something almost abrasive or something that would cut through or was unique to you. It was a very dramatic kind of thing. But it looks to me now that that's more internalized and within the composition. There's more grist within the bodies themselves rather than within the relationships between people and that may come out of you doing solos to make larger compositions with them. Do you know what I'm saying?

Juliana: Absolutely. We've been doing a lot of scoring. Just working in rehearsal with different improvisation scores; doing some sort of Body Mind Centering®, some Authentic Movement, working with bone and skin and organs and blood, and working on how to move from those very singular places and integrating them, and integrating the body and understanding the difference between generating a kind of lower case vocabulary from that way of working as opposed to a more virtuosic vocabulary—with a capital V—which is the *developé*. I love using that kind of vocabulary. It's beautiful. It's not a vocabulary that is familiar to me really, but it's an interesting little tool.

Tamar: But still there's a very virtuosic sense of control in your work. Everything is very precise. Everything is very where it should be. Where it's suppose to be. And I like that all of the sudden you can shift things so quickly. Like on a dime your piece can change. There can be something aggressive happening and then something rather mysterious will happen, but because you sort of hold sway over your compositional elements so much, I think you can re-root and all of the sudden, it doesn't take you a long transition time to get somewhere.

Juliana: Right. It used to take a lot longer. Or I just got rid of the transitions all together.

Tamar: So it's more a layered sense. It's this layer then this layer.

Juliana: This is happening next to this, next to this, next to this, next to this. It's pretty rigorous. I don't have to explain it, which is true of much dance that is going on right now.

Tamar: So you wouldn't want to say what this piece is about?

Juliana: Right. I mean I can talk about it. It's certainly about the process of creating the movement and where I am as a choreographer and where we are as a group. You know, the name of the piece, *Discrete Body Dilemma*, is discrete like subtle, but also discrete like discrete mathematics: something that has a limit. Thinking about choreography as something that has a limit and structure. As opposed to something more improvisational that is coming from a more intuitive place. Not to say that choreography isn't coming from an intuitive place, but once you put it on a dancer something might get lost or they turn it into something of their own, which then doesn't become discrete anymore. It's about understanding what these boundaries are that I've been creating certainly. That's why the piece flips back and forth between something that's really recognizable and familiar and that you can own compositionally and something that's less glossy, something that's a little harder to grasp.

Tamar: Do you want to say something about why you started with the audience participation and what that meant within your piece?

Juliana: The space at The Chocolate Factory is so specific I wanted there to be a very, almost liturgical slow process of inviting the audience into the piece that wouldn't necessarily stay that way for the whole period, but I wanted to control or be fairly manipulative (chuckle) with where I wanted them eight minutes into the piece, which is sort of a random place to start anyway. It's almost as if we started in the middle of the piece. So I wanted them to sort of be soothed into the situation even though asking the audience to participate is actually fairly nerve-wracking I think for some people.

Tamar: And you had the musicians participate too?

Juliana: Yes, the musicians and then some planted people.

Tamar: You wanted to hold sway over the audience's viewing point.

Juliana: They [audience] were situated. The audience is viewing each other and the piece is, compositionally, sort of like a tennis match, a little bit. There's a lot of looking back and forth. Looking across at the audience. Watching the audience look at the piece. Watching people respond to different sections. Returning to your own body, looking at the piece, which is also happening within the piece. That metaphor is kind of taking place all over the space.

Tamar: Right. Do you have an idea; once they're seated and they are open to it, what senses do you want to open up for them? How do you want them to receive it? We walked from our seats. We crossed and we sat on the other side. And then from there what was your motivation in terms of what you wanted them to perceive?

Juliana: I don't think I had that desire. Or beyond that beginning moment I didn't want to have so much control over it. The piece began to do it. At that point it took over. I had never made a piece in this way, in terms of having the audience across from each other. It felt like I wanted to refocus them at the beginning, preemptively.

Tamar: That was very new for me, seeing your work go to that kind of place, when you were so conscious of the audience. You became a community within a community. Also, just the physical organization of the bodies walking puts us more in touch with the dancers full-bodied motion and consciousness. We were awaked to something.

The heart of the piece, where is it?

Juliana: It feels like the nervous system, the movement. It's all about the movement. It's about the back, about the ribs. It's about the back and the spine and that most of the movement and timing comes from some sort of articulation from the spine. I feel like that's where the content comes from as well. It is all about understanding the emotional system; that way of moving, that way of being sad, that way of being happy, that way of being sexual, that way of being angry. Violent. Shy. All of those emotional places come from spine. They are obviously connected to everywhere in the body—organs, bone and muscles—but the more that we generated movement, the more we understood what went together. How the sections went together, how to articulate the phrasing. Once we made those choices it became really clear. When you use your spine that much it's incredibly stimulating. It really brings you into a sharp focus. Where you are emotionally. I'm a huge back-bender. I love back bending in yoga. So I think that physically the piece is always riding that continuum, and structurally that's what's happening as well. Especially when we move into our voices, it sort of reaches a climax and it is climaxing for a very long time and then it sort of devolves into this other place. But the heart of it is the body and different places in the body for sure.

Tamar: So has it always been the spine?

Juliana: I think so. Certainly hips and spine. When I was doing gyro-tonics for the first time, I felt like wow! This is where I live.

Tamar: It's where / live. So Juliana is there anything that you would want to add. Just to shed more light on your process or the piece? Or where it's leading you?

Juliana: I'm excited to start something new. We are starting something new in March and I know I want to add some more dancers. I want to go deeper into the body. At the beginning of this process we started with almost a sort of fabricated sense of process. I thought oh, I want to work in a very structured way with improvisation. I want to start with set material. The dancers know we are going to work on set material for 20 minutes and without talking we are going to move into an improvisation, and then after the improvisation we are going to move back into working on set material. There were delineations between improvising and learning. My hope was that the learning and the moving from a more intuitive place were interfacing and becoming more aligned. And that feeling was a little fabricated at first. It just felt like, oh, this is what I think a process is.

Tamar: Your process is fascinating. The integrity of the composition being so supreme, it feels to me it's starting to be more about the body's sense of it's own composition as it will radiate out. It feels too like you are in a position to be shifting somewhere because you've been very, almost methodical about what you've approached in your work all along and the fact there's so many places you feel to move. It's really exciting.

Juliana: Thanks Tamar. Also, to be in an unknown place, to not know where it is going is a really great thing. A lot people talk about that. To not really know what you are doing.

Tamar: But you know so much. There is a whole encyclopedia inside you; all of your experiences.

Juliana: Right, but to be able to let that go. Those are wonderful tools that obviously are from watching so much dance. Learning about composition throughout the years and having these things to return to, a sort of arsenal of tools, but to let those go and to get to know them in a different way.

Tamar: It's really brave. It's always wonderful when you can cut across what is expected of you and what you fear to be the response to you. Once one can do that, you're really set free.

Juliana: Yeah well, that will be a while. (Laughs) Does anyone ever get over that?

Tamar: Yes!

Juliana: Have you gotten over that?

Tamar: Rght now yes. I sort of don't have the membership in the communities. The communities are more diverse and my membership has elapsed in certain communities and entered other ones. In my work I bring in other communities so that I don't feel hand in by expectation and can be my own source of inspiration.

Our work is defined in a sort of way. What is dance? What is choreography? What is improvisation? What are the systems that go out and explore those systems? Well, what if we get rid of all those systems and then we just go, what do we want to do? Then we have to ask, where do we fit in? It's like experiential anatomy for me. I don't know all the systems. I can't say, I know the system, now you go and find it in your body. I don't know the systems so I go, let's go here in

the body where you have your tattoo or behind your tattoo. Or I don't even know where to name it, but then it names itself and a lot of things happen. I feel like I have the courage within my own bodywork with the way I work, but then when you are setting something out, it's a big adventure about what boundaries you are actually allowing yourself to cross and what conventions are you *keeping* to be a part of the community?

Juliana: That's a great question. Absolutely.

Tamar: And if you recognize which of the conventions you are keeping and you agree to that, that's one thing. But if you don't know that you are keeping conventions then you might be a slave to them and there are maybe things you are not hearing or listening to in your sensibility. There are the downtown dance community conventions. There are the ballet conventions. There are all the conventions of body type. There are all of the conventions of technique, language and how we talk about dance, who talks about us in what languages and... This is about you!

A lot of what your pieces look like to me are sort of disassembled family groups. Almost dysfunctional. The real picture behind the picture. There are certain archetypal groupings that look like family photographs and, referring back to composition being emotional, sometimes when you hit *that*, it's a kind of a collective unconscious moment. So that's why it's almost aggressive and abrasive in some ways because it rubs up against what's supposed to be.

Juliana: I was just talking about in rehearsal that I feel like the act of choreographing or setting something is very performative. The dancers watching you create something, them learning, you watching them, you're all watching each other and you're all absorbing. There is something about that sense of authorship that gets kind of confusing. In terms of when do the performers take on, at what moment? For me, you have to integrate it immediately. Once you learn it, you integrate it immediately. Or at least for me, I want them to integrate it immediately so that we can start performing it immediately.

Tamar: Make it their own, right?

Juliana: Yes, make it their own, but make a choice right away. Right? You can learn something and just do it, but...

Tamar: Be active.

Juliana: Yes. Be really active in it. Unless you activate it, it's not a piece. Otherwise it just feels like crap. I felt very insecure over the years because my compositional sense or my movement sense can be very controlling, and I always worry that the dancers don't feel like they have a voice in it. Or that because I'm so specific and we spend such a long time getting something the way I want it, they don't feel like they have room within it, but they do. There's a tremendous amount of room I think *after* that choice has been made. But it is somewhere in the process that it's incredibly rigid. We work in that rigid way for a while and then it can expand after that point, and become alive.

Tamar: I don't ever demonstrate movement I kind of just tell them. I want you to start behind. It's behind your sternum. I want you to then drop down to the place between your shin and your calf. I give them a body script.

Juliana: Right. It's like moving from language to language or moving from one language to another language.

Tamar: Or it was before language.

Juliana: Yes, but no. You are telling them with your language how to move.

Tamar: I'm telling them where to move from and that is so specific, but their choices are still... by a millimeter to the right or the left, and then they'll tap into something else. I think what you're saying is you don't want to be the dictator of what they do.

Juliana: Well I do. (Laughs)

Tamar: You do.

Juliana: I do, but I...

Tamar: You want their energy.

Juliana: Right, I need them... I want them to feel a certain sense of freedom within it as well. The making of it is coming from them too.

Tamar: Well, the texturing of it.

Juliana: Right, and the inspiration of being next to them and knowing...

Tamar: You're making for them from them.

Juliana: Yes, from looking at them.

Tamar: And your idea of getting more dancers means more information that takes you in a different place.

Juliana: Yes and it also just means a visually a bigger idea.

Tamar: When I first met you, you were working with very large groups. And I kept thinking what a lot of responsibility.

Juliana: Like twelve [dancers].

Tamar: It was almost like marching bands of people. It was *lots* of people. And you probably had to rely on composition and a sense of organization. Otherwise, what would all of those twelve people do with 18 year old you.

Juliana: And it's all shapes, lines, colors, and all of those formal aspects are real. They lend themselves to reality in some way. That's the beginning. Now it can go further.

Tamar: Right, and hopefully you don't have to *prove* yourself as much as a leader. When your young and you are in charge of so many people you have to come to rehearsal and know what you are doing. That can get in the way.

Juliana: Now in rehearsal I can definitely let them know I don't know what I'm doing and they are pretty generous in those moments.

Tamar: Good dancers.

Juliana: Yes.