

Justine Lynch in conversation with Beth Gill

Beth: I'm going to read these last 2 sentences, just as a place to start. You wrote:

"Without trying to recreate old images of ritualistic movement, my aim is rather to use the powerful structure of ancient alchemical paradigms to free the individual artists involved. To transform the energetic light in the spaces we inhabit between rehearsal and performance, to treatment and life."

So my first question is, how long have you been working on this particular project?

Justine: I'd say it came to me in...you know it's still coming, but I'd say it was September of '07.

Beth: As an idea?

Justine: Yeah. As the point. The point itself. It got clear to me that this was the point I was going to do. And then it had a little bit of a life force underneath it and we did the Judson. And that was a really big learning experience for me about many things, which I could probably talk about a long time. And then we took a break and then we all went up to Maine the Labor Day weekend. And that's when the inception of it started again.

Beth: So it's a timeline.

Justine: Yeah, if you think of it like birthing something. It's like I had the idea that I wanted to have a baby in September in 2007. I think I probably got pregnant Labor Day weekend, and now, a couple of weeks ago, I was completely obsessed with the idea of what crowning is... like when the baby's head comes, you know, is visible. And everything has to relax in order for something to happen without trauma. That's where I'm at right now.

Beth: That's beautiful. That's really great. Will you talk a little bit about when you say "the point," what that is for you?

Justine: I've been thinking about that a lot. I think everyone who makes a dance, in a way, there's a point for it.

Beth: A point for making a dance?

Justine: The dance is a point.

Beth: The dance is a point.

Justine: Some more well intentioned or more attentioned than others. This one is an acupuncture point because that's the language that I speak. So the acupuncture point is here, below the nose. And it is towards the end of a whole meridian that runs up the back and ends right here. The meridian itself is called the governing vessel. And this point, middle of man, it's the point that is connected to the features of the face, because this is what makes us up as individuals. And because it's above on the body rather than below, it's also connected to heaven. They talk about heaven in Chinese medicine. It can be related to a lot of things like what's bigger than you, what's outside your control. Sometimes it's more refined, more divine, more ethereal, less tangible. Some people might call it your higher power. But it doesn't have to have a religious connotation. Heaven could just be the part of us, or the part of the world that is not able to be dissected or held tangibly.

Beth: So then when you say that the point of this dance piece is this acupuncture point... inside of acupuncture to address that point is to do what for the body?

Justine: The points have many different names, so I chose middle of man, but it has a couple of other names. When I did the Judson, instead of choosing one, I used two. I called it middle of man ghost market. And after that performance realized I did not actually want to invoke ghost market. It's not that I won't necessarily ever do a ghost point, but this piece is not that. So when you're treating the point on a body, there are many ways and reasons you may use that point. It has a direct connection to the uterus. It has a direct connection to the diaphragm. To the earth element. It's centering. It has a relationship to this point up here, which is the north star. And I had the north star in the piece, Ghost Market, but she dropped out. So there's no longer that role and the piece has become more precise. The point is fascinating to me because, as I've heard my teacher say many times, that if you could only use one point on the body, you might choose this one because it's got so many different confluences. I was explaining it to a client of mine, and he said "oh, it's like the Fulton Street train station."

Beth: I loved what you revealed in saying that you had the north star in the piece and then she dropped out. You know the first word that came up for me when I was watching the Judson piece was "archetypes."

Justine: We have roadmaps in life and if you go a little way down a path, hopefully someone else has gone down that path and you follow a little bit, until you find the creative turn that can make it yours. I've worked pretty deeply with some of these long healing treatments that have to do with taking the time and the focus to slow down enough to let things go deep enough for something to change, right? So in these treatments there are roles. Everybody has a different job to do. So I was looking to have people have different perspectives from which they entered the piece.

Beth: It seems like the performers actually have roles that can be physically mapped on the body. Is this an intention?

Justine: Some are more corporeal like a connection to the crossing point of a meridian, others less the body, but more the qualities of the point like yang rising, the image of the cock crowing at dawn. I'm a little bit of a literalist; I guess sometimes I can go sort of simple. So I had Tom and Gus with these bright colors and these feathers and all of this representing the rising of Yang, which is what happens in the piece.

Beth: Yeah, it's beautiful. It becomes a culmination and visualization of all of these ideas.

Justine: Sometimes the performers are more archetypal to the roles or prisms of what a practitioner does, like attending to the space, the vibration many are coming from the way this dance wanted to be made, the people themselves and what they bring to the possibility of the point activating onstage. Ultimately, it is sort of nuts to be trying this, but what I would like is for the audience to receive the point. Meaning...

Beth: Like as they would if they were receiving a treatment?

Justine: I guess there would be no way for it to be as they would, but the answer would be yes, as much as possible, for the way the point needs to be received by each person differently in that moment in time. Ultimately my goal is not just to portray images of the point, but to create an environment where through performance the energetics are specific and directed... you know there's a long long history of healing performance, or ritualized healing that has performative aspects and that's been going on forever. For as long as people have been together. It's sort of like midwifery. It's a hot topic now, but only because we lost it for the last couple of hundred years.

Beth: Do you experience contemporary dance or performance as a healing?

Justine: Sometimes. I think healing is such a bizarre word and it's a good one, but it can mean so many things. I saw Karole Armitage and it was a treatment for me, definitely. Both uncomfortable and strangely exciting... it had really great musicians who were performing. Talibam knocked my socks off. I guess my definition of healing is probably bigger than...

Beth: No, that's kind of what got me excited in the conversation just now is that I realize that you are approaching performance as a form of healing and I'm just not sure if I really ever considered it in that way.

Justine: I think we started to take things a part a while ago, and that's really interesting. Cunningham took things apart. He was using chance, rather than divination - he used the I Ching. The way science has gone, it's been looking to take things apart. Now physics is actually looking to put things together and make relationships. What's the connection? I think that people go into dance for reasons that usually have something to do with a connection to what's bigger than themselves or a connection between themselves and those things. And then we start taking things apart and use our minds a lot. Then there's a lot of hierarchy and that is all sort of necessary in this day and age... I guess what interests me right now is "What are the relationships? What are the things that are connected?" It started when I was at a bit of a crisis point. I wasn't sure if I was going to continue dancing or not. I was doing this acupuncture stuff and I was getting into working with what it is to be alive. What it is to be able to stand with somebody in their own work towards who they are, towards their destiny, towards why the hell they are on this planet. It's really interesting and not just interesting, but –

Beth: - important.

Justine: Important and rare and fascinating. All these things so...

Beth: I can totally understand why dance would fall into an area of question that felt like a crisis because it's really difficult sometimes to understand the importance of dance in comparison to other things in the world that feel more necessary in an immediate kind of way.

Justine: I think you're right. I think again it's a way that we look to separate what's important and what's not important in this world with war and starvation. There are all kinds of things we can prioritize. I think there's also something about not just following an idea of what's important, but actually following what it is I'm doing here on this planet. And I'm definitely a dancer, there's no question about it.

Beth: I was really curious about where you were going when you were talking about encountering a crisis moment about dance.

Justine: It was really through being treated in acupuncture something shifted in me. How could I possibly continue in this dance community the way that I've been doing it? You know, it's not really how.

Beth: Is it why?

Justine: Yeah, or what? What am I? We are all placed here with a specific tao, or destiny, to manifest in my understanding of it. And the problems happen when we walk away from that. That's when things get harder and harder. It's sort of a simple thing, like "What is it that closes me down?" I was thinking about this yesterday. I think there's always this critical point right before a show where choreographers tend to end task. Where all of a sudden the velocity of the treatment goes up and it's almost hard to breathe. Things become critical. It doesn't matter how I talk to you, as long as you get over into that corner...you know. It starts to get like an ER room. I'm really interested in how to work with that energy without destruction. And without losing –

Beth: - what you've been building.

Justine: What you've been building. Which I think is common.

Beth: So how have you been building with the performers inside of rehearsal?

Justine: Well, we've met a number of times as a group over the past nine months since "conception" up in Maine. Some with Gus Mergins's son Ansis who is in the piece, but only in the beginning, he's two years old. And we had all kinds of instruments. And he led us in making these soundscapes...he did all kinds of stuff with that. Tom [McCauley] recorded that and like many parts of the process there was a weaving in of that moment becoming part of the force of the dance. The music Tom has made is full of this experience and expansion. A lot of our initial meetings were less about making something and more about opening possibilities and really watching were the light falls, where the sound opens, who shows up, who doesn't. In a way it feels to me like there needs to be a mess in order for it to get clear for me. How to manifest it because I have all these wonderful ideas but the truth of it is that there are these people on stage that need to get from here to there, not all of them are dancers, in fact very few of them are.

Beth: There is such an urge for me to demystify what I'm imagining is your process, because as a choreographer myself I can engage in a very straightforward process sometimes. You know, like where I am using direction to manifest an idea and sometimes it's as simple as a visual idea. And there are other times where it becomes more complex. But I sense by the nature of the ideas that you are working with, it creates this mystery for me about what the actual process is like.

Justine: I think it is easy to demystify on that level. As far as how I build material, I often use what I've been doing for 15 years with Neil [Greenberg]. I'll improvise and then I'll learn some of it and work with it. That's sort of a way that I know, after many many years to get to the moving body and the timing in me that is not from my mind. Right?

Beth: Got it.

Justine: But I hit a bit of a block a couple of weeks ago where I felt like everything I was trying to do was pushing out to the periphery and to the most extreme amount of dancing I can do or the most...trying to move everyone into the space with my force. So after working with that and taking with Laura [Barnard] who is the person I work with as far as these deeper acupuncture treatments) who is mentoring me in this piece and the energetics of it. She reminded me that the piece needs me to do "the point" when I'm in rehearsal and that if I can be that smoothness of earth or that connection, I'll call it, like a sweetness, then everyone else will be affected by that. And so I went into the studio and I've been running up against how to enter that space in the beginning. It was still the same process of improvisation and then meticulous learning but it was a completely different level that I got to after working on the internal aspects of what I was moving from. I don't know if that makes sense?

Beth: It makes perfect sense to me. I feel the work that I make is often a clear representation of myself in a period of time, whether that's with the intention that I am clearly putting myself at that moment into the piece or it happens in more subconscious ways.

When I was watching the DVD I was really enjoying all of the color in Judson and then, assuming it was in The Kitchen and I started to consider those two different spaces and wondered how you're approaching that issue ... just in terms of color.

Justine: I think that it's funny that you ask me that because, just by you asking that question, I got why I've been veering towards more lightness, more simplicity in design. I think it has something to do with entering into that darkness, into that space that is so vast and what I would call incredibly Yin. It's incredibly cool and dark and more mysterious which is exciting to me. I've always imagined this piece there, but it's almost the opposite basically of Judson.

Beth: Yeah, definitely. My experience of The Kitchen a lot of the time is that I really feel its malleability as a space and sometimes that I can experience optical illusion in that space in a way. Because of its dimension, its color, and the affect of light, the way I view the body and objects and things in the space is very particular and not always my experience of the way I view bodies and objects in day to day life. Whereas, if I'm sitting in Judson I don't feel that dramatic of a separation in the way that I'm actually looking at things. I love that about The Kitchen. Are you affecting or changing the space?

Justine: We're not going to be changing where the audience sits. I made a conscious choice that I didn't actually want to ask anything of the audience. If they are the guest, or the people receiving the treatment, I want to allow them to be themselves, to be comfortable and to take it for how they want to take it. So that was a choice, but I am working with the space outside of the actual theater and how people enter. I'm working with the people involved, how involved they are. I'm working with the people involved in the piece, the people involved in the other aspects of getting into a theater. I've been thinking about the bathrooms and what's out there and how it comes in. Because it feels to me like everything is going to converge. It's going to hopefully do something kaleidoscopic or shifting so that it goes in dimensions that I'm not controlling and that ultimately converge.

Beth: Yeah. For me that is the power of performance a lot of the time - the sense of how it draws together so many different people and so many experiences into what feels like a single moment. So I do think the idea of converging is very present inside of performance, which is really powerful.

Justine: You know I'm working with this woman, Johanna Burke, who is a master with visuals. She was somebody who did the windows at Bergdorf Goodman for many years. The detail that she is able to hold is unbelievable. So in working with her it's like my senses have been opened to what is possible in terms of paying attention to detail.

Beth: I was thinking at Judson that the costumes were really effective and detailed.

Justine: It's one thing to imagine, and it's another thing to actually be able to make a paper suit, that's like little leaves of paper. How do you do that? I learned. It's rare to actually be able to do that with somebody. One of the things that I hadn't really expected is that we're actually using some of the artists' [performers'] work in the piece and it's because it has to do so closely with their involvement in the piece. For example, Paige [Martin] is starting out doing a solo that she did at the Kitchen many years ago that was her lying with her legs up against the back wall of The Kitchen. It's this beautiful dance with her legs getting her high heels off. And that's going to be part of this piece as a thread from that connection between the two of us and her connection to The Kitchen. There are other elements like that happening. Sarah Paulson and Holly Faurot are going to be ending the piece with a little snippet of something that they did at this gallery space in Bushwick, where they were using rocks, pushing them. That I didn't expect, those kinds of elements are expanding.

Beth: For some reason when I was going in to make the last thing I made in The Kitchen I was thinking constantly about my first experience that I ever had in The Kitchen, as an audience member watching Paige's work. And I was sitting all the way house left, and I remember that a huge part of my experience was peeking over the side and watching her from above play this drum. I love the way you're allowing those moments inside of your work.

Justine: It's hard to know how those things come through, the way you see a space for the first time. It's like that's how it's born for you and then you're putting your stamp into it in a way. I was in there this summer before that Labor Day weekend I described to you. I was in there alone for maybe 6 hours at a pop, just walking the space and becoming friends with it in a different way because I've performed there a number of times and it has a certain feeling for me. There were

just work lights. It was almost like it was undressed. In the middle of summer it was freezing in there, it was pretty amazing to spend that much time without any real plan. I wasn't close enough to actually be rehearsing. It was about just stepping into the space, looking and feeling and dancing in something. It's a pretty magical place.