

Kimberly Bartosik

in conversation with Heather Olson

Heather Olson: What are you working on in your new piece?

Kimberly Bartosik: You mean, what kind of concepts and issues I'm working on? Kind of background?

HO: You could start with that, yeah.

KB: The piece is called *home in the neon heat*, and the title is taken from a Milosz poem, *Treatise on Poetry*, that he wrote after World War II. It's a poem in four parts, and it's a line from one of the parts. The poem is a kind of meditation on the loss of culture in Poland during WWII. It traces the deaths of some of the major Polish poets. It's a reflection and mourning of this loss of culture. It's a very beautiful poem. So, I took this line, and when I started working on this piece, it was right before the elections in 2004. I was having a lot of political feelings, like everybody. Once Bush won the election, it changed my body somehow. I felt so upset, and so betrayed, in a way. So, I went into the studio and had this idea from this poem, and I was reflecting on the nature of where we are as a society right now, and the way - especially that election in particular - highlighted the divisions in our country: political, social, economic, and this feeling of living in a place where there's lots and lots of fragmentation among people, among belief systems. In a bigger scope of things, definitely that's happening with the world, also. So, I started working on this very basic idea of, not so much fragmentation, but things being fractured, things being cracked, not whole, boundaries being damaged, in a way. That idea of fractured landscapes was the original idea for this piece, and that really informed the kind of movement that I was working on. Also just the kind of anger that I had in my body. I started making these big, big movements that were actually too big for me, because of this frustration that I was feeling.

HO: I was going to ask you about finding a movement vocabulary. I did watch the video of your work-in-progress, and I was very intrigued by the movement vocabulary. So, would you mind expanding a little on what you're saying now about how you found that movement?

KB: Yeah. It really came out of what I was feeling. I was just so pissed off. It was actually a couple of things; it wasn't simply that. It was this feeling of being so frustrated at being an American citizen, or not wanting to be an American citizen, and also a totally different issue, which was a kind of reaction to my last piece, which was in 2004 in the spring, and was a much more physically lyrical piece, softer around the edges. And the whole piece had a feeling of warmth, and it was in the springtime, and it was really hot. As much as I really loved that piece, I was reacting against it, and I wanted to make movement that didn't have transition, and that wasn't as kinetically pleasing. Then, also this idea of wanting to make something that was bigger than my own body. I think that's something that every choreographer comes up against at some point: being so frustrated with the limitations of one's own structure, that you just want to try to move beyond it. The people I'm working with are big people, so I've tried to really make things that stretch their bodies. That combined with the idea of these non-organic putting together of phrases where things didn't necessarily have to make sense—a lot of stopping and starting, a lot of abrupt change of direction. So that was it, and this kind of base emotion that was coming out of me. In fact, as I was working on it, there was a lot of other stuff going on in my life, and my body just started falling apart. When I did the first showing of it at Judson

in February, 2005, after I'd been working maybe 4 months on it, I had to take myself out of it, because my back was a mess, and I couldn't really dance for a while. I think part of that was just pushing my own form to this place that couldn't sustain itself. But, that was actually really good because I could step outside then, and see what I was making, and that was really helpful at that time.

HO: Could you also talk about finding a structure of the movement? You said the words fragmented and fractured... I guess talk about how that influences your structure.

KB: Yeah, I'm thinking of that really in terms of space, definitely phrasing, but more space than anything else. So, in the first excerpt of this piece that I showed at that first Judson, I really dealt with different planes of space—foreground, midground and background—and really dividing the space up in a “perspectival” way, if that's a word... so that certain things would come into focus at different times, and the space didn't seem whole. I wanted it to seem like it existed in different chunks. It wasn't like one single landscape; it had these different parts to it. Space is my biggest thing that I work with. When I started working on the piece again—I took a break and went back to it—I started thinking about space again, and how I could fracture the space by bringing audience people into the space as well. So, I experimented with that a little bit this past year at DTW. That idea of fracturing really comes from space, and also from time because I wanted to, just to repeat myself a little bit, make these non-organic rhythmic phrases or sections that didn't necessarily have a really satisfying beginning and end, but they just kind of happened. And then try to put them together, which is really hard, because you want to make things make sense, and transition into everything. But I keep trying to take transition out of things.

HO: Of course, going back to your original thought of the political turmoil in this country, it makes a lot of sense. When you say that space is a major thing that you work on, do you mean just in this piece, or in general?

KB: In general, definitely in general. I really experimented with that in the last piece I did at Danspace, where I really made the piece for the space and looked at the architecture of the space, not necessarily anything radical, but just to kind of give the audience a view of the space that maybe was different for them. I used a lot of different corners, and a little bit of the balcony, and a little bit of the lobby area, just to give different points in space different weight.

HO: I want to get back to that in a second, but I want to knock off a couple of more questions about the piece, and then we can talk a little bit more broadly. I wanted you talk about the title a little bit. You said that you found it from a poem. Is there anything else you want to say about the title?

KB: It just jumped out at me, and the more I thought about it, the word “home” was definitely relevant to what I was dealing with. And then this idea of “neon heat,” because I'm definitely reflecting on war, and all of those major things we're going through these days. I kept having these images of hot deserts, or surreal, really hot places. The title came first. I didn't have these ideas before I chose the title. I started reflecting after I chose it. Then, Rick [Murray], who's doing the lights, which is a major part of this piece actually. He's actually in the piece in a way; he and his lights are players in this world. He's using a lot of fluorescents that are neon-like, and also trying to think of the space in this heated way, yet, it's cold too. There's a hot, red, heat, and then a cold heat.

HO: Do you want to talk a little more about a) your collaboration with Rick, and b) your collaboration with the dancers? Why did you choose these specific people?

KB: Sure. I'll talk about Rick first. It's interesting. We've worked together on all of my

projects, but I feel like this is our first real collaboration. He's so brilliant, that he can just come out and light a piece, and we don't even really talk about it. It's always great and magical, but for this piece... This was really interesting, we did a photo shoot back in December, and in one of the photographs he's actually in the photograph holding up a light, and there are these dancers doing these weird things in front of him. The photographer and I looked at him and we said, "Oh, that's so interesting to see him there as part of this thing that's happening. He's so outside of it, but he's also really part of it." So, I started thinking about that, and I thought, "Well, I want him and his craft, his lights, to be a part of this piece." So we started thinking about using his manipulation of his lighting fixtures as a way to further fracture the space, or further change the space. There are a lot of sections in this piece now, where he just comes out and rearranges the space with his lighting fixtures. So, it's not so much about just lighting the piece. I didn't want it to be about his lights coming down from somewhere. I wanted to see the things that were making this happen, and I wanted him to be actually manipulating the space with them. So, he's very nervous that he has to be on stage. We experimented a little with it this past January at DTW, where he just came out and placed some lights in the space, and I was really excited to feel him come out and do that. It was such a disruption, and yet the piece just kind of continues, and then you deal with this thing that he puts out there. It's really exciting what we're working on together now; it definitely feels like a real collaboration. It's really cool.

With the dancers, one woman, Derry Swan, this is my third project with her, and she was a friend of mine when I danced with Merce Cunningham. I've always loved her dancing, and I always wanted to work with her because I felt that there was something in her work with Merce that wasn't being totally realized about what her body and her expression could do. We started working together, and we've had a really wonderful experience in the past few years. The one man, Daniel Squire, this is our second project-- he's amazing. He's also a Cunningham dancer and then Cedric Andrieux is a Cunningham dancer too. Cedric is a very interesting mover, and he's very smart, too. I wanted to work with him. Then, more recently, about two months ago, I asked another wonderful young woman to come in. Her name is Tara Lorenzen, and she's actually replacing me in the piece. I'm not actually in the piece now...

HO: (commiserating) Yeah... I know...

KB: Do you want me to tell you about how I work with them, or...?

HO: Well, I'm always curious, selfishly. Since I'm more of a dancer than a choreographer, as of now, I'm always interested in why people decide to work with the dancers that they do. So that was my little question. You could talk a little bit about your process of forming this piece in the studio with them, if you want to.

KB: Yeah, it's not terribly complex. Just to go back one step to why I chose these particular people. I've always had this interest in working with people that I've seen dance a lot, and seen something that I want to pull out of them. That was my impulse with Derry Swan; that was definitely my impulse with Daniel too, who's a very complex dancer and just fascinating. You just never know what's going to come out of him, not in an improvisational way, but just what he will do with a movement; it's always a surprise. And I love that sense of knowing somebody, but you don't really know them. You give them this other stuff, and there's this whole other thing that comes out of them, and it's really, really exciting for me. This group of people, I chose very much for that. In the studio with them, it's different for each of them because they have different schedules. For instance, with Cedric, I work a little bit more collaboratively than I do with Derry and Daniel, just because of their comfort levels. With Derry and Daniel, I have most of the movement prepared, and then I work with them on it, and then we talk about it, and then we structure it. I don't really know what I want to do with it until I see it on them. With Cedric,

we really start more with an idea, we talk about the idea, and then we work on movement. With the new woman, who's quite a bit younger than everyone else, and she doesn't have as much experience, so it's kind of a combination of both, less about the ideas, actually, more just about the movement.

HO: Do you have a preference? Do you see yourself as a choreographer going more towards starting with ideas? Do you have preference in how you like to work?

KB: I can't move without an idea. I have to have an idea before I start even creating any kind of material because I wouldn't have any idea what to make... if I didn't have an idea.

HO: Ah, Interesting.

KB: I'm a terrible improver. I can't just go into a studio and move around. I just stand there until I know what I want to do.

HO: Intellectual.

KB: I never thought of that, but it's true that my mind is always the first thing that works for me, and then my body kicks in. I'm not fast. I'm so slow, painfully slow.

HO: So, now I just have a general question. This idea of why make a dance? This dance happens to be about some big political issues. Do you ever think about "Why express myself through choreography rather than some other form?"

KB: Yeah, yeah. I didn't for a long time. I started out my own creative life by writing. I wanted to be a creative writer, and I started that when I was still with Merce's company. And I was so thrilled to be working in a form that I felt had fewer limitations—just going back to the idea of always being bombarded with the limitations of one's physical self. I didn't feel that with my mind. I felt that with my mind I could really go far. Writing is still very important to me, actually, although, I tend to do a lot more critical writing than creative writing. After I left Merce, I worked with Wally Cardona for a few years, and I still had no choreographic interest at all. It wasn't until I left Wally that all this stuff started coming up for me. Similar to the way that I'm interested in dancers for what hasn't been discovered about them, I felt like I had to explore some ideas that I felt hadn't been tapped into in me—in my body, in my mind—that the choreographers I had worked with so far hadn't asked of me. So that was kind of my first impulse. It wasn't to make a dance, really. It was that I felt there was something that I really needed to explore in myself. It was really slow for me. I started out making a solo. Then I made a duet with Derry, and then I made this trio with these other people, and I did some other projects on the side, but I never feel the impulse to make a dance. That never comes up for me. It's more that I feel that I have to either express something or communicate something, and movement seems to be the form that works for me now. My first two pieces were heavily influenced by video. There was very little movement in them. It was mostly video images, and a little bit of movement. I've gotten more and more into movement being the main thing, but I never really think of myself as making a dance. It's so funny.

HO: It's more just making expression?

KB: Just making a piece of art, and it happens to be with movement. I know that the next project may be something else. I'm kind of a clandestine visual artist wannabe. Not that I've never done anything in visual art, but I've always wanted to, again, not deal with the limitations of my body. (Laughs) I look at these words, and I'm like, "You could go on forever..."

HO: It's very interesting to hear you say that, having come from Cunningham. To be a

Cunningham dancer, you have to be so physical, and incredibly virtuosic. So, it's a little bit shocking to me to hear you say that you have to deal with physical limitations.

KB: (Laughs.) All the time.

HO: It's interesting.

KB: I mean, Merce's work is about that too. Merce's work is about always being faced with what's really impossible, because what he asks of you is pretty impossible, and then you have to figure out a way to do it. That's why his work, when it's really out there, people are so exposed because they are on the edges of themselves, and they are pushing themselves really far. There's never a comfort level. So, you spend enough years always not necessarily looking at what your body can do, but what your body can't do, and I just keep wanting to not have to look at what it can't do anymore.

HO: Did you ever feel like you were reacting? When you started making your own work, was there ever an issue, having been a Cunningham dancer, trying to... I guess, talk about the transition from being this well-known dancer to becoming a choreographer or artist, however you want to look at it.

KB: Well, there's definitely when I was with Merce, I felt that there wasn't... He's such an overwhelming presence in the world of dance, and he's such a master structuralist, that I thought, "Why do anything else? He's doing it all." Of course that was... I think he's brilliant and everything, but that was a very narrow way of thinking. I definitely had that mindset though, and when I suddenly realized that I had some real interest in exploring this art for myself, at that point it was a reaction not just to Merce, but to Wally also, because I had a really close relationship with Wally, and I felt that I needed to do totally what I hadn't done with either one of them. Every step I took in the first few pieces, I would ask myself, "Does this feel familiar? Have I done this?" And I would stop if I had. I would be like, "Oh, I can't use that. No, I can't use that." That's why I'm really slow in making stuff. I wasn't identifying myself as, "Oh, I'm not a dancer. I'm going to be someone who makes pieces instead." That's been happening really recently, definitely with this piece, because I've been much more rigorous in asking myself very specific questions and giving myself very specific problems to work on in this piece. I've realized that I've kind of changed now from being this dancer-person to being the person really in charge, and the person making the decisions. It's been ok, because it's really been over a period of time. I'm still in denial that I'm a choreographer at all because it's just too hard to do it, and so every piece is my last piece. It's like everybody else. Every piece is my last piece, until someone offers me the opportunity to do another piece, and then I say, "Of course, I'll do it." It's this thing that just keeps going on.

HO: I think that was really great. Do you have anything else that you want to put out there to the world? I don't mean to pressure you... anything to wrap it up?

KB: I think the only thing I would say is just regarding the project that I'm working on now *home in the neon heat*, because it's the most mature project that I've worked on, and, I don't know if you sense this as a dancer sometimes, but sometimes you do a piece and you feel that you've gotten older - in a good way... in a really good way.

HO: Absolutely I've felt that.

KB: There's some shift, and that's what I've definitely felt in this piece. It's been really interesting because, while I've stayed with the original concept of these fractured landscapes and where all this movement came from, it's become this whole other thing, where I'm exploring these issues through these other ways in, and understanding how complex making a choreographic work can be, which is really great and exciting. I think

that's also been happening in the past few months when I've taken myself out, and I can see. I don't have to worry about the limitations of how I can't do anything. (Laughs.) I guess that's one thing I've been reflecting on a lot. I feel really grateful to have had this opportunity. It feels like a really transitional moment in a way.

HO: Cool!

KB: It's cool, yeah.

HO: That's really great. Thank you so much, Kimberly.

KB: You're so welcome.

HO: It was a pleasure.