

Molissa Fenley

in conversation with Tere O'Connor

Tere O'Connor: Okay, I'm sitting here with Molissa Fenley, and I want to interview you on this occasion because you say you are doing your work—can you say where you are doing your work at?

Molissa Fenley: At the DUMBO White Wave Festival, the first week in November, on an evening with other choreographers, and I'm performing two pieces.

Tere: I'm going to go right into some of the things. I go see a lot of work—I think you do, too—and I see that one of the things that is, maybe mistakenly, being called 'contemporary' is to not move anymore. I'm still interested in any kind of range of no movement or a lot of movement. I think all of that can be part of contemporary content. I think you are doing that. You know, I've seen your work since I was really young—and we're not that much older than each other, but you started working before I did, so I always looked up to what you were doing.

I'd like to talk about a couple of aspects of it, and just kind of let you freely talk. I talked to you about it in the studio the other day, about the gestures thing, and how they are so—I call it 'runic'—or how they are...

Molissa: ...almost like an alphabet.

Tere: Like an alphabet! But an unreadable one, one that doesn't want me to read it. So there's both the 'plastic arts' of it that I'm looking at—it's visual—and the internal thing that's going on in you as a contemporary person. You know? And sometimes, in the earlier days, dressed in *really* cutting edge fashion items, these blendings of contemporary and something really primitive. I've always been really interested in that. I see it as a long continuum in your work, and I would like you to talk about what you think about that—anything from any points of view.

Molissa: Okay. Well, I think runic is a really good word for it, because in a sense, there's a kind of feeling of magic that's involved in that gesturing. The gesturing evolved really early on in my career, probably my last year of college when I was at Mills, where I became really interested in an Egyptian hieroglyphic-type of profile work—an archaic type of style that then, as I started working on it, became morphed into the three-dimensionality of the torquing of the torso, which became a trademark, being in a position and then torquing and spinning out of it really fast. The body and the arms would often be initiating that force, I started codifying that more and more as time went on.

Another thing about it was having grown up in Nigeria, West Africa, and having not come to the United States until I started college—so I was sixteen. I lived here until I was six, but then my real formative years were in a third world country. When I think back to my childhood, or when I just close my eyes and think about the imagination of that period in time in my life, often very alone—we lived sort of out and away from other people, so I was always by myself in the afternoons after school—and remember sort of having this kind of language that I devised for myself and my dog...

Tere: (laughs) That's great!

Molissa: It was this sign language thing with my dog. In a funny way, that's sort of been incorporated in as well, as a knowledge that the upper body is so informed, and so communicative. Then, seeing so much of Yoruban dance as a young child, the upper body is just, like, you know, gesturing all the time and rhythmic, and often in counterpoint to what the

lower body is doing. The lower body is often transporting the body through space, and the upper body is doing all this akimbo sort of stuff, that then is a language as well.

Tere: So, it's a layering of these things.

Molissa: It's a layering of that, and then, as I said, codifying it even further as I went into my career here. I was very interested in Balinese dance, Indian dance, mudra. I was never interested in the idea of learning specifically what those mudras signified, because I thought that was really not right—you just can't take from a culture...

Tere: No.

Molissa: Right? And you see people do that.

Tere: Yes, they do, and that's a really interesting subject matter.

Molissa: But seeing what was going on with the hands—particularly because in Western dance you don't really have the hands as being almost, you know, like a fan, or this very extreme curve that can place...

Tere: Like the Javanese dance.

Molissa: Right. And that's so expressive that, I just fell in love with that. And that became part of the language as well. So, all of these things are part of it. And then as with the making of each dance, I tried to dig deeper into what that language is, and finding things that are specific for a specific dance. For instance, that piece you saw the other day ...

Tere: Can you say what that was called?

Molissa: Oh, yeah, sorry. That piece is called *Dreaming Awake*.

Tere: And it was to a Philip Glass score.

Molissa: Yeah, a Philip Glass score that has two lives to it—it can be done as a solo or as a trio performed with two of my dancers, Ashley Brunning and Cassie Mey. So, in the making of it, I made sure that the language that is chosen for that piece is very endemic to it and not from anything else. The expression of the language within that dance gets started and evolved and goes to some kind of—not necessarily fruition—but some kind of other...

Tere: Other place, yeah.

Molissa: Yeah, that gets explored and dealt with.

Tere: I can really relate to what you're saying, and I think it's good for an audience to see because I could think of an audience member saying, 'well, it looks similar to the other dances.' But I know something about being in a really micro-place, and finding the enormity of choices within that place, you know? Because I do think you have maybe a style, but I don't think it's a place of stopping for you; I think it's a place... it's generative for you.

Molissa: Yes, it's very true. It's a place I always cull from, a place like a reservoir that is present and I can always go in there and dig something out. And when I do, I try to propel it into this new form, into another form. And often that involves either a timing issue or a spatial issue. I'm really interested in how dance is situated in space. When I was working as a soloist for so many years, that was really the whole premise—this individual in space—and what does that say

about our culture, what does that say about dance itself or the individual. It's taking a stand, taking a position.

Tere: Do you think you were trying to... Where there inferences being made, or was it completely just a projection-field for you—when you were in that place, from your point of view?

Molissa: From my point of view, it was really about taking a stand of some sort, depending on where a work would be performed. Like in Japan, for instance, there was a time when a woman by herself onstage was unheard of. Whereas in India, a woman alone onstage is like, well, yes, why would you ever want anyone else onstage with you?

Tere: Yes! Exactly. right, right. That's really interesting.

Molissa: And then in Nigeria, a person would not stand out alone, a person would always be a part of a group. That collective space is always very present. So, to work as a soloist all that time was really a deepening of an emotional expression of a person standing alone. But emptied—I mean, I think it was never just me, Molissa Fenley, standing there. It was me as some kind of iconographic representation of a solo human being. And I think I was really quite androgynous at that point in my life, and I was really interested in that. It was like, this wasn't necessarily a man, this wasn't necessarily a woman, this was a person at large, within the space. I learned a lot from that whole period.

Tere: Yeah, I think it's basically an extrapolation of a basic root metaphor of dance—the human figure is used to be projected upon. I mean, you can't necessarily be as specific as you can in a narrative realm, so the human figure becomes this kind of adhesive for all of the suggestions that it makes coming from the minds of the viewer. I feel like that was very evocative in those solo works.

Molissa: And then also, when you think of ancient art, it's the sculpture that really exists overtime. I've been very interested in ancient sculpture. Sometimes, in periods of my life, I would just go to the museums and take those stands—particularly the Asian sculpture, the top body is going this way, and the hips are going one way and the legs are going another way, and it's like the body is a river, a flowing object, and to me that's a tie-in. Cycladic art I absolutely adore—these really iconic, graphic positions of the arms, particularly, or of the body just being one entity.

Tere: Can you tell me what that brings you, when you go there and relate to them? Because the other day I was talking to you about the relationship of what I saw as 'runic' with the temporal setting that you set up, which comes from a kind of twentieth-century knowledge, certainly—and relative to a lot of twentieth-century music—but also this idea of continuum.

Molissa: Yes.

Tere: Maybe a post-minimalist look at time. How do those relate? I don't know if you know the answer to that—I think it's something you are working on. Because if something is...if you are standing still...when you stand still, is it electrifying? Does it generate forward movement through time somehow for you? Or, what do you think about that?

Molissa: Do you remember a work called *Bardo*?

Tere: I do! About the forty-nine days after the death...

Molissa: *Bardo* had a lot of stillness in it, and yet within that stillness there was the sense that this metabolic body is continuing, and our sense of watching is continuing. It's taking that stillness of the body, and the stillness of the person watching, and maybe together you go somewhere.

I think that stillness allows for an entrance that maybe doesn't happen through the continuum of dancing. In my early work, when the dancing was constantly going, that was really my interest in that period, particularly with group work—that there would always be this feeling that space was being emptied and filled constantly; that there's this ongoing-ness of... An area of the space would be taken by one dancer, that dancer would leave, it would be alluded to by someone else, in an inverse relationship to what the other person had just done—maybe an arc is described and then another dancer performs its inverse or performs it smaller or larger or in the air or on the floor.

Tere: I want to go back to the other thing, but just now you're talking about that time in those early works, like *Hemispheres*, etc. I always felt it was a problem—or a stopping point—that people looked at it and equated it with sport, athleticism or aerobics.

Molissa: That's horrible! (laughs)

Tere: It's so much more interesting than that, and I always thought that was a block...for the work.

Molissa: Well, you know, the politics of criticism—that's a whole other issue.

Tere: Yes, and marketing. But I think that's something people glommed onto, and I think it's good if it can get your work out there, but I thought, 'you're missing a *whole layer of this!*'

Molissa: Yeah. I remember it was like, 'oh, you could be the Jane Fonda of dance.' There are so many issues to talk about with that. I would have people tell me that I made them feel embarrassed about their own body. I had trained myself to a point where doing a dance like *Hemispheres* was absolutely a piece of cake. Remember the three of us—Silvia (Martins), Scottie (Mirviss), and me?

Tere: Of course!

Molissa: The three of us danced the work all night long, and then it was like, 'okay, now what?!' We were absolutely *women of steel!!*

Tere: But that was secondary to the subject matter of it, basically.

Molissa: Absolutely! Because if you train your body to a point where that kind of physical work is effortless, it's a physical relationship to your mind. It's all about concentration; it's all about discipline and how to filter your mind into zeroing in on the body. So it was really metaphysical.

Tere: You're relocating continuum through this.

Molissa: Absolutely. A few people would get it.

Tere: I got it! I was so into it, you know?

Molissa: Yeah. And when we did *Hemispheres* again at the Kitchen just recently, to reenter that, twenty-five years later...

Tere: Oh my god!

Molissa: ...or whatever it was, you know, in my fifties.

Tere: That's intense. You went to it from a mind exercise, so it didn't necessarily have to be...

Molissa: I mean, yeah, you have to get to it physically, but you get there through your mind, whereas when you're younger, you just sort of forge ahead, and you have this amazing musculature that can deal with it! And now, to do that kind of work, later in years—like right now I'm reconstructing *State of Darkness*—I'm going to be setting it on Pacific Northwest Ballet.

Tere: You're not going to...

Molissa: Well, I could! That's what is amazing!

Tere: *State of Darkness* is Molissa's version of *The Rite of Spring*, which she danced topless—it was beautiful. I saw it in Florence, if you remember.

Molissa: That was the absolute premiere of the piece—and Enzo got so mad!

Tere: He got mad?

Molissa: Yeah, remember? He and...um...Enzo and Guy—what was his name? Bartolucci?

Tere: Oh, Giuseppe Bartolucci.

Molissa: Yeah, had a huge fight with you about it, because they both hated it and you loved it.

Tere: Oh! Right! I remember that! Well, you know, in Italy, that's not called a fight— that's called a debate.

Molissa: Well, I mean, it was great—it was really super fun. But anyway, I'm doing that again, and for the PNB. I asked Peter Boal, who is the director over there, 'Are you going to have the women not wear shirts?' And he said, 'No, because then it'd just be called the "topless ballet."' It's just interesting that the first thing you said was that the piece was done topless. To me—and this is another aspect about having grown up in Nigeria, where, you know, we just never wore shirts—it was not a big deal. You often would see a woman's breasts, and it was never... anything.

Tere: No, I didn't mean to characterize it; I'm just bringing some anecdotal information to it.

Molissa: Yeah, I know, but it is a thing that becomes an endemic thing. It's, you know, 'oh, *that* ballet.'

Tere: But let's get back to where we were. I'm interested in the relationship of runic thing or something plastic—I call it— and solid, to continuum or what I was saying as this post-minimalist thing. We've talked about it as being from the molecular body, or the moving internal body, but I think it posits something about the relationship to objects around you in the world. For people, that's really important. To say something about that object that is moving past me, or I'm moving around it and sensation changes—the whole language of dance that I think is really present in your use of the plastic versus the trajectory of time passing.

Molissa: I think that might also have to do with the spatial concepts that we're talking about: that the body is moving around objects that are invisible, or set up sculptural designs on the stage that are then... that the body sort of moves through these structural forms to continue.

Tere: It's a relationship I look at in many peoples' work, and I say, 'are they adept at this, or not?' And 'are they even aware of it?' I think it's a good thing to talk about because—going back to the politics of criticism—I think a lot of criticism is based only on the visual and on stopped imagery, as opposed to the fact that those images are in a temporal setting. They're moving by you in relativity to each other. So, the ways that we do that are the whole language here. It's a really interesting thing to investigate, and I think you are one of the people investigating it by taking dance, and really committing to it as a valid form of research.

Molissa: Yeah.

Tere: So each piece you do is examining that thing, you know? It *is* difficult to talk about, but I think that something like... I forget what piece it was—it was a while back, and you did it at the Joyce, and there were these attachments to your body...

Molissa: *331 Steps*.

Tere: ...and I thought there was an attempt there to visualize something that was going on spatially—like *rays* that are going on. And sometimes I feel like there's a circularity, a spinning three-dimensionality to what you are trying to do there, and that that generates a time-sense, also.

Molissa: That piece had to do with being attached to the back wall by a long piece of cloth while trying to maneuver your steps. The idea was that you would get caught up with other people's attachments and you'd have to move around, underneath or above them. But I think this temporal thing is really interesting and the vocabulary changes according to the speed a lot. You're talking about how a lot of dance isn't really dance anymore, that there are images that are made, and image against another image's place; whereas the transitional moments are really almost not even adhered to—or thought of—as being important. I think my work rarely gets to a moment where you say, okay, 'that's a second,' or 'stop!'

Tere: Something that's readable.

Molissa: I use stillness, but in a very different way. The continuum thing means that all the movement necessarily has an equal value, or equal validity to it, so that you're not making pictures; you're making motion that of course is made up of pictures, but is just continuing over time. That, I think, puts your mind into a different place as you watch dance. You have a reading of time passing over a period of time, rather than, um, more like a dramatic effect of something being placed. The effect, I think, is cumulative...

Tere: I agree.

Molissa: ...of the temporal work. As time passes, the experience of being there, present, watching—the experience of dancing it at that kind of level of commitment— that's where it goes someplace else.

Tere: Right.

Molissa: And I think that's kind of transformative. I think that's a kind of magic thing that goes back to the runic concept.

Tere: It's also a desire you have to re-organize time.

Molissa: to something that is outside of our normal realm. Because to me that's what the theater should be: you go in and you are already outside of your normal realm. For things that take place over real time, you have a half an hour or something—you have this real-time situation—though within that, you have time-travel, you have past, present, future. Time varies according to how deeply one is dancing and how deeply one is watching. It's an even match, and it has to be. I think in a way, audiences are not trained to do that anymore.

Tere: Unfortunately.

Molissa: I think that is a very sad thing. I mean, you know how we were saying the other day how the piece teaches you how to watch it while you watch it?

Tere: Yeah, if you can let go to that.

Molissa: If you can let go to that, yeah. And I think that that's true mainly of many art forms. You go to a sculpture show by John Chamberlain, for instance, and there are all these hedges of cars stacked together, and you see that as a visual entity, as an iconographic thing. Yet it's in the making of it and in the understanding of its components and what it means—and you know a little bit about the person who made it, you know? It all becomes a full experience. Or you can come in and say, 'oh it's a bunch of cars.' So it has to do with engaging—how deeply does an audience want to engage? And I think they *do*! I think that if you give people something that is engaging, I think they are usually happy to be engaged.

Tere: I think so, too.

Molissa: I think people love to read, people love poetry, film. I think our culture likes to think that they don't, because it's more marketable to be quick—let's be quick...

Tere: Also, the kind of criteria for product—which is an element that is stopped and doesn't move in time—is kind of hoisted onto this temporal setting. Even at the image-level, people look for a product: what's that *one thing* that is capturable, something that I can use to denote that experience.

Molissa: Right—logo.

Tere: Logo-setting, which becomes a temporal idea, because you are looking for a stopping point as you watch it. And if you're offering to the world another temporal ideology, it's going to have to be filtered through that, somehow.

I wish that a lot more people... I think that even people who are doing what they would call "outer-edge"—I can think of a range of different people—you always have to be aware of how is your time kneaded out, and what is the inference of the way you are using time. It has meaning, the way you are using time—the density of elements within that amount of time, and it's inescapable. And I really would love for choreographers to redouble their attention to that, because there's an issue of what people are coming to it with that's different now from what it was like when we started, you know? I really see that change, but it can be so powerful.

I also wanted to talk to you about some of the endings you had, which I think are so lovely. You can say that you just stop in some of them, but they're *arrived* at. I'm thinking of one where you just do a plié, and you finished in an attitude. Does that ring a bell to you?

Molissa: Um, yes, it could have been... I came up in an attitude and that was the end?

Tere: Yeah, that's the end. It's just like, 'dun, dun!' But in a non "tah-dah" way.

Molissa: I think that's the second part of *Eureka*.

Tere: Oh yeah, I remember that dance. I forget how *Hemispheres* ends, it ends in some kind of other way that makes you eat the continuum; it goes into your body somehow. And I remember thinking, 'well this isn't foxy—she's not being sly,' and it doesn't have a "ta-dah factor," and somehow it was like clipping the continuum. There was something about it that was really successful.

Molissa: Well, I think that it's this idea that the continuum is happening before the dance begins and after it ends

Tere: You're just bringing it into everything.

Molissa: Yeah, and you're riding it that period of time, and when the wave is over, boom!—you're gone.

Tere: And then people can select to go back to real time or go back to it, in a way.

Molissa: Right. It stops so that the idea can reverberate, I think. And it's in that reverberation that you're saying this artwork has happened. It has taken place over real time—you sat there and watched it, and now it's over. And what is its resonance? Is it moving you to do something yourself? Are you a better person because you witnessed it? Are you a worse person because you witnessed it? Does it have any effect? I think that reverberation is what we really need for artists to be working with.

Tere: One of the things I've been thinking of doing is looking at all of the ways in my work that I could...what's the word? take on the audience's point of view as a role and invite it into the process of making things. The idea that people leave and are coming to terms with what you've made is how I want to make my endings, so that they are in the middle of boring into your neurology and it's not finished—it continues. And you're going to be the final editor in your memory. So, I don't want to do anything, taking from the history of dramatic structure that would make it...

Molissa: ...a finalization.

Tere: ...the tyranny of drama, you know? Take that away and say 'you and where you are in the world—where the world is—and you walk away from the theater, and *forgetting* is going to make this piece finished. I'm going to create a wind that collects the stuff of the world and brings it before you.' And that's what I am working on now, and I feel like that is something that is going on in you as you work. I actually think that dance—if people could be freed up to take it in—in a way, is a much easier art form than a lot of people think.

Molissa: Well, they are mystified by the whole deal!

Tere: Totally, I know.

Molissa: I think abstract dance is the most beautiful thing to watch, and to just experience.

Tere: To go through.

Molissa: Yeah. I just saw Merce's show the other night...

Tere: Me too.

Molissa: ...and the piece with the Rei Kawakubo costumes! It's just really extraordinarily beautiful.

Tere: It's *glorious*! And it really sculpts time. It's really chopping up time for you in a way that is just so... glorious. And the music for that, too! God, it was extraordinary.

Molissa: David Behrman's music.

Tere: Cunningham is really the place where I want to dress up in a nun's outfit and say 'I want to try and help you! I like this!' Bring people to the light! It is an intense experience. Maybe there are just different types of people, but I think there are filters for people, and they don't allow them to get to what is so mystical about it all, you know?

Molissa: Merce has a trajectory that is followed through each work. You know when it's going to end because suddenly all fifteen people are back onstage. I mean, it almost always happens, and I find it so interesting and lovely, as a kind of nod-to-this-finalization onset at the end of the dance, but yet...

Tere: ...but then the curtain goes down and the dance is still going on.

Molissa: And you know that it's a moment in time being stopped. That's just so great because, as I said, it's a nod to this need that we seem to have for a beginning, middle and an end. That's really brained into you from day one—that that is what you want.

Tere: It's a Western cultural idea.

Molissa: Absolutely. That's another really wonderful thing about performing in Japan, is that that is not the issue. Often the end is simply: another door opens and off you go someplace else. This thing of opening doors for people is a really important thing.

Tere: Yes, in any way that you can...

Molissa: In any way. I think that the vocabulary in my work helps—that if you see the work over a period of time, that vocabulary becomes something that is signature and a signifier. And that then, if you are seeing the work over a period of time, you get that, and then that takes you to another level, too.

Tere: In fact, with many artists—and visual artists—you see a body of their work to see one thing, so it really does something to your understanding of it.

Molissa: And that's something that is really missing in our culture—this idea of going to see a body of work. I mean, I have some critics who saw my work in the early eighties and who have not come back. And it's like 'just think of your own life trajectory, what you did when you are twenty-five is not what you are doing when you are fifty'. But this idea of making art as a lifetime pursuit—that's what we're doing. And there are periods in one's life, and there are things that are interesting when you are older that are not when you are younger.

Tere: There are all these transitions...

Molissa: Everyone is going through those transitions!

Tere: I actually wanted to ask you that, because you've had a pretty anomalous journey here. You had such an enormous, unprecedented visibility in your early, early career. I've been talking about this recently: there are very few artists who are still going *at* something, as opposed to creating something that has their name on it, and continuing to sell that thing. Like Merce, you, this woman Odile Duboc from France who I've just gotten turned onto—people that keep turning the corner and saying, 'what else?' But that's what I'm interested in doing. What do you feel about that? I know it's like that for everyone, but it's been quite an anomaly, your experience, I'd say. I can't think of anyone else that's had this thing.

Molissa: Well, thirty years. 2007 will be my thirtieth year.

Tere: That's a kind of continuum, how you've gone through it all.

Molissa: It's gone through many, many different ups and downs, the whole gamut—from working with a company at first, to working as a soloist with visual artists for ten years, and then back to a company. When you think about it, you're just living it, you're in it, and time passes. I remember when I decided to drop my company and work as a soloist; it literally was a year of discomfort with how things were going. I'd had a company for a number of years, Scottie and Silvia both left, and other dancers replaced them. I had to teach them repertory, and I felt like I was treading water, and it was like, 'let me out of here! I'm out!' I got out of it, and then suddenly all of these other doors opened, and I made *State of Darkness*, etc. So that was a whole re-invention of my self. Then one day, after doing all of that, I started getting really lonely and thought that I should have a company again. And then I had that terrible accident, and as far as other people were concerned, that was the end of my career—they're still waking up to the fact that I'm still dancing.

Tere: That's a big issue.

Molissa: Anyway, I got lonely, and I got people again. And I *love it!*

Tere: It's almost like a dance: it starts out with some people, and then lead with a solo, then you fall, and come back in! It's like a really long dance.

Molissa: I feel about it that way. I feel that everything is interconnected, and one thing leads to another. Also, to look back on older work, like reconstructing *Hemispheres*—to embody it not just on someone else, but to make myself do it again. Oh man! I loved it! It was like being in someone else's dance company. I had to relearn this stuff that I hadn't done in years. And just relive that whole thing, and then here it is, years, years later, and I'm experiencing it with these other women that are half my age. I love that, because I'm dancing right in there with them!

Tere: Yeah, you are! That's like an old kind of discussion, because the way you are—and some other people are—it's not an issue that you're older than they are, it doesn't seem like a theme at all.

Molissa: No, it doesn't seem like a theme to me at all. It just feels like it's very natural. I feel ultimately that I dance my work the best. It's that simple.

Tere: I actually think that's one of the things I want to say to you, that sometimes people's dancing is really crucial to their making, and sometimes I think that the fact that their dancing is crucial to their making is a problem. I don't see that with you—you're the motor for it.

Molissa: Even more when I wasn't dancing. Like when I was laid up, I made pieces on Peggy Baker and Peter Boal, but I could still kind of get up and give them the idea. The idea of not doing it myself is not interesting to me. I like doing it.

Tere: That's true. That is important in your work.

Molissa: I love doing it. I get anxious when I'm not involved. When I make a piece for a ballet company and I have to watch it instead of dance in it, well, that's hard. Because I know that as an ensemble dancer, my being in the ensemble, it's like it's a feed. But I don't feel like my dancers are constantly referring back to me as to how they should be doing it—it's just that it's a feed.

Tere: It's an energy thing.

Molissa: Yeah, and I love that. And I get that from them, too.

Tere: And for the viewer it's a point of reference. I also feel like you don't make them try to do it like you.

Molissa: That's right.

Tere: It's a thing, and three people are doing it in three different ways, which I adore. I'm really committed to that in my own work, also. Everyone should do it completely different.

Molissa: I have a really wonderful rehearsal director, Judith Renlay, who comes in towards the end of a rehearsal period. She helps me pack it together, where the disparate things that are *too* disparate, you know... But also to find a way so that each dancer does it according to their personal translation, and I really like that. Everyone dances in terms of their own training, in terms of their own interests.

Tere: And also, that mirrors audience, too, because it's a reinterpretation of something and anybody who sees your work is not going to know, because there are no signifiers, really, that are denoted in any dance, so everyone's interpreting. And even in the room, the dancers are playing that role of audience. To let that slip seems really helpful for the audience members. It's like, 'oh, they are doing that, too.' Not on a frontal level.

Molissa: On a subconscious level. I think that this idea that is open-ended—everyone has their own experience—and as you say, it's clear that that is the issue, that it's meant to be that way, because we don't look the same.

Tere: It's really beautiful in terms of an open ideology of 'wow, this system is so finite— what you're doing. It's so specific and at the same time, it's really open.' And it really is a metaphor for language, too: the millions of different ways people can suddenly use language, using all the same structures and words within one language, but everyone is a variation. No one is the standard. And so it has that...

Molissa: It becomes conversational. It becomes a dialogue between the dancers as they dance, and consequently, a dialogue with the people who watch.

Tere: Just a couple of things. What do you feel now about teaching? You have an appointment at Mills College for half the year, and I'm interested because that's starting to happen to me now. What is that like, to coexist in some of those things in your life?

Molissa: Well, I go one semester a year, which works because it's a four-month period that's really quite intensive. I live on campus, and I work with mainly the Masters graduating class, who are doing their thesis. I go to rehearsals in the evenings—it's real hands-on. I really like that. I find that talking about choreographing, seeing people when they are younger, helping

them find their own voice, helping them filter through what is interesting to them, what's not, giving them a wide array of information... My big thing is visual art, I know a lot about twentieth century art. Many dancers have never even heard of Picasso, much less Malevich or Mondrian. I like to give a lot of information on Frank Gehry, and Frank Lloyd Wright—get the dancers outside of the dance thing! Because they'll get that, they get that through their history, or they get it.

Tere: They get it, it's not that big. (laughs)

Molissa: Well, yeah, that's the problem: they're too in that. They need to get a wider array of knowledge, so that's what I do. And the music department there is fantastic. They have the contemporary wing in the music department—it just has amazing people coming through. It's a great resource.

Tere: And how does it affect your making? Or does it?

Molissa: Well, when I'm there, I can't make a thing!

Tere: Is it time or....

Molissa: I think it's time. I can reconfigure things. I can take a dance that was maybe made for three and make it for twenty, and within that, have a very creative, wonderful time reconfiguring. But as far as actually making new language, I find that I'm just stymied, lost. I'm a real hermit when it comes to working. Even before my dancers come in to the studio, I do a lot of work alone, and always have. There at Mills I don't have big blocks of time. I have some, but I find that I'll be in there trying to make something, and I'm thinking, 'oh, I have to grade that paper.' Then also, in the University, you get so involved in these faculty meetings and it is endless! Watch out! You are just consumed. But, because of that, there's this boiling pot: I come back and it's like boom! I go into the studio and make three works back to back!

Tere: So you just have a back-up in your system and you spit 'em out.

Molissa: It sort of works. Hopefully that'll be the case for a couple of years, because I just signed a contract for three more years!

Tere: Sometimes I find that my teaching, because I make them ask continually widening questions, it's really affected my work.

Molissa: It does make you ask questions of yourself, because they're asking questions. Also, you think, 'okay, if I were looking at Robert Ryman's work right now...' because we're doing that in my class, and so I'm looking at it, too.

Tere: Right, exactly, you're reconsidering it.

Molissa: This is part of the boiling thing I'm talking about: these things are starting—

Tere: You're feeding yourself.

Molissa: Absolutely. It's really interesting, because when I leave there, not only do I have this wonderful relief of making work again, but I also find that some corner has been turned. You were asking about how is this thing—the continuum—doing this for three years, and how to make new work. I think it's getting involved with other people that is helpful to turn constantly new pages.

I just made a piece, *Patterns and Expectations*, with Fred Frith music, a wonderful composer. Joan Jeanrenaud, the cellist, commissioned him to make the score for her and William Winant, who is a wonderful percussionist. Not only are the cello and percussion going, but there are moments where suddenly she plays the cello with a chop-stick, or suddenly Willie tears up a newspaper or throws a ping pong ball, or something is dropped on the floor. I thought it would be interesting if the dancers echoed those actions too, it's kind of Dada.

Tere: That's really interesting: take someone else's impulse, or something, and play with that.

Molissa: Exactly. And we're having so much fun with it. That's actually the piece we're doing at the DUMBO festival.

Tere: That's interesting to me, because sometimes I look at what Merce does—he's just like, 'I'm going to do my dance, and you can put whatever you want on it.' Basically, it doesn't matter, it's unwreckable.

Molissa: And all of that information that he gets from the computer—the body moving through space, and the possibilities. It's changed the vocabulary so much; it's just opened it up. That ipod thing was really funny. I liked the idea a lot, but... words, hearing a song...

Tere: Hearing words was really weird. And a regular, metered, quantized tempo was not what he's getting in there. It's a much more ragged musicality.

Molissa: But I mean, still, *what* an experiment.

Tere: Totally interesting, of course. The basic metaphor of everyone being by themselves in the audience—you're having your own experience, and I'm just going to put spray paint on that and make you really notice that. It's really your own experience *and* it's communal. Of course he's just endlessly new, you know?

Molissa: That's really filmic too: you go to a film...and I don't know about you, but I'd much rather watch a film with other people around in a movie theater than to watch it on DVD.

Tere: But not with a friend. I like to *go by myself*—in a group of people, definitely...

Molissa: ...but among strangers, witnessing in a void. And there's something really fascinating...

Tere: ...really compelling.

Molissa: ...about that. I think that's why live performance is so great. To be there...

Tere: ...with everybody...

Molissa: ...and you're just like this thing in a sea. It's such a great, freeing thing. That's the other thing about art: let's free ourselves up.

Tere: That's totally what it does, yeah. For myself and for you people who have been doing this for a long time, I notice that the way I look at everything has been totally altered because I spent so much time making work. The way I look at *everything*. I hope that can happen for audiences sometimes. I think it can to different people at different degrees.

Molissa: Right. When you're making work, you're inside your own head, and that head is either engaged in the cultural world, or it's not engaged in the cultural world.

Tere: And/or it's filtering it into its own cultural nature.

Molissa: Well, what I mean by that is that there's this dialogue that goes on—you see it more in the visual arts—this idea of a dialogue that then artists feed into, sort of like a strain—maybe it's installation art or whatever. Then you have somebody who is still painting over the edge; that person feels really isolated. But, meanwhile, that person is making explorations for herself/himself that's within a dialogue of painting throughout the time, the culture. I think what happens with marketing is that everything gets narrowed down to where the dialogue is between the last five years and the next five years. That's why it's so interesting for me to look at people like Malevich or Mondrian or Agnes Martin,—that their dialogue takes place over a very wide, expansive period of time. That continuum—getting back to that term, which is such a good one—is what I want to get into. I want a dialogue with those people!

Tere: It's so interesting to think about how I'm doing my work, and where I'm going in my work right now is less and less result oriented. It's more about what am I doing in that room, or what are the inherent politics of my process. The product could keep getting just more and more what it is.

I've been seeing a lot of younger work, and there's some unstated rules in a lot of it, which are: no dancing, don't make a finite ending (because that's bourgeois or something)—there's a bunch of little things going on, which I'm sorry about because I want people to go on their own journey. I think contemporary art forms should open up and multiply and multiply and multiply the types of voices, because to me, the more it comes to a consensus, the more it is like our ugly friend's religion. And government.

Molissa: It's just all about a narrowing down of the mind so you don't question it.

Tere: Yes, and I see it in a lot of younger work now, that it's looking back in itself. It's interesting, but there's a bunch of givens that are almost requirements, and I hope that people will crack that a little.

Molissa: Is the anti-dance thing a rebellion against the period before them? Against Paul Taylor or something? I mean, what do you think that is?

Tere: I don't really know. I think that some of it is an affect, perhaps an erroneous look at what is a "European" affect or... I don't know exactly, but I think some of it is anti-establishment of some sort. People come at it from different ends. I think a lot of people are interested in performance art.

Molissa: When I was starting to choreograph, you wanted to go against Grand Union. You wanted to dance again! That was the thing: Johanna Boyce, and me and Charlie Moulton, and Bill T. Jones—we were all *dancing*.

Tere: Well, that's the thing that I wish would become contemporary: that all of these forms that we've gone through—we've gone through Judson, the '80s, through Martha—that they all become part of a toolbox that can represent a different texture within one work. So you can go from something really conceptual to something representational to something commercial, and that becomes a reflection of a moment that's really advanced, just in terms of time moving forward in history. Not as in post-modernism, either. It's not *referring* to the source, it's just assuming it.

Molissa: I think when people are young, though, it's helpful to have mandates that get you going. Because I remember when I was young—and I'm sure there are still people that are angry at me about it—you know...

Tere: What?! I'm *sure* I've got people angry at me, too! (both laugh)

Molissa: But the point is when you are a young person, you're sort of like on a mission.

Tere: You have to be the generating step.

Molissa: Yeah! And you have to be a little bit arrogant, because you have to settle yourself, you have to place yourself in this *thing* that you are a newcomer to. So you have to come in, head first

Tere: Yeah, show 'em up!

Molissa: And everyone gets angry, you know? And then you find twenty-five years later, they're *still* angry!

Tere: Well, I love a lot of this work. I've been watching it. And now there's a bunch of reiterative elements, let's say, in people's work.

Molissa: Like it's mannerist. That's the problem. If it's not on its own trajectory, it gets mannerist.

Tere: Definitely. And I mean, if the trajectory isn't like 'exit where you just were,' basically lean forward, forward instead of going back. It's a really huge discussion, but it's something that I look at, and what I see now is like, 'wow, I could do this, I could do this, I could do this.' Going back to these role model things, I want to go to Merce's every time and see him be in this other kind of examination again and again and again. Or I go to Pina, and I *know* what it is. She's never going to get rid of characters and just do one kick in repetition. It's not going to change, it's called Pina, and it's PINA.

So that's the thing that I am looking for in my life right now, and there are very few role models for an older artist. If you are a visual artist, you would look at Matisse, who did paper-cuts at the end, and summed it all up!

Molissa: That's why I think as a choreographer there is a really wide world to look at through Matisse. There aren't necessarily role models in dance culture, because it's still so relatively new.

Tere: That's true. And I think it's new—this phenomenon of people dancing time for a long time, and making for a long time, other than a couple of people. I think people are going into their fifties in a really different way than they used to. It will be interesting to see.

Molissa: Well, yeah, into their fifties and still dancing...I mean, Trisha is still dancing, which is great.

Tere: I know! Oh my god, I saw her and she looked like she was fourteen!

Molissa: Brilliant. And Merce danced until he was—even with a walker! It's so *great*. It's really interesting to see—just talking about Merce again for a second. In that piece *Crises* from 1960, there are movements in there that were so particular to him, to what he does with men, because what he does with men is different from what he does with women, I think.

Tere: Yes.

Molissa: There's this sort of balletic boxing thing that it was so interesting to see it early on—it's like it gets down...

Tere: ...it gets grody and down low and punchy, very interesting. (laughs)

Molissa: That's something that I've seen in many of the works....

Tere: It was really interesting to see that piece, and to see that that's where he came from. You can see both the seeds and the moment—the exit. You can see both the newness and what he was trying to get away from. Do you think there's any other stuff you want to cover while we're having this talk?

Molissa: Well, we were talking about the sort of Zen concept, and I think that's a helpful thing to talk about, because I think that for a young person, it's a very interesting thing to see. You and I have a very different...when we got here, it was not so expensive—I lived in a place for fifteen dollars a month! I rented a room from some guy.

Tere: I had a house on Vestry St. for a hundred dollars a month—a loft.

Molissa: I worked on Wall St. for a long time, I just punched in at 6 am, worked until two o'clock and then made dances the rest of the day.

Tere: With really cheap studios.

Molissa: Absolutely. And I know people are not able to do that now. So there is a really different life force that these kids have when they're coming... And I think it's helpful for them to see that you can make it. That this life of making art—you have to Zen-it!

Tere: You have to Zen-it out!

Molissa: You have to Zen-it.

Tere: What is interesting: the really, really positive side of a lot of this work is that the work is the result of the situations. You know, making work in your house or...

Molissa: Which is so interesting.

Tere: Totally. That's the thing that is really free and open and new about it. These people are—that's *not* rebellious, it's just the situation. They're not looking at the role model of 'single artist/company'—that's not even in their dreams! So it really unleashes up to this whole other thing that's really interesting to watch.

Molissa: There are all these situations that have been happening before, and they can just cull from one to another. I mean, David Appel makes living room dances...

Tere: I know David Appel's work!

Molissa: I just think they're so interesting.

Tere: I wish we didn't have this grant situation where every year you have to produce something. There could be more space for these other voices for people who work in smaller

ways, or to see that whole range of things. Well, some people are doing that—in Brooklyn, there's places to see that stuff.

Molissa: It's interesting doing these group shows. I just did one at the Flea the other night, and someone said to me, 'Oh, it's so brave of you to go back to working in such an alternative space,' because the other people in the evening were like, you know, thirteen years old! And I just said, 'Well, you know, I don't have a season this year—I'm working on a season for next year—but I just want to keep in the mix!' It's not an embarrassment to play in a small place—it's actually really fun! I had a great time. And Richard Move was in the Dance Conversations at the Flea—he was the moderator at the end—and it was a hoot to talk to him again. It's been a while. I think that work should get made, under any circumstances.

Tere: That's a really great point.

Molissa: And just young kids have to know that! You just have to get out there and just everyday get something made, or think about it, or do your research, or whatever.

Tere: I'm amazed at how many exciting people there are out there, doing it, in these conditions. I'm shocked, really.

Molissa: And thank goodness for that! That they are making it!

Tere: Totally. There's a whole thing going on of young work that is very impressive. It's amazing. Well, I'm going to end this here, maybe we will have another conversation next year. But it was really nice talking to you.

Molissa: Well, I timed it—it was exactly an hour.

Tere: It's like a T.V. show! (both laugh)