

**Sarah Michelson**  
**in conversation with Tere O'Connor**

**Tere O'Connor:** I'm so happy to talk to you Sarah. I didn't plan this too much because I like to just be able to talk openly. One thing I would like to do is find some kind of—not clarity necessarily—but a way into what you're doing choreographically because I, as you know, think it is very interesting. Other aspects get talked about. You know, other things about you get talked about, and I'd really like to talk about the inside of the work more because it is of great interest to me, and I wonder about it. The first thing I would ask you is (and just tell me if it's too broad or something, because I could get a little more pointed): What is the degree of your imagination relative to the function of what you're making? What is that like? I feel like your work is based in your intense ability to imagine things. At the same time, it looks at the world in a really pointed way, and I wonder about that. What is coming from an internal source, and how does that relate to the moment you're living in? And what do those two things have to do with shaping your work?

**Sarah Michelson:** Well, it's a very flattering question. When you were asking the question... This is funny, sorry, but I feel like you were asking me... This is just a funny thing to say. In that workshop of yours, a long time ago... I feel like you can ask me that question because whatever that was, you saw back then: that funny combination of me trying to organize something personal from the way that I would perform something or be a character or move, as well as structure something quite mathematically, in a weird way. I don't remember what you said to me, but I remember having the sense of you watching. I remember being very impressed by you and nervous, but you watching. I feel like you saw something that is somehow in that question.

**Tere:** Well, yeah. One of the things that I talk about a lot, and I think that you do very naturally, is you take things very far. That's a big part of what you're doing. You say, "I see this, now I'm going to take it very, very far." It's choreographic. I have this term "choreographic," which means something very specific to me, which means that it's not about something explanatory or about something denotative, but it's this journey that starts from something, and it has a response to the starting point that isn't necessarily an explanation of it. That's something that I think you do in such an incredible way. It's very poetic, as operatic and as large as it is, sometimes I find it really poetic. It's the imagination, and I did see that in you a long time ago. Then there's this kind of formalism in there too. That is a beautiful contrast between the hyperbolic, exaggerated things you do, and the restriction of the formalism. What is that? What does that feel like to you?

**Sarah:** I don't know what to say because you said a lot of stuff that was right. But, I definitely think... Okay, let me be simple. For example, when I'm working in rehearsal, it's very, very, very rare that we improvise or that anybody else makes up any material. That material that is on the stage has usually—I'm going to say 85% of the time—come from my body. And, how it works in rehearsal, these days, and in the last few shows, is that people stand around me, and I do stuff. They copy it, and they do it over and over again until they remember it. Then I turn around, and I look at that. Those people are a varied group of people, and from looking at that varied group of people, I can get a wide picture of what I must have meant. The better I know

the people, and the better I know the way they interpret things, the more I can be reductive about what the thing was. There is something very internal when I'm making up a movement.

**Tere:** And something intimate with those people, I think.

**Sarah:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely. I rely absolutely on the impulses of the performers in the action of copying me. I think that Parker and I, now (especially in *Dogs*), have come to a place where the movement gets transferred from me to her, and to what the thing will be, really fast because of the way she understands me and because of her role as visual collaborator. She brings that role to her dancing in the studio. She is very exciting to work with in that way.

**Tere:** And, is that like talking to them, or is that like being observed?

**Sarah:** What is it like? You mean...?

**Tere:** I mean when you're in that action in the studio, with the dancers, are you playing anything out? Are you hiding something from them? I have this premise about dance, not that it could "reinvent and talk about what language can't say" (that kind of romanticized thing), but that it is its own language. I think more and more of what I do in my work comes out of my personality.

**Sarah:** I think it's definitely control, in the way that the specificity of the thing that I'm trying to get at is ultimately... Regardless of my inspiration in terms of the sites, and by sites I mean theaters—I'm just going to say theaters. How I consider those is often an inspirational starting point, but then the work that we make together—me and that group of people—is very specific in terms of the way the movements come out of me and are developed into the material that then we'll use. I think, if someone assumes too quickly that they know what it is, I might be like 'It's not that.' But, in answer to the original question, it's like being observed rather than having a conversation.

**Tere:** I think what's interesting is that you make these enormous arenas out of the theater/site/whatever-you-want-to-call-it, to house these intimate things, and that's so beautiful.

**Sarah:** Right, and I think very early on in my, if we're going to call it a career...

**Tere:** Let's call it a career.

**Sarah:** I was rejected by... I auditioned for a dance company in San Francisco. He rejected me, and I was so mad, and I realized that his movement would be so much better if I was in it, but he can't... whatever.

**Tere:** No, your work would be better if you made it.

**Sarah:** Yeah. So, anyway, that was it. I guess I'm going to have to make the scenario for myself. I'm going to have to make the situation that I want the thing to be seen in, even before I make the thing. So, first I have to make the scenario that I'm going to make the thing to be

seen in, and once that's pretty complete, then I make the thing. That's why I think, from what I'm told anyway, that there's a complete experience.

**Tere:** A completeness to it.

**Sarah:** It's not arbitrary. I'm not looking for a beautiful place and then making a dance in a beautiful place.

**Tere:** No, I feel like you react to the place, and something about it. The word "opera" comes up for me, because the size of it against... I guess because I know you, and that's not fair, but I mean maybe who you are, or who one could think that you are, the size of it is a real reaction to that: to who you are and to how you're bumping against the world. I can see how you grow some things. You see maybe one little thing in a space, and you just go dig at it, and you put fire and sun, and it becomes this thing, which moves me into another thing that I wanted to ask you about. What was that gorgeous thing you made up at the Kitchen, when it was a work-in-progress?

**Sarah:** *Grivdon*

**Tere:** Yeah, yeah. I was saying about that piece that there was this repetition thing, and I saw it in *Group Experience* also. This person saying, "I have to stick with this." It's really dramatic, and because it's so dramatic, because it's so personalized, because it's coming from the person you are, it doesn't refer to repetition in the history of dance. It's its own thing. It objectifies repetition and turns it into a thing that is forced into the viewer's head. I see the repetition come up again and again, and I keep thinking it's very much a really key part of what you're doing. I wonder what you think about that. The battement section in *Shadowman* going across...

**Sarah:** Totally. I've been trying to let it go. What it is, is a lot of what you said—'here's an idea.' In *Grivdon*, it was the stepping, I think.

**Tere:** Oh, I loved that.

**Sarah:** Yeah, I loved that too. How do we fulfill that? When is it that we've experienced that?

**Tere:** You mean, when can you leave it?

**Sarah:** When can you leave it? And, in my case, I think, if I was making work in a vacuum, I think I would really still be doing that. I would be going on and on and on and on with repetition, but I feel—and it did show up again in Lyon... I don't know if you saw that piece.

**Tere:** I didn't see the piece yet.

**Sarah:** I've been trying in *Daylight* not to do it, but then, afterwards, this Lyon Opera Ballet thing came in, so that showed up.

**Tere:** Well, I mean, more and more, the most interesting thing to me about this form is that it's temporal. It's just a way of registering time passing, which is a very dramatic thing on Earth right now. Time passing is marked by a lot of war and a lot of awful things. So, it's almost like saying, "I'm going to stop time." That's where I think there's a drama in it, that it's so persistent. You insist on it, and insist on it.

**Sarah:** It's felt very powerful to me.

**Tere:** Well, *Group Experience* was the first one where everybody's coming down front... It really questions for the viewer, "Is this a transition, or is this a thing? Am I there yet? Am I at whatever I'm trying to project on to this? Has it arrived yet? Is this it, or are we getting there?" I think that's one of the basic questions that a choreographer who is seeing well is asking. How do people perceive time, and a sense of, "Are we there yet?" which is obviously a useless thing to think about because you're not ever there. Something about that really comes up in these works for me.

**Sarah:** I definitely think that it has something to do with eternity, as corny as that sounds.

**Tere:** It doesn't. That's the place you've been working from.

**Sarah:** It's at the root of everything as soon as I start to make it, and that shows up in different ways. I think the repetition thing is something for sure. Now that I've done it so much and my local work environment has shifted slightly since I started making work, it seems less relevant for me to keep doing that. I'm letting go of that, but there's something in that for me, and I think there always will be. It's very deep in me.

**Tere:** I'd just like to talk about other aspects. Tell me if I'm characterizing them incorrectly because there are other things about your work, and I'll try to say them as someone who would see it for the first time. There's a reference to dancing in it.

**Sarah:** Yeah. If I'm political, which I'm not, or I am not deliberately, but if I am in the way that we talked about, I definitely... With all the options that have been offered to me every time in terms of what people say, "Oh, you do this," I would say, "I make dances. I'm a dance-maker." I'm coming from that point of view. I defend that point of view. That point of view is very precious to me. If I make something that's good, I want that kudos to be in this world that we belong to.

**Tere:** That's hard to do. I mean, you don't use the language verbatim necessarily, and it's filled with all kinds of your sauce, but still it has references at the level of line and stuff. I think it's to your credit that you wrest it from the history of dance and use it in this other context.

**Sarah:** That's what I'm really trying to do at the moment, and I feel like I'm really trying to go very far with that. I feel like there is a lot of rejection of dance and of forms of dance, and I have questions about that. Why? I know that maybe there are taste and aesthetic issues, and where do they separate from that very interesting question that you brought up about conceptual art using movement that's unconsidered inside the structure, then... Those

questions of form and what form people use, and how the form is dated in time and forms that have...

**Tere:** Forms are in the air—they're in the air.

**Sarah:** I really love David Dorfman, but no one's making handstand dances anymore in the fashionable arena. But ten years ago, everybody was making handstand dances. What would it mean—I'm not making a handstand dance—if I was going to make a handstand dance? I don't mean to be rude by calling it that. You have to protect me and help me out here. That seems an easier way to talk about it than ballet or Mark Morris.

**Tere:** It's recognizable.

**Sarah:** It's because that was a whole period of Doug Varone and David Dorfman and Lisa Race, and many others.

**Tere:** A certain kind of physicality.

**Sarah:** A certain kind of scenario of being upside-down that was really exciting, including to me. I tried really hard. I auditioned for David. I like that guy very, very, very much, and I was very excited by that, and those things. What does that mean ten years later? That's a very interesting question, to me.

**Tere:** Yeah, it is.

**Sarah:** Someone was going to make a work, and say they made incredible work, or it would have been incredible if it wasn't full of handstands. Or, it's incredible because it's full of handstands.

**Tere:** So is it just a perception?

**Sarah:** Yes, what is that? So, I'm interested in that. I saw a dance that I thought was incredible, that actually my very good friends hated.

**Tere:** Oh dear.

**Sarah:** Yeah. It was interesting. Because I didn't know anyone else who'd seen it, apart from Gia. It brought up a lot of questions for me, because I found that they, my cute friends, were rejecting it on grounds of aesthetic and of form.

**Tere:** One can.

**Sarah:** Of course. That's true. Good point, Tere. I accepted it wholly, in terms of structure.

**Tere:** The questions are there, those questions. I think the thing about what I was saying about you using technique is that there's something going on that's basically so personal. Personal

isn't the right word because it sounds like psychology, but personal in the other way. You're seeing it detached from its history. You're relating to it...

**Sarah:** Totally.

**Tere:** ...within your own life, and so I don't see it as reference. That's really the difference. You could look at a language or what you were calling a handstand dance or a ballet dance and say, "That dance is a ballet dance," or you could say, "That's a dance that includes some ballet." Or, you don't even see the ballet, and it's those degrees of where the structure subverts the visuals. I think that's what's happening to you. The content behind what you're using reinvents the visual information. I think I see that with you a lot.

**Sarah:** I definitely think I'm working in that area.

**Tere:** The other thing I wanted to ask you about, because it was so interesting in the last piece at P.S. 122...

**Sarah:** *Daylight*.

**Tere:** ...was the woman coming out at the end and dancing, and the woman was just this...

**Sarah:** I'm so glad you brought that up.

**Tere:** ...real beautiful and simple and blatant and kind of painful coming to terms with theme and variation. This is my old trip: theme and variation. Why does anyone do theme and variation?

**Sarah:** I think I do theme and variation.

**Tere:** But the whole thing is like, "Oops, here's the theme. I'm sorry. Are you leaving? Oh, here's the theme. Here's the dramatic information. It's going to be delivered to you in a person who's out of ilk, in a costume that is really different, who has not been introduced." I am grappling with it, and I think it does with the audience—the theme is being presented out of the confines of the beginning and end of the piece.

**Sarah:** So simple, right?

**Tere:** Very simple. It suggests something like the viewer has to come up with the thematic material. It's after the show. You are coming to terms with it after the show. You just bring that into visibility somehow.

**Sarah:** It's great that you notice that because Phil Sandstrom thought she was doing completely different movements in his review.

**Tere:** That's the root movement, isn't it? It was the basic theme.

**Sarah:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Tere:** That's clear. I just love it because, I don't want to talk about myself, but I am grappling with theme and variation. I really don't like it. I want to run from it. It's like a nightmare.

**Sarah:** But, you do theme and variation, Tere. You do theme and variation...

**Tere:** Well, I do theme and variation, but I want to do just variation.

**Sarah:** ...like a master.

**Tere:** I want to do just variation.

**Sarah:** I know, but you do theme and variation.

**Tere:** I want to do just variation.

**Sarah:** I'm sorry.

**Tere:** It's not about whether I do or not. It's an Incubus for me. I hate it.

**Sarah:** You're masterful at it.

**Tere:** How did that come up for you? Making that decision?

**Sarah:** For her?

**Tere:** Yeah. What was the chronology of that, and how did the chronology of that discovery...

**Sarah:** I had these grand ideas about Herzog & de Meuron, and reinventing P.S. 122. Parker and I had just heard Herzog & de Meuron's idea for an intimate theater for the Walker Arts Center. Using all of their concepts, and even their fabric, and making P.S. 122 into a Swiss stage—ha, ha, ha—and then, in that stage doing a modern dance. Then knowing who we are and that 90% of the people watching that dance will watch that dance knowing who we are: me and Parker and Greg and Mike doing that. It felt like there had to be someone making an effort. Not that we weren't making an effort. We were making a huge effort.

**Tere:** Oh, definitely.

**Sarah:** But, there had to be something authentic. It was so authentic. *Daylight* to me is... I'm very proud of that dance, even though I think it was received very negatively. I really have this new adulthood where I feel very confident about things even when maybe people don't like them. That's very new for me.

**Tere:** Well, I think that...

**Sarah:** I know I'm trying something.

**Tere:** The thing is, out there in the world, a lot of people who suggest they would like you to try something, it doesn't really work out when you do, so that's something that you have to really...

**Sarah:** I know that, as far as I'm concerned, that was a little experiment, and when that theater was built inside the Walker Arts Center, and you saw how similar the actual thing was, like the stencils, all these things that we had mimicked, just from a PowerPoint presentation and some theory. It was very fucking exciting to be on the stage in the middle of that theater and then have 50 children dressed in stencil outfits.

**Tere:** In terms of extending the idea, the idea that that one girl... You could see her through the glass on someone else's lawn. It's the same as crossing the street at the Kitchen when you guys, you and Parker, came over. The theater expands outside of the theater. My idea expands outside of the theater. My idea is expansive. It is so poetic, and the poetics are made geographic almost.

**Sarah:** I think the formalism is the thing. I didn't know this at the time, but I think I'm figuring it out now. I think that formalism is the thing that protects me from being thin on the ground with a fast idea. I think formalism is the thing that backs up my desire because I am so formal.

**Tere:** You mean supports it.

**Sarah:** Yeah, that's what I mean, that it's not dismissible quite as easily.

**Tere:** Oh, I see. I remember seeing the Rose Window when I was very young in a book—not really young, in college—but I just remember being like, "God, this is so... this is the beauty of repression."

**Sarah:** I'm a repressed person.

**Tere:** Oh, please. I wouldn't have had you over if you weren't. It's all about that. The word "press" is in the word "repress." It's like a stencil, or pressing something out through this formalism, and that's what I think is a real tension in your work. It's you through the cage of formalism. It's really, really resonant. But, I just want to go back, if you don't mind, to that question that I asked about—because we just went on a little journey right there, which was very enjoyable; my hair is mussed—but...

**Sarah:** Put your shirt back on. [Laughs.]

**Tere:** But, when did that idea come? It subverts theme and variation.

**Sarah:** Lindsay.

**Tere:** Yeah.



**Sarah:** Her name is Lindsay.

**Tere:** It doesn't matter when it came, but I think it's interesting for people to understand the chronology of dance doesn't necessarily reflect the chronology of its inception.

**Sarah:** No, yeah. She was a player—that role, from the beginning.

**Tere:** Oh, from the beginning. Oh, that's incredible.

**Sarah:** But I didn't hire her till about halfway through.

**Tere:** But who she is isn't necessarily that, but the structure of what's going to happen there, was there. That's really interesting.

**Sarah:** I have to make decisions that are going to give me faith. If I'm going to go all the way of making that dance in weird, floaty outfits, I need to know something's been placed so that I can go all the way with that.

**Tere:** I see, so the structure is kind of like an anchor for you.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Tere:** I was really into that. That was really interesting to me. Now, I would like to talk to you also about a sense of fashion that's in there. I said to you before that I'm an enormous fan of the pictures in the BAM promotional material. I'm not a fashion person.

**Sarah:** I'm not a fashion person.

**Tere:** Well, I mean.

**Sarah:** All right, readers...

**Tere:** Well, I don't mean fashion person. What I want to ask you about it is why is it one of the symbols in your work, and I think that it is. I don't have a judgment about it, I'm just wondering, what do you think about that?

**Sarah:** I think at first, when I first started making work, and I feel like I can talk to you about this frankly because I feel like really you were there. You came to *Group Experience* and you knew me, and I think it seemed radical at first. Fashion, as an element in a modern dance piece in P.S. 122, at that moment in relationship to the things that I love: Yvonne and DD and Jennifer and DanceNoise, seemed a step out on my own at that moment.

**Tere:** So, it got born that way, and what did it become?

**Sarah:** Then, well... it's so hard that word, "Fashion."

**Tere:** Well, let's call it something else.

**Sarah:** I feel like I know what you mean, and at a certain point in my life, when I was working at Movement Research and editing the *Journal*, and I was so proud of that job and so dedicated to it and so upset that there were a million magazines that people would pick up before they would pick up the Movement Research *Journal*, I thought it was because it lacked glamour, and the things that people would pick up—I feel naive saying this now, but—had a certain kind of cache or glamour about the design. It seems sort of dumb to say this now because so much has changed in that short amount of time, actually, really in the last six years. There's been a huge change in relationship to media and dance and magazine cultures, and all of that stuff, but if you can imagine another time... At that time, I just thought, "Couldn't it just have something that would be... We're doing such neat things."

**Tere:** It brings attention.

**Sarah:** I was younger. It seems naive now, but I think that I felt I was driven somehow to stay really true to everything I'd learned from all of my collaborators and people I worked with at Movement Research and all those thoughts and ideas, but just get a little bit out of the bread and butter culture, somehow. Meaning that I don't want necessarily to use string and cardboard every time, though I love string and cardboard. What happens if you have a limousine? Can you have a limousine and Dolce and Gabbana outfits? Can you do that, or can you not do that? I don't know if you can do it or not do it, so I want to try that.

**Tere:** The fashion thing to me is interesting because I feel like when I read things about fashion, and I'm not a real intender, but it talks about, "This is like the '80s, this is like the '70s." It's all reference, and when you guys came out, particularly the women, but also the men, in *Daylight*, you come out, and we're like, "What is that? What is that look?" It's Cesaria Evora goes to Macy's to have lunch with Lucille Ball and Edith Head, and it's like, "Where am I?" But it's the same way that you deal with signifiers in dance because there is no lexicon of anything. No symbol really means anything in dance, and I think that's what you're doing. You're using fashion in a choreographic way. When you came out, I was like, "Okay, I am in a place of not knowing right now." (Laughs.)

**Sarah:** That's cute. I like it. Our outfits...

**Tere:** No, they're gorgeous, but they're unidentifiable. They make a comment on choreography. It's its own system.

**Sarah:** There was so much in that. We had so many crazy outfits. We had these puffy coats.

**Tere:** Oh thank God you didn't do those.

**Sarah:** Yeah, well, we did them in *Daylight* in Minneapolis on the roof, and we sang the pop song that became something in the extended *Daylight*, but I cut them all up in my house. I made these things. I was very affected by Dominique Mercy when he performed at the Bessies.

**Tere:** That guy from Pina's company?

**Sarah:** Yeah, and his billowing shirt, and we had a section that was based on Dominique Mercy in that dance. I don't know why. It was just funny, but we did.

**Tere:** Well, because it hit you somehow.

**Sarah:** Yeah. It seemed like we took ages to really arrive at it, even though the idea... This is really Parker and I. We kept wanting to go for it. It seemed like the men had to have billowing shirts—weird.

**Tere:** And weird pants.

**Sarah:** So are we in slips? What? We had to be like, "Whoa, okay."

**Tere:** But I think there's also an attempt to say, "This isn't anything you know."

**Sarah:** Well, I don't think that it is anything you know because we barely always know. I only feel satisfied if, on some level, I don't know.

**Tere:** I feel that. I think it's a parallel to the choreography, and I want to just go into one other level of thinking about the choreography. Say that one of the elements is repetition. Can you talk a little bit about how you construct things? Because I think that really is telling with artists. You can just talk randomly. I don't think that you need to be explanatory about it, but I know some things in retrospect about what I make that are kind of telling, and I'm wondering if you have any. Suddenly they're all over on the side of the building, the side of the Kitchen. Then there's the thing with Jennifer Lacey. Then you're here. What do you think about that, about constructing and making structures with the elements?

**Sarah:** That's very instinctive. That thing is always the thing that—even when we're talking about it—burning me. Well, you have to go over there. No, over there, over there. It's very base. It's very instinctive, that thing.

**Tere:** That's good to hear.

**Sarah:** It amounts to something in the end, and I just keep going, fiddling and fiddling until it amounts to something. But I think it's probably some kind of physics or mathematical construct that arrives.

**Tere:** It's a system, yeah.

**Sarah:** It's always sadness. It's always a feeling in the end. How do we get to the feeling?

**Tere:** Repression and sadness. (Laughs.)

**Sarah:** In the end, it's always all these elements: What are we going to wear? What are we going to do? What's the space? What are we going to make it look like? What's the genre that I'm going to use? What's the reference? What's the comment? All of those questions are happening, and then after that's all in the pot, how do you arrive at the feeling that those things all are?

**Tere:** I think maybe it's because...

**Sarah:** It's Love Boat, man.

**Tere:** It's Love Boat (laughs). Maybe you don't give any of them more importance than the other thing, because I think the experience that I have of your dances is, or that one could have with them is, that there's something inevitable about them. There's something going on that is...

**Sarah:** If you feel that, I feel like I've succeeded. That's what it feels like to me.

**Tere:** I remember that I was so in love with, in *Group Experience*, the person who was knitting the thing. That's not frivolous. That's like the repetition. It's soaked in the aesthetic somehow. It is a part of it. It's temporal. It's constantly being knitted and growing. It reminds me for example...

**Sarah:** Of yourself. (She points at the knitting basket.)

**Tere:** I knit badly. Splitting up *Shadowman* was basically two halves of one evening, but you have to suspend your mind for a two-week intermission. It has its seeds in the ever-growing crocheting there. There's all these parallels from the visual information and the structural information in your work, that I feel point to you being an artist. It's interesting to hear, and I think it's interesting for our community to talk sometimes, about what's just intuitive.

**Sarah:** I think there's a level at which I'm pretty base in that way.

**Tere:** Or that's heightened. I like to think of it as a heightened sense.

**Sarah:** Okay. That's cool, and I really want to say, that those ideas, I really work on with Parker a lot, and she's very similar to me in that way.

**Tere:** If you just focus on a moment of your work where there's dancing happening, you're thinking, "Oh my God, this dancing is just very fulfilling." Do you think that, because I look at people's work and find that their phrase material, if there is phrase material, or just even the way that they make one step go to the next, reflects the overall structure of their work.

**Sarah:** Totally.

**Tere:** Do you think it gets born out of dancing often? That structure?

**Sarah:** Mine?

**Tere:** Do you think that through dancing you're trying larger structures—through making material the dance material?

**Sarah:** Yeah. The moves become iconic. Therefore that move exists and then it creates, it demands something of you in order to leave it.

**Tere:** And you can grow from that into larger ideas.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Tere:** Actually, one of the things that I really respect from you and would like to try and do... That you're so secretive about your work is really great. I wish everyone would do that because having to explain your work beforehand is really a big problem in this form.

**Sarah:** I think so. A fucking blurb? I mean, whatever. I don't mean to be critical about what works for people.

**Tere:** It's just the system, and people are doing the best they can. It's not about that. For me, I find it completely aggravating to write one, and you don't, and I think that's great.

**Sarah:** I pretty much say no whenever I can, and people are starting to be much more supportive of that. It was very, very hard at first, especially because I don't...

**Tere:** It's not a bratty thing.

**Sarah:** No, it's me. I don't have a website or a press kit or any of that. That's not for me, and that's fine for everyone who does it. Of course it's fine. I'm totally supportive and would help anybody who wanted to do that stuff, but I do sometimes want to say to people who hear that they must have a press kit and they must have a website and they must have a this, that, and the other, I want to say... One time, I was really, really upset about something, and I called Guy Yarden. He met me for breakfast, and he listened to me go on. I dribbled on, I'm sure, about this, that, and the other, and he just said, "Do your work. Do not get distracted. Just do it." He was not being nice with me. He was like, "Why are you wasting my time?" That's Guy. "Do your work. Don't be a baby. Just get on with it." I really hear his voice saying that so many times, and sometimes I do think it's important for people to know that you will be told that you need to have marketing materials, that you need to meet presenters, that you need to do all these things. But, if you keep making your work, and if your work becomes of interest to your immediate community, people find out.

**Tere:** Yeah, that's true. That's true. To go back to what I was asking you, and to finish the question, is there something about the BAM space or this experience, without you telling me anything about it, what's the next step for you at the nuts and bolts choreographic level? What do you think you're confronting now, if you know, because that always changes, I think.

**Sarah:** It does. I think that potentially the pressure or the expectation that “Sarah Michelson going to BAM” would be spectacle. So, I'm really handling what does that mean and potentially not arriving at spectacle. Also handling—this is the responsive thing—I am going to have a gig at BAM. And maybe I'm being too grandiose and special about it, but...

**Tere:** No, it's scary.

**Sarah:** It's, for someone who is me, from the downtown community going to BAM... First of all, let me just say that as far as I know, certainly Wally [Cardona] and John [Jasperse] who are the other two people from our community that I know of (there's Susan Marshall, but I don't know her) who have done shows at BAM, have premiered there work elsewhere before the show. So this, as far as I know, is a pretty rare situation where a person hasn't premiered the work elsewhere and has a two-day load in.

**Tere:** Oh, God.

**Sarah:** Total. Two days total load-in.

**Tere:** You should load in during the piece.

**Sarah:** Hello! Right? In going to BAM and considering all those things—Who am I to this community? I don't know, but obviously I got that gig and so, how can I be responsible about that, whatever that means. What comes up are the considerations of how would one approach that stage, and how would one approach that scenario, and how would one represent, and how would one figure out if that representation is actually diminutive, really? My concerns have become... Recently, inside our community, with the introduction of a lot of conceptual work and maybe less focus on actual dance and structure, I feel I want to approach that in a very formal way. So, I'm doing it on purpose. I'm just telling you now.

**Tere:** A bunch of things are coming together. I got it, I got it.

**Sarah:** But they're printing this after the show, I know.

**Tere:** Unless I black-market it.

**Sarah:** Hey!

**Tere:** Sarah and I were talking earlier about being responsive and what that means, and are we?

**Sarah:** Sarah and I? (Laughs.)

**Tere:** Sarah Michelson. I'm talking to [other] people, not to you (laughs). So, I'm just saying that to the listener/reader.

And that's the thing that we were talking about: what is being responsive now? I think there's something about trend, and I run for my life against that. I think it shapes my work. It shapes

the look of my work. In *Baby*, there's certain things that are just gross to me, but I keep them because they're other, and that's why I like them. I think that's a way of being responsive, and I feel this tension between conceptual and movement, although I think it's a really unfortunate thing because it feels very old to me. It's almost like "figurative versus abstract", which is a dead discussion. Do you think that it changes any kind of natural progression you would have or it's part of that natural progression?

**Sarah:** I do, but then I have to imagine it's like ecology.

**Tere:** It doesn't matter, yeah.

**Sarah:** The thing fell off. I didn't want it too. I really liked it, but it had to fall off. It definitely does. I feel like there are things that I started that are unfinished because their potential got picked up and done in a cheaper way. So, therefore, I can't finish that thing. That's when I have to go down another route.

**Tere:** But what is that? I've had those feelings, and I think a lot of my work has been shaped that way.

**Sarah:** I don't know.

**Tere:** Why do we have to be so original? Is that...?

**Sarah:** We could talk about dumb stuff like meter and all that stuff, but I actually think that's the very deepest argument of artists of all time.

**Tere:** Which?

**Sarah:** Exactly that—what does it mean when someone else who is close to you and in your community... when those things are all happening and you're responsive, and you're forced to go in a direction? I feel like that, in a weird way, when that's happening, irritating as it might be, is just living in a vibrant art community.

**Tere:** Yeah, definitely. I think so too.

**Sarah:** And as Guy says...

**Tere:** Do your work. (Laughs.) Let me just think of other things I could ask you about. Let's talk about something like the Jennifer Lacey idea, which I just thought was so great because, for some people, that's some woman in a video, for other people, that's Jennifer Lacey in a video.

**Sarah:** That was very exciting all over Europe, do you know what I mean? Some people knew her, and some people identify her with me.

**Tere:** Right because she just appeared and was born there, right. And then Superamas has their interview, which is really funny.

**Sarah:** Which, that was the funny thing, because they came up to me, and of course, I was a total cow. They were like, "Sarah, you must, must, must come to our show." They're so cute. They were like, "You must, must, must come to our show," and I was like, "Oh, yeah, yeah," and I didn't go in Europe. Then, when I went in New York, I did feel like a total turd, because I was like, "Oh, that's why they wanted me to come." They said, "We have so much in common, you must come to our show," and I was like, "Oh my gosh." We were on the same touring circuit.

**Tere:** Well, you were both at SommerSzene in Salzburg.

**Sarah:** We were in Salzburg and Berlin, so people must have really been seeing Jennifer Lacey's face all summer long in people's work. That was hilarious to me when I realized that.

**Tere:** Well, what is something like that for you, something that's really personal, and something that is going to be seen as personal, and also absolutely not? What do you feel about that? I think that's really resonant.

**Sarah:** People have really criticized me for that and gave me flack because they said that that means that it's all in-jokes, it's all insider dance. It's trendy insider dance.

**Tere:** I think that's so sad because...

**Sarah:** They say that I'm making elitist work. I was like, "I can take it on the chin. Okay, fine, let's say I am."

**Tere:** I hate that word.

**Sarah:** Let's say I'm making work for the contemporary dance elite.

**Tere:** All three of them.

**Sarah:** Yes, exactly. Let's say that's what I'm doing, fine. That photograph of Jennifer Lacey was taken during a special time. We were on tour with *Group Experience*, and we won this prize in Zurich. Jennifer Lacey met us in Zurich and she became the knitter for the Zurich shows.

**Tere:** Oh, she did?

**Sarah:** She was the knitter. We won the prize and then we also got the Joyce SoHo Residency on the same day, and it was Parker's birthday. Y'all didn't come for dinner because you had just flown in and you were too tired. You all had to stay in your hotel. Yeah, you did. You were apologetic. Janet called us.

**Tere:** I was being a Cancer.



**Sarah:** The next day we went to Baden-Baden and went to the baths, and Jennifer came, and we went on the Lichtentaler Allee and took photos in the flowers. So she was, in a weird way, part of getting to *Shadowman*, and it was Germany, and as you know, part two of *Shadowman* was inspired by Germany. The whole second part was German speaking by Mike and Paige.

**Tere:** Oh, which I loved.

**Sarah:** It felt like we brought the girl home.

**Tere:** It's a specific choreographic thing, especially these...

**Sarah:** But, it also was for Miguel Gutierrez. It also was for Miguel Gutierrez. I knew that he was in the audience and that, when Jennifer Lacey's face came on, he was going to be very excited. Why shouldn't that mean something? Why can't it be that? That just means that certain people who dedicated their lives to this form, sometimes get a special message, and how fucking great is that?

**Tere:** I also think it brings into focus how much people project onto dance works. Some of it is really personal, and some of it is really generic. For an artist to bring the personal and the generic into close proximity is in the nature of the form, and when people call things non sequitur, or, as you know, the famous "surrealism", I think those are aspects of dance. They're not what you're working with. They're already there in the form.

**Sarah:** Totally, of course.

**Tere:** And you're just bringing them into evidence. I feel like that's something that you're doing that is of great interest to me. I really hope that it can be elucidated to the viewer that it's not elitist. It's just what they're doing anyway. They're looking at something saying, "That reminds me of my friend."

**Sarah:** Totally.

**Tere:** Then they're like, "What's that?"—the next thing—and then they're like, "Oh that's like pizza." Then they're like, "Oh, what the heck is that?" It's just that journey in and out of a sense of being able to identify things through personal codes, and I think you bring that in to the making.

**Sarah:** Well if you want to take the time when Jennifer Lacey's face is flashing, Jennifer Howard, who shares her name, but who doesn't even know Jennifer Lacey...

**Tere:** Is going on a wicked diagonal downstage.

**Sarah:** The only person who doesn't know Jennifer Lacey is doing a dance with her.

**Tere:** She's doing a wicked diagonal, I know. She's like, "I am on this diagonal."

**Sarah:** Totally. (Laughs.)

**Tere:** (Laughs.) Also bringing Henry [Baumgartner] into it. There's all this...

**Sarah:** Henry. Now me and Henry are friends, do you know?

**Tere:** I know. I saw him the other day.

**Sarah:** That's a shift. I always knew Henry, blah, blah, blah. I learned so much about that person. I know his girlfriend, or at least I speak to her on the phone. She is not a dance lover.

**Tere:** He's there all the time. Well, I wish the elitist thing could go away. If there are four women in England who collect a certain kind of milk glass, you wouldn't call them elitist, but for some reason that gets foisted on us.

**Sarah:** I think that gets foisted on me when... I'm scared to say, it doesn't get foisted on you when you're unsuccessful.

**Tere:** Perhaps not. That could be true.

**Sarah:** I think it's when it feels like it's successful in some way that you don't relate to. I apologize. I am...

**Tere:** I feel like the world...

**Sarah:** I am a hybrid, and I am a snob maybe. I'm also very, very humble. I'm definitely one of the most snobby people and one of the most humble people I know all in one.

**Tere:** They often coexist.

**Sarah:** In one little parcel.

**Tere:** I think people are responding to your work, and I hope that it's something about audience opening up to a wider understanding about what this form can be. If we go back to the new problem of conceptualism and dance-making as we see it, in a way that includes movement as part of its investigation. The thing that upsets me about some of the conceptualism is that it is so topical. It calls itself conceptualism, but it's narrative to me. People who can look at dances that float meaning with a lack of meaning and intermingle those things, and that that can be successful, and in your hands it is, I'm happy about that. I think that's a really good thing. Also, that my feeling about... I use this word "imagination." It sounds so bogus, but it is key to dance-making, because there's nothing there in that room. There's nothing there. You are just creating the whole vision and its temporal motor.

**Sarah:** Definitely motor. I really like that: motor.

**Tere:** Yeah, you have to keep it going and it shifts the ways that it continues moving forward. I

don't know. I guess I kind of feel happy that there's light being shed on you, because I feel like...

**Sarah:** Oh, that's cute, Tere. Thanks.

**Tere:** I do think the success thing is an issue, because I wish that people could just see that this is a real great big poetic.

**Sarah:** But it is that funny thing. Why do I have a show at BAM? Why me? That's what Erika [Kinetz] has tried to ask, I think in the *New York Times*, and I don't know. Honestly, I don't know. I don't know why you don't, Neil Greenberg doesn't, Miguel doesn't. I don't know why. I am lucky? Unlucky?

**Tere:** That's one level of importance. I feel like a real horizontal thing about it. I don't think that BAM is any different than Dixon Place, really.

**Sarah:** No, I don't either. The thing is...

**Tere:** Erika [Kinetz], when she said, "the scrum"—"getting out of the scrum of downtown dance." What is going on?

**Sarah:** So disgusting. So disgusting, but yes, I am responding to... Okay, BAM's different. I'll tell you why: the way that it's organized. You have rehearsal space. You call the people up, and you say, "Oh, let's have a production meeting." It's different. It's very supportive.

**Tere:** The thing about BAM in a really obvious way is that you are making very big work and it goes there. I think that makes a lot of sense. I want to talk about one other thing though, because I don't know, is this going to be interesting to people or is it just that we're having a nice talk? What about a sense of what's going on in the world? Do you feel anything about that and how...

**Sarah:** (Laughs) Oh, Tere, Nothing.

**Tere:** Obviously. I was just asking the question. I just keep asking the question because I get so confused when some people do work that is called political, and I think, well, "I get those ideas. Why are they in the work?" Then other things like Juliette [Mapp's] piece, where she's just asking the question, and you really feel this sense of urgency in her question about it. I'm wondering if that's in your work. How does it get filtered? I think it is. I think you're crashing against what the time we're in is like. But do you see how that's filtered into the work or how it manifests itself somehow in there, or not?

**Sarah:** You know, I don't. I feel like it is. I feel like I... It definitely is. I got to say, if it's in my body, then it's in there.

**Tere:** Yeah, that's true.

**Sarah:** I can only trust that.

**Tere:** I trust that. I guess I just asked you because I think that whatever the word “contemporary” means, I feel like your work is very contemporary and I trust that. I think dance-making is a way of processing information that's going on in a non-hierarchical kind of way: not saying this is more important than that, so I'm not going to make war frontal in my discussion, but it certainly is part of the engine. I feel like that's going on in your work... This is my last question.

**Sarah:** Okay. Just like that.

**Tere:** Well, I mean, I could go on forever, because I am so full of shit, and I like to blab.

**Sarah:** Oh, my God. This is an hour long.

**Tere:** Well, we'll go for two hours. I just did this piece in Lyon, and you did a piece there. You're doing this piece at BAM. What do you think about big stages and dance? I find it sometimes really hard to see people.

**Sarah:** The dancers you mean?

**Tere:** Yes. I feel like sometimes it looks like pencils in an earthquake. That's all it looks like.

**Sarah:** Yes. You have to know that before you do it.

**Tere:** But sometimes it feels like that's the biggest message that there can be in it. I see some work at BAM, and I'm interested in the poetics of it, but I can't feel it.

**Sarah:** Like what?

**Tere:** I think more in the olden days—things with Pina, and these huge cavernous spaces where I was like, “I can't see that, so it kind of brings something generic to the work.” William Forsythe's last piece, *Kammer/Kammer*...

**Sarah:** I didn't see that. I was away.

**Tere:** Well, it's very, very, very far away, even though the video screens do something about bringing it into close-up. Maybe he was trying to come to terms with that thing.

**Sarah:** Definitely it was, because the close-up...

**Tere:** Well, they're not really what's going on. It's a framed version of what's going on, but there's something about that that bothers me. Even at New York City Ballet. I went this year, and I had seats in the back of the orchestra, and it was like “I could go to Central Park and watch people at that distance.” Is there an overall statement about putting the human figure in such a monolithic space, and can you get beyond that? Can you transcend that?

**Sarah:** I think you can. For me, just in those small things between *Shadowman 1* and 2...

**Tere:** Yeah, big to little space...

**Sarah:** And, *Daylight* to *Daylight in Minneapolis*, I feel like...

**Tere:** Shrinking and growing things.

**Sarah:** Definitely, and in Lyon, the thing that I made with White Oak that you saw in the studio. It was successful in the studio. It was unsuccessful on stage, pretty much, I think. I learned a lot from that, on the proscenium. For a bunch of reasons, several reasons, really, but one of them was the proscenium. I did better in Lyon. I wasn't on the proscenium, but it was a fucking huge place. It was so huge. Did you go there?

**Tere:** No, but I heard about it.

**Sarah:** Oh my God. It looked exactly like The Kitchen, but four or five times the size. I mean, it was huge. So, I did that thing, that probably I would do. I put the dancers really far away in one corner for like half an hour.

**Tere:** That's cool. It's just a big question for me when I see work, because I feel like there are all these accidental kind of ideas that come out if a person, if an author isn't really on top of it, and one of them is...

**Sarah:** Perspective is a huge issue.

**Tere:** But also the message of placing a body in space, what it says. The space says, "Look, you can't see me because I'm too far away." To transcend that is difficult, I think. I think we, as a group of humans, we've come to terms with it and said, "That's fine with us."

**Sarah:** I'm very inexperienced with big stages, but...

**Tere:** But it has to be brought into consideration...

**Sarah:** I think that the one thing that I have going for me is that I naturally handle things in relationship to perspective. I'm always looking, as a looker, in terms of that. So, the idea of something being invisible because it's very far away, but still being dance—I'm interested in that problem.

**Tere:** A lot of times what you seem to do is grow spaces outside of their size. Do you think in a big space you shrink the space?

**Sarah:** In this particular dance that will be at BAM, I think that I went in. I think I went in to the idea of that space as opposed to... I think yes, shrunk it, not literally.

**Tere:** I'm looking forward to seeing it. Do you have any questions for yourself?

**Sarah:** No.

**Tere:** Well, what other things do you think are interesting because, like I said to you before, it would be nice to do a class or something with people to look at a piece and talk about it because I can't remember everything. I can remember a lot. I certainly can, but...

**Sarah:** You certainly can. I can't even believe it.

**Tere:** To say to people, "What does it do to you when you see this next to this, or when this progresses to this?" You've taken my class, and something I talk about is the "thing-to-thingness", this idea of "what comes after what?" In your work, I think that's really gorgeous and important to the work, that you set up a system where I don't know what's coming next, but that's not its point. That's what's happening because you're immersed in a certain innate, forward-moving thing that you're making, and it occurs and it goes on this journey.

**Sarah:** I hope so. Gosh that sounds good.

**Tere:** It does feel like that. I don't think I would like it so much if it didn't feel like that. There's something about the shaping of it that is ineluctable. It has to happen that way, and it's so well wrought, and it's interesting to hear you say that it's intuitive because I think intuition is so important to unleash on your work.

**Sarah:** If something feels wrong, all I know is it feels wrong, and it bugs me.

**Tere:** But, just the way that you talk about it that way, it gives me the freedom to not have to look for the reasons why it's working.

**Sarah:** No, I'm kind of autistic in that way, I think.

**Tere:** I think that some choreographers are on that spectrum, and I don't mean to be not respectful of that. We can stop here. I don't know if we did a good job or not.

**Sarah:** I don't know either.

**Tere:** It was nice to talk.

**Sarah:** It was nice to talk to you.