

Stephanie Skura
in conversation with Lana Wilson (Part One)

Filmmaker and Performa curator Lana Wilson talks with Stephanie Skura, a Seattle-based choreographer whose new work, Two Huts, is being shown this weekend (through March 18, 2012) at Roulette. This engagement marks her first return to New York in 20 years, which Critical Correspondence is celebrating through this two-part interview series. In Part One, Skura and Wilson discuss Skura's influences as a choreographer, including early exposure to body-mind technique, a well-timed call from Pearl Lang, and collaborations in the early 80s with Ishmael Houston-Jones and Yvonne Meier.

Interview Date: March 9, 2012

Lana Wilson: I'll never forget when I first saw a video of your 1987 performance *Cranky Destroyers*—it was so funny and energetic, and full of constant surprises. You were an important part of the downtown New York dance scene in the 1980s, and since moving to Seattle in the early 90s, you've been very active in both choreography and theater over there. You've also been an influential teacher—a lot of the dancers who performed in your work or took classes with you, like Benoît Lachambre, Juliette Mapp, and David Roussève, have developed their own careers as choreographers. But I feel like very little is known about your beginnings. Where did you come from? How did you start dancing? Why did you start choreographing?

Stephanie Skura: Well, I was born in Brooklyn, and took my first dance class there at age four. The thing I remember most about it was the giant gray door leading to the studio. As a four-year-old, that was very intimidating. My mother sent me to the class because she wanted me to be graceful. She never really wanted me to get serious about it as a profession.

Lana: That's probably a parent's worst nightmare, their child saying, "I'm going to be a choreographer."

Stephanie: Probably! Then when I was still young we moved to Long Island, and there was a dance teacher in my town named Lillian Fenster who had studied Graham technique and yoga, and was familiar with Mabel Todd's work in *The Thinking Body*. Her classes mixed Graham with somatic stuff—like lying on the floor and imagining that we were a bag of sand with a hole in it, so all of the sand was slowly pouring out. So I started to have the experience of working with imagery beginning in the fifth grade. We would also learn movement, go across the floor, the whole thing, but then at the end of every class we would make up our own little dances.

Lana: Wow—that's a pretty radical education for a ten-year-old on Long Island.

Stephanie: Yes. And it means that my first experiences in dance included mind-body technique, and actually choreographing, which was important, because for a lot of people who study dance, it's about learning movement that you see. The thought of making up movement is traumatic, or at least a strange and uncomfortable concept. So I think it was a very lucky first experience for me to have.

Lana: When was this exactly, when you were studying with Lillian Fenster?

Stephanie: When I was growing up in the late 50s and early 60s. My mother also started having me take piano lessons from age nine. I was very serious about piano—I had the dance class once a week, but with piano, you have to practice all the time. I really enjoyed practicing. I think for me it was a way of leaving the house without really leaving the house, if you know what I mean. And I think I practiced more than my mother would have liked [laughs]. My teacher wanted me to be a professional pianist, but when he talked to my mother about putting me on the path to

a conservatory, she said, "No! It'll take too much time away from her homework." Which was fine with me.

Lana: Did you keep dancing all the way through high school?

Stephanie: Yes. I used to take the train to Manhattan for the teenage classes at the Graham school. And in the summer I would take the intensives there. I would work so hard, not having anything except Diet Coke, and just dancing all day every day.

Lana: Were you seeing performances, too?

Stephanie: Yeah, all the time. When I was in junior high and high school, I got to see the Martha Graham Company quite a lot, because they would tour to all the high schools. I never saw the Cunningham company or anything like that, so I just thought that Martha Graham pretty much was dance.

I also saw some other modern dance shows with my best friend and her parents, who were communists that listened to folk music. They would go because at that time, modern dance felt like part of the labor movement, with socialist ideals and strong women. That had its effect on me.

Lana: Then did you go to college?

Stephanie: Yes, first to the University of Chicago for a year. I was kind of a nerd and a brain in high school, but in college I wasn't a good student. I would cut classes, oversleep, just not show up. Some of the teachers resented that, understandably. I stopped dancing when I went there, which I think was part of the problem. I felt like my brain became this overdeveloped muscle, and it was almost paralyzing. All this thinking. I think dancing was a good balancing mechanism for me, and that I had enough instinct to know what I needed. So I moved to Manhattan, and started taking dance classes again at the Graham school.

Lana: What year was this?

Stephanie: In the early 70s. I tried going back to college, to academia, at the NYU College of Arts and Sciences. I studied philosophy, religion, literature, math...all things I was interested in. But I ended up not following through, and instead started taking two or three dance classes a day at a studio in midtown.

Lana: Did you think you wanted to be a professional dancer at this point?

Stephanie: I remember the exact moment when I felt that. I had started experimenting with psychedelic drugs, which sort of exploded my whole personality, so I began studying Haitian dance with Jean Leon Destine. Haitian dance is somewhat trancelike and repetitive, so it helped to keep me together. Jean taught us a short dance structure to perform at a lecture-demonstration he was giving, and I remember performing it there, with four live drummers, and feeling like this was the most gratifying thing I had ever done in my life. After that's when I started to take several classes every day.

Then, when I was 22, my father died. It was very sudden, not a long illness or anything like that. He was alive, and then he was dead.

That completely rewired me. It was traumatic, but even more importantly, my father was such a hard worker, and in comparison to him I felt so casual and loose, always dabbling in lots of different things. When he died, I had this feeling that I needed to focus on one thing, go really deeply into it, and stop doing everything else.

I called up my old piano teacher and said, "I want to go to the conservatory now." And he said, "You're too old." Which is kind of weird.

Lana: You would expect to hear that for dance, but not for music.

Stephanie: Right. The other thing about my father's death, though, was that he left me some money, but it could only be used for education. And my father didn't believe that dance classes counted as education. My older sister had wanted to be a visual artist, but he wouldn't pay for her to go to grad school, because he said that intelligent people didn't become artists. So I could only use the money to go back to college, which wasn't what I wanted to do.

I was telling the head of my dance studio about all of this, and he said, "I want to put you on the phone with someone." He calls someone on the phone, I didn't know who, hands the phone to me, and says, "It's Pearl Lang."

Lana: Wow! The legendary Graham dancer.

Stephanie: Who just died last year. She was on the phone, and just said, "Do you want to be a choreographer?" And I answered, "Well, yeah, I guess so." Then she said, "Start now! *Don't wait!*" And hearing her say that was like listening to an oracle talking. It just went right through me.

Lana: That makes so much sense to me, because when I think about your work, the first thing I think of is urgency. The people on stage are trying to communicate something very important to us. And it sounds like, after your father passed away so unexpectedly, forcing you to re-focus, and after you had this phone call, you really seized on that feeling.

Stephanie: That's interesting. Today I make fun of this, but I remember Graham and the other teachers at her studio always shouting, "You should go across the floor like it's your last day on earth!" I would watch the older dancers at the end of the class before mine, and the sweat would just be *whipping* off of them—they were always throwing every fiber of their being into the combination.

Lana: Incredible.

Stephanie: Anyway, I ended up finishing college at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. At first I wasn't happy, because I felt like my father had forced me to go back into academia, and like everyone else at Tisch just wanted to go on Broadway and be really sexy. So I was lonely, and gained thirty pounds. But I found certain teachers that I loved. And I got the chance to choreograph my first piece, which was inspired by the German Expressionist film *Nosferatu* [1922].

I was living with friends in a cheap loft in SoHo where we had a studio. They were theater and dance people, a lot of them had been to Poland to work with [Jerzy] Grotowski, and we had improvisations and other events there a lot. They helped me with this performance about *Nosferatu*. I had a woman playing Dracula, and an image came to me in a dream that I was actually able to re-create: at the end of the piece, Dracula backing up and then starting to walk backward up the wall. After I dreamed this, I talked to people from the school's design department, and they figured out how to make it happen, with a harness. So for the first time, I had the experience of an image from a dream actually coming to life on stage, which was so exciting to me.

Lana: And this must have been around the same time as Trisha Brown's walking on the wall experiments, like *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* [1970].

Stephanie: Yes, it was about 1973 or 74, although I didn't know about those particular Trisha Brown pieces at the time. I was seeing a lot of work though—The Kitchen was right across the

street, where Robert Wilson was doing his early experiments with the autistic poet [Christopher Knowles], and I got to see performances by Steve Paxton, and Yvonne Rainer, and these incredible music concerts that would go on for hours and hours.

One of my favorites was Grand Union. Douglas Dunn, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon...They had no rehearsals, and were very, very rigorous about how they improvised. Someone would start something, and they would all say yes to it, and stay with it, and see what would happen. They wouldn't just flit from one thing to another. To watch that kind of total improvisation materialize was unforgettable. And I think a lot of my education came from seeing all of this work.

In 1972, I actually performed with Meredith Monk in *The Education of the Girlchild*. When I worked with her, I saw this incredible, strong woman directing rehearsals, and having visions, and working from those ideas. It was inspiring, and I learned so much from her. She was a master performer. When she got onstage, the depth of her concentration was like nothing I'd ever seen. Pure presence. Not a simulation of anything.

The other big influence on me was the Wooster Group. They were right across the street from where I lived, and you could pay ten dollars to watch their dress rehearsals. I felt like what they were doing with theater was a lot like what I wanted to do with dance. I would take mistakes that were made, or unexpected things that happened in rehearsals, and fold them back into the piece, so that it was always incorporating those imperfections into the evolution.

Lana: It's like Grand Union a bit, too. They would take "mistakes" and explicitly incorporate them into the performance, or even make them the centerpiece.

Stephanie: Yeah. And the idea of working collaboratively came out of watching groups like them. I was lucky enough to work with people I was in awe of, so I could just give them ideas and see what happened. I was the director and had the final call, but I was also smart enough to know that other people have good ideas! So I worked that way from the very beginning.

Lana: I think you can really see how all of these different influences play into your work. There are a lot of balletic qualities and references in some of your performances, too—was ballet important to you then?

Stephanie: Well after college, the most money I could make per hour was by accompanying ballet classes on piano. So I became a professional ballet accompanist. I would take one ballet class every day, and then accompany two or three.

Lana: That's a lot of classical ballet music. And you play with choreographing to and against the music a lot. *Cranky Destroyers* uses Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, for instance.

Stephanie: Yes. That was really a joke, to choreograph to a piece of classical music, because I had never done it before. But another reason I threw myself into ballet at that time was because I had started to feel like modern dance programmed my body to move in a certain style, and instead I wanted the purest technique I could get. Chechetti ballet technique was very simple and good for me. And then I started finding some more postmodern techniques that felt right, like contact improvisation and somatic work. In the early 80s I started to learn about Skinner Releasing, and that really became home for me. I began teaching it at Movement Research, and became very involved in Skinner releasing, and in teacher training programs for it.

Lana: And how was your choreography developing, as you experimented with these different techniques?

Stephanie: I was starting to find my own people, like Ishmael Houston-Jones and Yvonne Meier, who I started collaborating with in the mid-eighties. My first major piece was a duet I choreographed for Ishmael and myself called *Boy Meets Girl*, from 1981.

Lana: I fell in love with the images from that piece I saw on your website—I'm dying to know more about it!

Stephanie: It was based on a relationship I was having, all the little things we did in our daily life together. He would drink milk from the refrigerator, I would read while he got dressed, we would go on a walk and wrap our arms around each other and try to kick each other at the same time. Ishmael and I expanded on some of these things, and also taught each other movement and commented on it, as part of the piece. There was one section inspired by the construction workers who yelled things at me as I walked down the street, which I would always write down. Ishmael danced, and I yelled stuff like, "Hey, hot papa! I wish I was your bicycle seat!" It made me feel better.

The title was from an interview Francois Truffaut did with Alfred Hitchcock. Truffaut asked Hitchcock, "Do you ever use material from your dreams in your films?" And Hitchcock said, "No. Never." And Truffaut said, "Why not?" And Hitchcock said he used to keep a pad and paper behind his bed so that if he had a dream and woke up, he could write down the idea and go back to sleep. It happened one night: he had this incredible dream, he woke up, he wrote it down, and he went back to sleep. And when he woke up the next morning, he looked at the piece of paper, and it just said, "Boy meets girl." He said that was the last time he ever considered using an idea from his dream in a film. I didn't really believe him—but it's such a great story. So I called the piece *Boy Meets Girl*.

Lana: Who was the audience for your performances in New York in the 80s? I always wonder about that time period in comparison to now—was it just everyone's friends going to each other's shows, or were some people in the audience total strangers?

Stephanie: In those days, we made our own flyers to promote the shows. We went out with wheat paste and brushes at night and put them up in the streets ourselves. A lot of people would actually be attracted by the flyers and find out about the shows that way. Then some downtown dance "institutions" began forming—P.S. 122, Dance Theater Workshop, Danspace Project. They started inviting me and other artists to present work there.

Lana: Did you think things were better after that shift happened? Was it better when you were all presenting yourselves, or better to have these structures to support your work?

Stephanie: It was just a different time. Self-producing loft performances and spontaneous events in the 70s and early 80s worked because we had cheap space, and we were broke, but we really didn't care. I feel like that kind of situation is great, but can never last. When the world started getting a whiff of what was going on, and it became more of a commodity, egos got involved, and there was a lot of, "Hey, how come he's getting produced, and not me?" Or, "That was my idea that you stole!" So that's the downside.

But what Mark Russell did at P.S. 122, for instance, was incredibly astute, and it really helped bring our work to a whole new level. I think that all the people from back then have gone off in different directions, but there's still a deep sourcing of material from living through such a rich and fertile period that leads to something very real, almost primal, in the actual art. I still see that in Ishmael's work and Yvonne's work today.

Lana: So is this when you began to have a more formal company?

Stephanie: Yes, I started to move in that direction, making more "choreographed" pieces, too. I got picked up by Soho Booking, which was run by Ann Rosenthal. Her clients were Bebe Miller,

Stephen Petronio, Wendy Perron, Victoria Marks, me, and a few other people. So now we all had an agent! She started sending us on tours and to Europe and to festivals.

Lana: And is this about when you made *Cranky Destroyers*?

Stephanie: Around then. That was made in 1987.

To read part two of this interview, in which Skura and Wilson discuss the process of making Cranky Destroyers (1987) and Two Huts (2010), please check back tomorrow.