

[fromstagetopage](#) on the greek dance scene

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Maxine Heppner- Across Oceans

Could you briefly introduce yourself?

Maxine Heppner is a short dark haired woman with a lot of energy. Born in Montreal Canada, she moved to Toronto in the early 70s, when contemporary dance was coming alive in Canada.

My pre-pro training was in Graham, Cunningham, some Limon, mask, and new contact and butoh techniques, but my creative development really had begun with my mentor Elsie Salomons (in Montreal) who had danced with Mary Wigman and Kurt Joss, with Til Thiele from Germany (in Toronto) and with Alvin Nikolai and Hanja Holms in New York. It was only with hindsight that I realized that all the teachings I most connected to since a child were from that European tradition.

I was lucky to grow up in a magic time when new dance and new music was birthing in Canada. I was part of many indie projects, pure dance and interdisciplinary. I worked with 'The music dance orchestra' and the '15 dance Lab'. "15" was a studio in an old garage space, across the road from a mission for "rubbies", homeless street men. "15" was run by 2 dancers who had run away from the National Ballet Company and the myth is that they had literally burnt their ballet shoes. Hanging from the ceiling of the garage was a full-size glider plane being built by Lawrence. At the back was a printing press where Lawrence and Miriam spearheaded one of the first avant-garde art magazines. A closet turned into an editing room for video and sound – on reel-to-reel tape – also had a computer that filled a whole wall. My god, I sound ancient but this was not so long ago!

With 'The music and dance orchestra', we interpreted music scores in dance, and dance scores to music. We had a period along the lines of the work now being done with sensors, only then nothing was wireless. We used a lot of duct tape attaching microphones and other machinery to our bodies. Tape recorders and video cameras were

the size of this table. I remember always stepping on lots of cables and a crazy project with contact dance trying to incorporate the cable-problem into the work, rather dangerous with electricity running through some...

I've had 3 companies. The first one was just after university in the late 70's with fellow students Holly Small and Robyn Simpson. After about 4 years we went our own ways.

My second company "Phyzikal Theatre" had 3 directors: myself as the dance person, a mime and a theatre person. This was period when theatre and dance were re-converging. Our obsession was performance that did not give up any of the difficulties of any of the art forms for the sake of the other. This is the time that I developed my movement and voice technique.

'Across Oceans' is the company I run now and is an outgrowth of my life in the time between "Phyzikal Theatre" and 'Across Oceans' companies. In 1989 I made my first trip to Asia -a kind of personal Odyssey. I went all by myself, on my bicycle. I rode across a good part of Indonesia and also to Singapore, Hong Kong, and Bangkok-Thailand. Indonesia was the main part of this trip. Back then most villages didn't have telephones. Many of my new music friends at home had studied East Asian music. So I arrived in Indonesia with a pocket full of letters from these students to their teachers. This is how my trip developed from village to village. As a



*"Heron under observation"
Performer Maxine Heppner,
Photo C. von Tiedemann*

result of these meetings then, the next 25 years of my life have been full of connections with contemporary Southeast Asia artists. I think that the reason for this is because when I arrived there, I was in my middle 30's and I had already developed a choreographic voice. And the way I thought of energy and spirit really connected with the people there.

I came to Athens in 2000 for a conference via the Pays Bas (Holland/Belgium/Germany). Driving up Vouliagmenis from the old airport to the Centre I felt so relieved, since it was vaguely chaotic like Southeast Asia only with lots of gorgeous European cafés. So whenever I got invited to do a workshop in Athens, I was always happy to return. More seriously, I was drawn in by the dancers here, very spontaneous, with fabulous dry technical training primarily from England and the US, and performed with a deep blood passion – a very special combination I haven't seen other places. These characteristics make it possible to do projects like “krima” – flash! idea, 3 weeks of flash! action and then a show with a phenomenal cast of 90 or more performers. And during that time I also met Christos, my husband, so Athens has become home.

What do you want to question with your current project?

My current work has the title “My heart is a spoon”, although the whole project is called ‘The Rage project’. My main artistic interest now is how we use energy. Rage is an extremely powerful energetic condition. We are examining how we release rage in ways that are both destructive and creative.

Why this project?

Because it's all around us. Isn't it?

Is questioning actually the process?

My motivating question is how does our energy move us, cause us to act: physical, intellectual, emotional actions.

My process? I tend to watch a lot. What goes on around me. Observe patterns. Make these patterns into drawings, because that makes them abstract, takes them away from the human element or the group. By abstracting, I can more easily see the pure form, or impose a form (a time and space) – uncover and then manipulate the tension: the force that is in the action. Then I work with the interpreters. We experiment with these forms as abstract idea. Then, I turn this abstract work back to see what we are portraying as people, so the final development is always about relationship. Dance is always about people. I don't think that humans can distance themselves from human interaction when they are watching humans.

Are you interested in the individual?

I am interested in people. My art work is about people.



*“Krima!” ensemble (Toronto)
Photo Christos Giotis*

Do you think audiences are looking for a message?

No. Not necessarily. Audiences are looking for entertainment, meaning something different from their everyday life.

Are you interested in text or sound in your work?

Sometimes. Text appeals to our intellect. Sound goes to a similar place that dance goes to. In my life there are times I've done text based work, times when I have done only movement. BUT...lately I have been thinking that it seems very strange to me, to watch people on stage without a sound coming from their mouths.

Is text improvised?

My relationship to improvisation is this:

I think it is essential when we are researching our work. Improvisation as performance is its own art form. The term that is commonly used these days is "spontaneous creation" and I've been part of improvisation performance ensembles in both dance and physical theatre. I think that the work of a choreographer is to create set movement. I could soften this statement...in my set work I may occasionally include tasks like 'walk from here to there with floating arms' but through rehearsing, in the end, the performance of this instruction doesn't vary much. I call this a small room for interpretation, not improvisation. But most detail in my choreography is strictly set. And for text it is the same. I do the same.

What does it mean to produce work?

Do we produce work or work to produce? We could riff on various phrases we know: for instance, "take an idea



*Memory project: phase one: experiment with 2 dancers.
Louis Laberge-Côté, Jessica Runge*

to production", "make dance-work".

You know this cliché, art is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. I believe that the 99% is the actual producing of the work and this has two aspects for our discussion:

1. Making the piece
2. Making it possible for other people to see the piece.

I tend to make projects- ‘The memory project’, ‘The rage project’; in-between I also had ‘The faith project’ but I didn’t have enough faith in it so it’s resting now.

The concept of the project dictates the form of the production.

For ‘The memory project’ – the concept made it blessedly simple to produce. My main collaborator was a neuroscientist. Most of our research about deep neural muscle-memory was done in his science laboratory. Each of the public events was an experiment and was called an experiment and we directly challenged and included the audience in the lab. The shows were for 10 to 50 people. Never in a theatre space and with none of the administrative production work, except for Athens actually, when Takako Segawa and I presented “Kiss: an ongoing experiment” during months of dance in...2006? I still approached it as an experiment- how to put it on stage without losing the laboratory feel. It worked in many ways but the audience was distant and I decided it belonged in non-theatres after all.

My current ‘Rage project’ is very different- I want to take it off the street and put it into conventional frames so that the audience relates to the content, undistracted by some unusual container. So it has all the standard production baggage. One of the first events was a formal academic roundtable. “My heart is a spoon” is a dance media work with multiple projectors, 5 technicians and, and, and... The project also includes an art exhibit, a talk about the psychology of rage, a mini film series, and the final stage of the project will be a festival with others’ creations... a Lot of tech and administration.



Memory Project: phase one: experiment 6 dancers: Susan Lee, Louis Laberge- Côté

What is your strategy?

From the first impulse to actually get to the creative work took 2 years of organizing. Last fall 2010 I finally began creation. My strategy for 'The rage project' was to have 4 months of studio work- not thinking about anything else apart from the dance. Then I had 10 months doing more administration and non-dance research of the theme (like the roundtable). Now I am going back to the studio for 2 months and with any luck my production manager will take care of all of the production stuff. Being a choreographer/producer is hard; it's just too many jobs.



"Steel" ECNAD Dance Ensemble, photo M. Heppner

Making a piece is like having a baby. It's not so easy to get pregnant, one can try but ultimately it just happens. So in a way the actual getting pregnant is no big deal. Being pregnant has its ups and downs, moods swings, health issues, and in some societies the final decision to go forward with it. The actual birth is always horrid and then one has an unavoidable HUGE commitment to bring this all to maturity. With luck, in the end the parent and child actually enjoy spending time with one another!

Are you an artist?

I was first called an artist when I went to Asia. This was kind of a surprise. I'd never called myself an artist. I still don't define myself, think of myself, as an artist.

Do you set precise goals?

No. Not goals. I try to make things as clear as possible "Is this clear?" is the question that leads most of my work.

Do you have specific expectations?

Of course I have expectations. My expectation is that this work will be extraordinary and my hope is that it will be alright.

Do you have a daily practice?

Yes, a personal practice that I have developed over the years.

Is there a difference between process and practice?

Yes.

What do you think about solos and have you made solos?

It is a particular genre of choreography. I've made many solos and toured several solo shows. I believe that solos are more, if not most connected to the spirit.

Do you create scores?

No scores. I make a lot of diagrams though, notes and pictures- lots of them, on very large pieces of paper. I am going to be sharing a studio –in an old school building in Toronto- one of the walls there is a full blackboard. It's going to save me a lot of paper...

Do you believe in less is more?

Not always. Sometimes more is more.

How do you treat the body in your work?

I don't call it the body. I grew up hearing 'move the arm', 'tilt the head', I think it is very important for a dancer to know that it is her head or his arm. On the other hand when I watch videos of myself or dancers who are working with me, we always refer to the dancers on the video in the third person.

A few questions on the elements of performance

Time?

Malleable and cyclical

Space?

Embrace it

Lights?

Even a dark room is light

Set?

Even an empty room is a set

Costume?

Usually overrated- it has to grow from the piece not vice versa.



*Maxine Heppner collaboration with visual artist Hanafi,
TIM Jakarta Indonesia
Photo: Hanafi*

Do you feel you have sometimes failed?

Yes.

How has that affected you?

It makes me very sad. And then one carries on.

What do you wish for?

I don't think it's good to wish. Legends say one only has 3 wishes. I am scared to use them up, before I really need them.

So why does your company, or companies like yours matter?

That's a very good question. In many non-technological societies shamans and artists are the same class or guild. I think we are the shamans of the modern world. We are the keepers of the spirit. That may sound very grand... but... we need farmers to make food and farm, doctors to doctor, teachers and learners to teach and learn, and we need artists as keepers of the spirit. And some shamans are clearly more powerful than others, but we need all contributing from each particular place to keep the energy going.

Did the recognition you receive make you feel different about yourself?

Recognition gives one confidence, and with confidence one carries on. But every new work is a mystery. There are no guarantees.