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On collaborating with strangers

Choreographer Allison Orr discusses the methodology behind her large-scale dance pieces, what it means to see the beauty in everyday tasks, and why creativity should be accessible to everyone.

When you're approaching a project, how does it usually begin for you? Is it about seeing the potential in a space, or seeing the potential in, say, a certain group of potential collaborators?

Well, that has evolved and changed. The current project that we're working on is with The City of Austin Aquatics Department. We're in a three year residency with them to make three different pieces over three summers. We actually did a Kickstarter for the first leg last year. This project was an invitation—the head of Parks and Rec asked us to design a project. With other projects I've usually had a nugget of an idea or a little bit of curiosity about something.

We've been doing this now for a little over 15 years. It certainly started as a way to collaborate with a group of people. I had this idea to do a project—wouldn't it be amazing to work with sanitation workers and their vehicles and the movement of that work? So I approached the sanitation department. That idea really had been something that I had longed to do for many, many years and had seen in my mind as something that could be really extraordinary. That's how it started.

But these days we're actually getting asked to do work with communities or city departments, so how the dance will unfold is often very unclear in the beginning. This pushes me and the artists who I work with to really spend time figuring out where the piece is, and what it is. It's a curious thing. Also, I collaborate with another choreographer named Krissie Marty. We've been working together for a little over five years now, and we co-direct a lot of stuff.

I am definitely looking for the nugget of the dance at some point in the process, which usually comes from me witnessing movement that I find to be really compelling, or hearing a story, or understanding something about that place or that work. So, ultimately, even if we are invited to do a project, I feel like there is a spark from me—of trying to solve a puzzle, or trying to unwind something—that I then want to communicate to an audience. And that's how it's always been, I think. Seeing something—like firefighters rolling up hoses or sanitation workers working a street with a rear loader—and thinking, "Oh, could that be something that could be part of a dance?"



The idea of seeing art in the movement of things that are not necessarily part of the fine-arts space—or part of a historically established dance practice—is so compelling, and also speaks to a way of looking at the world. For example, noticing the possibility in things that other people are not seeing, or that more people are tuned out to.

I always like to say that I feel like I'm doing it the easy way. Most choreographers do it the hard way, where they have to go into the studio and get dancers to rehearse and try things and make things up, whereas I just go out in the world and look. I go look, and then I go find experts, and I ask them about how to make it and how to do it. And then the people that we mostly work with are the people who are doing those movements all the time. They're just out there. The trash collectors are out there practicing all the time, and I'm not having to direct that practice in any way. I feel like I have the easiest way to make stuff. I'm seeing these beautiful actions and just shining a light on them.

When you're working on a piece that involves a lot of people—even if they are doing a movement or doing some kind of a practice or activity that they do normally in their day-to-day life—how do you go about orchestrating something like that? I'm just curious about the collaboration/communication skills that are required to make something like this happen.

It's all about relationship building. It's all about spending time with people and earning people's trust, as well as being in the work or community environment so that we learn the language, so we can understand the pace and the rhythm and the culture of the place. That's really what we're looking for. I'm trying to really understand it so that I can become part of it.

The making of a dance really comes out of the relationships we build, and then the process feels somewhat less awkward. I mean it is awkward at the beginning, to walk into the aquatics yard and be like, "Hey, I'm here and we're gonna make a dance!" Actually, what we *don't* do is walk in and be like, "We're gonna make a dance. What do you want to do?" That would be terrible. It's more about, "How can I work *with* you," and "let me learn your work." When we made a dance in January with the dining services staff at William's College I was like, "I'm gonna come wash some dishes. We're gonna hang out with you and just get to know you."

That leap, I think, is what I find the most fascinating. My dad is a contractor. I grew up on construction sites around builders. If someone had come in and said, "Hey guys, I think what you're doing is really interesting. I'm gonna make a dance around it and I want you to be in it." They would have been like, "You've got to be fucking kidding. No."

Yeah, right. Exactly.

How do you convince people not only to do it, but also that they can do it? Or that it's something they should even want to do?

Well, before I've even set foot into the kitchen or the space I'm gonna get permission. When I set foot into the fire station for the first time, I didn't have permission from the chief. But these days I get permission from the higher-ups because we want to be clear about what we are doing. We also want to be clear that whoever is participating with us needs to get paid. So, I spend a whole lot of time at the beginning with management to sort through the logistics of doing this. I want to be sure that everybody that works with us has the permission to do so, and that they will get paid to rehearse and perform.

Usually at the management level people are saying yes to us because of the HR value. What we bring improves employees' pride and morale on the job. And, time and time again, that's why I think great leaders have turned up and said, "Yeah, everybody can do it and I'll pay the overtime." Because really great bosses are looking for something to do to recognize their employees. So, once I've gotten that permission and I'm walking into the kitchen, I don't ask the questions yet. I don't ask the question of, "Do you want to be in the show?" until I think I'm gonna get the answer that I want.

It's really important not to ask too soon, or ask in the wrong way. Actually, usually the way it happens is people cast themselves. For example, I was talking to the catering staff about this at William's College. "We want to do something, a dance, that involves everybody. What are we gonna do? What do you think we should do?" And the head chef says, "Well, we should set up a buffet. That's what we all know how to do. That's what we're all working towards." So he solved the choreographic problem right there. Then I ask him, "All right, how would you do a buffet in eight minutes?" So then we start talking about how we're gonna put some constraints around what they normally do, or what they're really good at doing, and that may help them solve the problem. And then usually, when you get somebody into problem solving with you, that is a good sign that that person will be willing to actually do it.

I don't come in and say something like, "So, I need four people to flip an omelet." The key is that the people themselves are figuring out the choreographic things we want to show, how we show it, and then who's best to do it. It was the same with the linemen and the sanitation workers. I go in with a problem and then people will talk themselves into doing it. Very rarely am I saying, "So, I have a spot in the show. Do you want it?" It doesn't usually work that way.



So many people in our culture feel so far removed from the arts, or from any kind of artistic process. I think that is a big part of what makes your work so beautiful. My father, for example, builds amazing things, but he would never think of himself as an artist. Do you find that to be true in your work? That people have a hard time seeing themselves in this kind of light?

Yes. Yes. Yes. That—what you’re talking about with your father—is what I think we’re all struggling with. Really, the biggest challenge that I have is to define what dance performance means for people, because most folks have not felt a part of that for a variety of reasons: “Humiliation,” “I wouldn’t be good enough,” “There’s nothing interesting that I could do,” “Oh god no, that’s for girls, it’s not a manly thing to do.” We work with a lot of people whose career is their trade. Again, sometimes I have to change my language. I like to keep saying “dance” because it makes people laugh. It gets people to be like, “Oh, this is a crazy idea.”

In some ways it’s a good thing, because we’re laughing about it and I think that that’s good. With the cooks and the dishwashers I had to start by saying, “Just think of it as a cooking show to music.” And then with the power linemen, we had to talk about, “It’s just like a linemen’s rodeo, but with music.” Or with the sanitation workers, “Think of it like a truck rodeo.” Usually the groups have within themselves some way that they actually do show their work publicly. Lots of trades we work with will actually have some kind of rodeo or fair or something where they show off. So if I can figure out how to sell it in a way where they’re not really being dancers, they’re really just doing what they already do, that expert work, then it begins to connect.

But that the whole division between artist and non-artist, I mean, that is actually what the work is intentionally fighting against. One of my firm beliefs is that everybody is inherently creative. That’s a firm belief of the company, that we’re all inherently creative and we’re all inherently dancers in that way.

I like the idea that everybody’s inherently creative, and sometimes you’re being creative when you don’t realize that you are. What do you think it is that happens to people that makes them not feel that way? Or that creativity is almost like a luxury that most people feel they can’t afford?

I like to say you never meet a baby that doesn’t dance and sing. You know what I mean? You just don’t meet a two-year-old that doesn’t dance, sing, or draw like it’s a normal, natural, inherent part of being a human being. I think as we grow older we’re told that we need to become an adult and give up things that kids do, which are often those creative expressions. I guess it’s just part of the oppression of the artist’s vanity that either you take it on—that you’re a weirdo, you live on the fringe of society, you won’t make any money—all this comes with the baggage of identifying as an artist. To me that’s really my job—and what I feel like is also the job of all my fellow artists—to get everybody else making art with us.

I mean, it’s nice to win awards and it’s nice to get called out for your work. It helps you to keep going. But really I feel like my job is to get everybody else that doesn’t think of themselves as an artist to make art with me. That’s my task. I was interviewing this guy who is a crew leader now at Austin Resource Recovery, which was formerly Solid Waste Services, which is the sanitation department. Basically he said, “You know, Allison, around here these are blue-collar, hard-working guys. There’s nowhere for them to go and be playful and try something creative. There’s no time for that in our job.”

And that was something that was so important to him about doing the trash project: that it allowed him and

his fellow workers to use their imagination—something that they all know how to use and they all used as children. He particularly talked about how, being raised poor, he had to use his imagination all the time and what was so fun for him was to get to use that skill again in trying to figure out how to make this dance together. It was good for us all to be reminded that even though we might not think we're using our imagination every day, it's still there, and we don't have to give up our creativity. We can still access it, even if it's something that feels hard to do. He said this all much more articulately than I am right now, but it really hit upon this very thing you're talking about.



I also grew up on a farm in Oklahoma and all the women in my family were crafters and quilters, and even though they didn't necessarily think of what they were doing as art, I always did. There are still all of these weird cultural divisions around how we think about creativity and what we consider art. Your work seems to speak to the heart of that.

Well, I think it's a little bit about our economic system, too. If you're not making money off of it, then it doesn't really count. Or, if you're getting paid a lot, then you're an artist. We were trying to sell *Trash Dance*, the documentary, to a group of people who were part of the Dance USA conference. These are national dance leaders, and they had come to Austin to watch the documentary. At the end of the film, some of the sanitation workers that were stars of this show got up to speak. Don Anderson, one of the participants in the show, spoke about how his world had opened up so much as a result of getting to do this project. He said to all of these fancy dance people, "I didn't even know you all existed." And that was such a good reality check. Actually, not everybody's thinking about us. Not everyone cares about the art world. Now they might not be on your radar, but you're not on their radar either. It was really good for these fancy dance people to hear that he's like, "I didn't even know y'all were out there. And I love y'all. I think you're great."

These dances you create really offer a way of looking at the world. It shows the physicality and grace of things that people do every day. Was that always a hallmark of your thinking? Were you always a person who was paying attention to those sort of things in the world?

As an undergraduate I studied anthropology. I also studied ethnography. And then I did some public health work. So I had always had this interest in ethnography, and leaned towards thinking about the daily practices of the culture. I was interested in trying to understand who people were and what mattered to them. What were the daily habits and the mundane work? And then from a movement standpoint, from a choreographic standpoint, it is that mundane practice—the everyday movement—that you get really good at, and you become very graceful at. You develop a really specific movement pattern or strategy around the work.

Again, if I was gonna ask somebody to "perform" their work in some way, I would want that person to feel really proud and comfortable, and able to be themselves fully. It's not, "Let's work with folks who don't think of themselves as dancers and get them doing movements that a dancer might do." That's not it. Instead, it's really about having a window into this person's world. I think it is the regular ordinary stuff that is most interesting, and in lots of ways it can be the strongest components of choreography.

Again, I feel like it's the easy way to do stuff. I think it has been a thread all along of when I started to figure out how I might do this. I wanted to marry ethnography and storytelling, and create performances that felt like great dance but also centered on the performer and what the performer wanted shown about her or his world. It's easy, really.

And where do you locate yourself in this work?

I studied choreography as a grad student, and there's all these assignments that you have to do. I would go to the studio by myself to work and just think, "This is terrible. I'm lonely. I'm not good at this. I don't care to make up a movement about anything." I also like to say I live in my own drama way too much already. I don't really need to make a speech about my own stuff. You know what I mean? I don't need to get any more attention. I prefer to just go out in the world where there is all this great material. It's all right there.



Now that these projects have blossomed, do you imagine a time where you might be able to train other people to do what you do? How will this grow?

It's a very great question. It's definitely what we're confronting right now. And I have mixed feelings about it, to be honest. This work has got to be from the heart and done with lots of integrity and with a lot of care. So I'm pretty picky about who I would let walk into a community center on our behalf. There are people I work with now who I would definitely trust, but I don't know.

It's great to be invited to do things, and that we have a skill that might be of service to a community. It's a wonderful thing to be invited. I'm working on a book about our process that's gonna be kind of like a journal or field guide kind of thing, where I'm going back and interviewing firefighters, sanitation workers, and power linemen about how we did these projects together. Sort of telling the story of the making in our own words, how we make our dances together, but really using their words to drive the story of the process. So I think it may be that the work demands more help. That's kind of what's happening right now, as the projects are getting bigger. I realize that I can't be everywhere, so we're having to figure out how to train other people to help us. I know that's good. I'm just not really sure how big it makes sense for this to be. I don't know.

The idea that creativity is accessible for everybody is so profound. That must be a powerful motivator for continuing this kind of work.

Yes. And it's so freaking fun to do these projects. What I love about it is that I get to be in places where not only are linemen making choreography, but I—as someone who is taking on the identity of an artist in that moment—get to be in a place where I'm not supposed to be. I'm in a truck yard hanging out with sanitation workers. We all get to hang out in these spaces getting to really know and understand each other, and making something amazing. There is nothing more fun than that.

Allison Orr recommends:

Write thank-you notes. I love just the art of the thank-you note. It's amazing what a simple thank you can give you. This is something I'm trying to teach my kids. I'm not trying to sound like I do this all the time, but if I walk into the bathroom in any kind of public space, I'll try to always look at the person who is doing the work, who is there cleaning or whatever, and look them in the eye and say thank you. It means so much to be thanked...and to be thankful.

Take time for meals. I am so bad at this, but when we are out in the field working with people, it's all about eating together. And I think it's a thing that we in the U.S. particularly suck at—stopping and eating. Eating together is the best. The linemen took me to eat good barbecue, and it was one of the most

amazing parts of that entire process. It means a lot to go and share a meal with people. You learn so much about each other.

I worked with a group of students embedded within the water and sewer department and they had to be at the job at six in the morning. Our organizer said, "Well, that means some of them will have to get up at 4:30." I'm like, "Awesome!" It sucked in some ways, but ultimately the best thing I did during my time there was to be at the water plant at six in the morning. So, I would recommend getting up early. When you show up early and eager and curious, you get a lot of great stuff. You see things that happen. I remember getting to the sanitation job at five in the morning and then it being 9AM and suddenly we're all done. I'm like, "So much has happened, and it's only nine!" So get up early when you can.

Sweep. Really learn the value of the broom. Working on these projects I learned how nice it is to sweep. And how easy it is to talk to people when you're sweeping. If you want to build relationship with somebody, find something to do with your hands, some shared task, that you can do while you talk, so you're not just standing there awkwardly being like, "So, I want you to help me with something." Pick up a broom.

I don't know exactly how to put this, but I've gotten to take climbing classes with the linemen. I got to climb a utility pole. I learned how to row a Venetian-style gondola. I've gotten to ride on the back of a trash truck. I've gotten to go up in a 150-foot bucket. The world is a really big place and I feel like it's me in the end who benefits the most out of getting to experience other people's worlds. It's just such an honor to get to have this glimpse that I wouldn't get to have if I didn't have this kind of cover of being artist. How cool is it to get a little snapshot into somebody's life? It is such a gift. So I don't know what the recommendation would be exactly, except just trying to be in somebody's world that's different from what you know. Be curious about someone other than yourself. It makes me remember that the immediate things I'm struggling with are not everything. We are in a universe. We're in a solar system. The world is a big place.

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Vocation

Choreographer, Artist

Fact



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