

On allowing your creative process to age along with you



Choreographer Bebe Miller discusses how your creative process can evolve over time, learning to see your work from the outside, and the new paths young dancers must explore to have their work seen.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2260 words.

Tags: [Dance](#), [Choreography](#), [Collaboration](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

What is a typical day for you? How do you organize your creative/work life?

You know, it depends on which decade you ask me. Currently, I'm wearing many hats as a choreographer. I identify as someone with a keen interest in how we move as people, the space between people, the nature of our world that we are moving in, and how we move with each other. As a choreographer, this is where my main interest lies. As the director of a company, I have the pleasure of sharing observations and curiosity with a group of really smart people who love to move and are really attuned to that. In the studio, it's less about how might they fulfill my vision, and more of, *"How do we come together with a strategy that translates in some way? How do all of these deep, as well as superficial, observations and fascinations come together into a form that is performed in front of people?"*

In talking to dancers—as opposed to other kinds of artists—your physical self is the vessel through which you communicate to the world. The other thing that's been interesting in talking to different dancers is how deeply collaborative it almost always is. Even when you're doing something by yourself, you're collaborating with a space and an audience. The skills necessary, as a dancer and as a choreographer, include the ability to articulate certain things, to make people feel safe, and to create an environment where people can be free to experiment and not be self-conscious. Is all of this something you just learn over the years? Can it be taught?

I think I've learned it over the years and I'm still not done learning. As the choreographer, ultimately, it does me no good just to have an idea. I'm not up there. It's about us creating something in time together, and strategizing and choreographing and improvising until you can say, "Okay, this is our piece." It happens in that one moment in time and life. The form is made together, but it's just the outline of an experience. The real job is to fill it during the moment of performance.

I want everyone to be comfortable, or comfortable enough, to deal with their own discomfort in a positive light. I think there is something about that rub of discovery when you're in performance that is one of the reasons why we do it. It's about pushing up against something.

There's a piece we made, 20 years ago or so, called "Going to the Wall." It ended up being my "identity piece," in a way. I thought, "Okay, now we're going to talk about race." And we ended up, yes, addressing race, but also gender, class, who are we, and what can we reveal to each other. It seems that, both in the making of the piece and the performing of the piece, there was an opportunity for all of us to change. In the process of actually performing it, you allow yourself to be transformed. And if you're transparent enough in the process, that allows an audience to also access their own transparency or their own potential to come with you on a journey. With that particular piece, it was like a discovery moment that our form could allow that.

So I think since then, I've kept that. Every piece doesn't follow that same trajectory, but I keep that experience as some sort of a talisman of what performance is for me. It's not a done deal. It is only a form for it to be lived through in time. Hopefully there is an exchange between the people involved, including the performers and the audience, who will bring their own history and experience to it.

I was thinking about performing from an audience's perspective. I have a good friend, another choreographer, [Tere O'Connor](#), who talks really eloquently about how it's okay for the audience to, midway through the piece, drift off and go, "Huh? Now what?" You kind of all don't pay attention in the same way. I don't have that capacity in my brain. It's not that consistent. We're all a little ADD, honestly. This is a sort of form that allows for that. You can lean back and muse. And then you get called forward

again. I like that, in a sense, that that's what I'm also choreographing. I'm choreographing attention, in line with *possible* attention. You never know what people are thinking, honestly. All of the talk about preparing an audience for this or that—good luck. You really don't know.

Another thing that's been interesting about talking to dancers in particular, is how their process has changed as their own physicality changed. Knowing what your body can and can't do, and what it's better at than it used to be. In the same way a vocalist or an opera singer might find that their voice changes as they age, it's also true for dancers. When your physical body is your primary tool of expression, how do you deal with growing older? And how does that affect your process?

Radically. I don't know how to articulate this exactly, but it has definitely changed. You age along with your process; you age into it. Like a lot of choreographers, I started doing choreography because I loved dancing. I love the whole idea of shaping movement. There's *this*, and then there's *this other thing*. And then—whoa—you just leapt in the air! All of that is pretty cool. Performing that is also pretty cool. But by being in it, you don't really know what it is because you can't fully see it. When I started stepping out of the work that I was making, it was a whole different education. Still, I feel very much involved with my kineticist response to it and trying to listen to that.

I realized that what I could do was compare, for instance, my own internal timing of something with someone else's, so that I could say, "No, you're really even at this point, and can you see how this irregularity asks you to accomplish something in a different way. Or by holding back the jump you're really good at, you deflect that into another direction, and turn into another person." They wouldn't have thought of doing that because they can't see themselves doing it. I realized that I started with this idea of interrupting someone's own seduction of themselves as a dancer. We love movement. I just went, "Oh, you can't love that part quite so much."

There's something about not being able to satisfy that that ultimately maybe is more interesting or satisfying. It sounds manipulative, in a way. In fact, there was one moment where I, still fairly new to being both in and out of the pieces, got excited and I said, "Guys, wouldn't it be great if we could all think the same thought as we're moving together." One of the dancers said, "Yeah. But that's fascism." I thought, "Oh, good point." How, then, do you take into account somebody's own opinion about what this movement is? Not in an over-prescribed way, but just, "What are they resisting? What are they falling into? How do you choreograph their attention as well, and their appetite for the movement?" These are the things I think about.

And that's been really fun. As I've gotten older, I can't remember as many steps. It seems not so interesting. I work with a lot of people who are really excellent improvisers, and we hone an improvisational score to the Nth degree, so that the score is repeatable, even though the details may change. Often when you say "improvisation," people think, "Oh, you're just making it up." Not so. Particularly in group work, it's the rate of interaction, the manner of the space, and the dynamic picture of the space itself that is choreographed. The details of which foot it is and when that arm happens are less important to me than those older building blocks.

That's been another way, a secondary benefit, of how do I work with people when I can't work with them every day, and we don't have the luxury of working four days a week, six months at a time. The economics of the situation just doesn't allow that. How can we all come together and work intensely for three weeks and do that five times a year? What do we then come up with? How do we document that? I feel there's a new kind of practical strategy that our resources have brought forward. These are the other things a choreographer has to consider.

Documentation is a tricky thing, too. So much about the experience of seeing dance is about being there, in the room, with the performance. Seeing a filmed version isn't the same thing. You don't want these things to disappear into the ether, but how to you capture them?

Sometimes things need to disappear. Not because of quality, good or bad, or anything. There's still just something about this form that is about being there in the moment. The documentation will never replace that. I think with all of our savvy in media and cinema and the tools that we have, there's something still about, "Ah, ah!" And then it's over. I want us to be reminded of that—it hits us in that primal, "standing around the bonfire" kind of way.

For aspiring dancers or choreographers or people just entering into this world, what advice do you have?

People ask me for advice sometimes. I was teaching at Ohio State for 17 years. At a certain point, you realize that Paul Taylor is not hiring that many more dancers. There are limited places for dancers to go. I feel really fortunate in my generation to have been in that dance boom where there's the Martha Grahams and people like that. But there were people like me, who just kind of went to college campuses in the '80s and '90s, and inspired a whole bunch of young dancers. And they are out there, too. There is always a huge number of people who are involved in this field, more so than can be supported with dance as their day job.

Even for me, dance is not just my day job anymore. I think that the economics of live performance are only part of it. What do I mean by that? What I would say is that ultimately, there is only your own vision that is unique and within your control. How do you then find a suitable frame of entry for an audience that is also part of this unfolding of new kinds of audiences? You might

perform at a club at 11 o'clock at night, every Friday for six months. If you could get that kind of a gig, I would go for it. Even if it's 20 minutes a night. It's yours. It may not be there to pay all of your rent, but it will build a practice of response between an audience and your work, and that then will be another kind of foundation that will head off in a different direction.

I think that artists, not only dancers, are, in essence, entrepreneurial. They have to be. For example, how could you use media that listens in to your rehearsal? Could you share that with people? Do something that lets people see what you are working on? Not everybody's going to want to do that, of course, but how about finding the people who are dying to know what you're doing?

I think there are younger folks who have the tools, and the savvy, to know how to do that. They're interlacing all of these opportunities that I may not even recognize, or my generation may not recognize, as "this is how I live in my field." It may just require a different kind of strategy. I also feel that I was a New York artist. I'm from there. I was really happy to be part of that Downtown scene. The Downtown scene in a place like New York is pretty crowded these days, but there are thriving metropolises in Minneapolis and Austin, Texas, Columbus, Ohio, Seattle, and Washington. Small towns filled with talented people who are making work. Go there.

My only worry is that there isn't enough critical dialogue to keep the work on its toes, to keep people asking enough questions about what they're doing and why. I think it's that questioning, that interrogating of a moment, that makes a moment—and the work—richer. Not so much the presentation of, "This is what I know." You never know. It's about questioning and making work that tries to answer those questions. It's all possible, and it doesn't necessarily depend on traditional funding. Funders can't exist without artists. It's interesting to keep that in mind as you become a part of this creative ecology. And the same with venues. The re-finding of artists and venues and funders is maybe the current gig. You want to dance and be the best dancer that you can be, but you need to think about all of these other things, too.

Essential Bebe Miller:

GOING TO THE WALL (1998)

LANDING/PLACE (2005)

NECESSARY BEAUTY (2008)

A HISTORY (2012)

IN A RHYTHM (2017)

Name

Bebe Miller

Vocation

Choreographer

