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Interview: Vera Blaine



Vera Blaine

How does Vera Blaine make a dance?

The OSU dance professor says there is no one way to make a dance and that every choreographer finds a process that works best for him. Blaine has carved out a process that works best for her whereby she explores the organization of movement and the relationship of movement to the human body.

"The physical properties of movement provide the sources for my choreography," said Blaine. "I'm asking questions such as where is the movement going (space)?; how long will it take to get there (time)?; and what kind of attack (energy) is needed to accomplish it?"

Blaine is more concerned with the physical properties of the dance she is making than in the connotations (happiness, sadness, anger, love) those movements may convey to an audience.

"While I eventually become interested in the connotations and start highlighting them in one way or another," Blaine said, "my initial explorations spring from the three-dimensionality of movement, the spatial location of movement within the 'reach' space from the center of the body, how these elements are then shaped into specific movement phrases or vocabulary, and from a desire to exploring the inter play between the dancers."

What fascinates Blaine about choreography is this endless exploration of movement — an exploration she does initially alone in a dance studio. She usually examines a particular movement by putting it through a number of manipulation processes.

"I want to see what will happen if I change the length of the phrase, the dynamics of the phrase, or if I invert the movement phrase spatially — take the movement actions that were up and put them down."

In the studio alone, she puts her movement ideas through a series of

twelve compositional devices — mirroring, inversions, retrogrades, and embellishments, for example.

"I work pretty consciously and am very problem-solving oriented. I rarely enter the studio without a plan on paper on how I'm going to spend the next couple of hours."

In her next to the last piece, "Progression," which premiered at the 1977 University Dance Company concert, Blaine used a movement vocabulary that seemed to throw dancers away from their bodies and out into the general space.

"Almost the whole piece had at its core taking the dancers off their center, off their vertical," Blaine said. "I wanted to throw the dancers out of their reach, not to see how off balance they could get, but because I was interested in exploring a particular type of movement within a specified spatial sequence.

Focus is another area that Blaine thinks is critical in choreographing a dance.

"In 'Progression,' the dancers spent 98 percent of their time looking where they were going, influencing the audience to perceive the dance in a certain way.

"The more I choreograph, the more I see how important it is to make decisions about where the dancer is looking and what the dancer is seeing in relation to the performing space being defined and the human relationships being established.

Blaine spends about forty hours in a studio alone, the result of which is about ten minutes of movement vocabulary material. Only then does she call in the dancers.

During the next 40-50 hours with the dancers, Blaine tries out her vocabulary, seeing how what she has developed relates to a solo, a duet, and an ensemble, and makes more decisions about what works and what doesn't.

"Out of this phase of the process comes a first draft," Blaine said. Then it's another 40 hours or more

for the dancers to fully understand the potential of the movement within the context of the choreography. We're talking about six months total from just me in the studio to performance."

It's only a performance date that tells Blaine when a particular piece has completed its first stage of development.

"Certain decisions have to be made because one is working toward a performance date. I set a deadline for making those decisions because I need to leave as much time as possible for the dancers to add another level of meaning or interpretation to the movement."

Blaine loves to see the dancers perform her work because that tells her something else about the choreographic process. She also believes a work grows in relation to the number of performances it has.

"It's important for me to work with the dancers after a performance so that we can discuss such things as 'Did you see what you did with such and such?; or I see this section has the potential for a more delicate quality, and let's do it that way; or this section needs to be simplified.' So we end up back in the studio and are challenged. I respond to what the dancers are finding in the material, and so then I just wait for the next performance."

Sometimes Blaine starts with music already selected, other times she locates appropriate music when the first draft is completed. In both instances she usually consults a musician to get help in understanding the nature of the piece — its melodic line, texture, phrasing, rhythms.

Blaine feels a responsibility to use music although sometimes she wonders why she finally adds music when the work has developed so far without it.

"I guess I use music for the audience," Blaine said. "Music helps them stay with a work by connecting the dynamics and

rhythms of the dance to the music. I want to support the movement ideas I'm trying to get across in a dance, not just to create a background, an environment."

Choreographing within a university suits Blaine because she is not product-oriented and she likes the freedom of working in an environment that is supportive of investigations.

"Students are very eager to be part of the choreographic process. They're very excited about being part of someone's work where the choreographic process is shared with them, and they are more than willing to give back to that process," Blaine said.

"I don't find that I have to simplify my work in any way because the dancers are students, not professionals. I enjoy students and the learning process. Also, I'm not terribly concerned with virtuosity. I don't have to have dancers that can wrap their legs around their necks."

Blaine's work and her attitudes about making a dance are continually being influenced by classes, reading, and so forth, but two experiences have made critical differences in her approach to choreography.

"Studying with Merce Cunningham in the early 1960s was a great experience," Blaine said. "I learned a lot about making decisions. His attitude was that as a choreographer you need to make a decision; it has nothing to do with whether it's the right or wrong decision but with making a decision and exploring it to see if it holds your interest. If it doesn't, toss it out and make another decision."

She left the Cunningham studio realizing choreography is an ongoing, never-ending process.

"Choreography is not about being a genius and making the great dance or making the great body of work. Although in teaching composition, I'll see students who just really have

flashes of genius, they don't know what they're doing, but they've just made the right decisions about some things. You do have to work intuitively, but you also have to work rationally.

Until about 1973, Blaine was frustrated with her work because she couldn't easily translate her own personal phrasing or dynamics or dance vocabulary from herself to other dancers.

"I simply didn't know how to communicate to others those things that came to me instinctively."

In the summer of 1974, Blaine became interested in Laban analysis. The Laban system gave Blaine another framework of analysis — one zeroing in on movement flow, space, and time. It gave her a different perspective from which to explore.

"As an outgrowth of that workshop, I began to see the dynamic and spatial relationship of the torso to the limbs," Blaine said. "That was the tool I needed to be able to talk to dancers about how to look at the total body, how everything affects everything else, and how the torso constantly accommodates and changes in relation to the demands of the changing nature of movement."

"In modern dance, we're not interested in a standardized movement vocabulary," Blaine said. "We're interested in developing our own individual visions of the world, and how we express that response or vision is through our own unique vocabulary within a choreographic context."

Blaine almost thinks of the body of her work as one piece and sees a continual excitement in exploring the potential of any movement.

"I'm interested in how the dancers can capture exactly my vision of movement. That vision has to be carried by the movement primarily and that's why it is so important to me to have a clear physical concept of what I'm doing." □