

## PODCASTS ON PROCESS

Kirsten Marie Walsh

podcastsonprocess.com

### EPISODE Transcript

#### WHO GETS TO MAKE—EVERYONE DANCE! (37:13)

In her book *Hiking the Horizontal*, Lerman emphatically states, “I am interested in... performers who look like people dancing, not dancers dancing.” Lerman has challenged the assumption that only professionals can create beautiful dances with active research, listening, storytelling. In this episode we'll hear from *Healing Wars* cast member and Navy Veteran Paul Hurley, and from other choreographers partnering with non-traditional performers.

### 4 QUESTIONS

**LIZ LERMAN** At the Dance Exchange we have 4 questions. Every project we take on looks somehow at these 4 questions:

Who gets to dance?

Where is the dancing happening?

What is the dancing about?

And why does it matter? I think the 4 questions are good for most professions actually. So I am just going to tell you a few stories from each of those questions and see how this relates to you. To me there are thousands of ideas in there about innovation. I hope you'll hear them even though I know I am just talking about dancing.

I was trained as a classical dancer. In fact, I performed for President Kennedy when I was 14, when I was a ballerina in this little troupe. But eventually I left classicism, which is a story in itself, and was turning to modern dance. My mother got diagnosed with a virulent form of cancer. She was given a very short time to live. Luckily, I was able to go home and be with her in these last few months of her life. She did things that people do who know they are dying, if you are lucky enough to know that. She imagined many people in her life she wanted to see again. And I imagined them all as old. When she died I went back to Washington where I was living, and I wanted to make a piece about what my family had gone through. And I wanted to have old people be in the dance.

Now, this is 1975. And I like to remind people that in 1975, this is pre-jogging. [Crowd laughs] It's amazing what has changed in the United States in the last 30 years. We are used to practically naked people stretching on the streets. Not again light posts any more—LEDs. There are out there. At the time you didn't see that and you didn't see old people, because Robert Butler had just written his book “Why Survive”. It was just the beginning, beginning of the idea of conscious aging.

Anyway I found this old home near my house, eventually, because I didn't even know where they were. But I did find one! I asked the lady could I come in and teach a dance class, and she thought absolutely ridiculous, but see I was desperate. And that to me is the thing about innovation. I was desperate. It's not like I wanted to break the rule that there should be old people on stage. I was following the rules. I was only in my 20's. I thought that was getting old for my profession.

She said however she lost her entertainment. She needed something on Thursday nights. I could come in for \$5 a week, and do whatever I wanted. [Crowd laughs] And the first night I went it was not unlike this. Except the room was also the room where bingo was, they ate—it was just one of

these very working class places where people were trying to stay out of nursing homes. I promise that I would perform a little. I performed a little bit, and then I said, "Ok, it's your turn. We are going to exercise together." I said, "Everybody, I want you to turn your head like this." And of course, nobody moved. I thought they couldn't hear me. [Crowd laugh] I think it's interesting to think about that, because if you are not in relationship with people all you can believe are the stereotypes. That's all you know. So I yelled, "Ok everybody! Turn your head!" And again, nobody moved. So I began to run back and forth in front of them. And their heads went... like this [following Liz].

And I have to say, the reason I tell this story over and over, it changes my life. I knew in that minute that everything I had ever known about dance was going to be challenged by being in this environment. And that the world was going to open up for me in ways that I could not imagine. And that is exactly what happened. The old people became my teachers. They continued to perform after we made the piece about my mother's death. They were angels welcoming her to where she was next.

They were incredible. I thought the show was over and they said, "No, we need to rehearse more." That's what I mean. They were my teachers. I learned very, very much from them.

## **WELCOME!**

**KIRSTEN WALSH** Who gets to dance? Who gets to make? Those are two of the questions we will be considering in this episode. Hello again and welcome, my name is Kirsten Walsh and you're listening to Podcasts on Process.

Podcasts on Process takes a peek into the creative process of artists, and considers what tools they use to create their innovative work. In these inaugural episodes the inspirational spark is choreographer Liz Lerman.

**LIZ** Since then when you see a Dance Exchange performance, you always see old people. The company ranges from their 20s into their 70s. We have a very, very busy, busy touring schedule. And the seniors are amazing. And it's incredible to me that audiences are still so moved by simply seeing the old guys on stage. One is a man who had been in the military, retired at 53, never danced—now he's in his 70s. Martha Graham says it takes 10 years to become a dancer. He has. And I think people will retire and become artists. I think that is one of our futures. So, who gets to dance?

**KIRSTEN** You just heard from Liz. The opening was from a talk she gave at the Business Innovation Factory. Right off the bat you hear Liz talking about the 4 main questions the Dance Exchange considers before making any piece. Liz started the Dance Exchange in the mid 1970s, and while she's no longer the director of the company, these four questions still apply to her own practice. The first being who gets to dance.

I love seeing true craftsmen and women working at what they do best, but there's something particularly special about seeing a non-professional express themselves artistically. Liz Lerman is known for including non traditional performers in her work. But why is their presence on stage so important or worthwhile?

In this episode we'll talk to several artists who incorporate and are inspired by the stories and movement of quote "untrained makers". First Elizabeth Johnson, who work with and at the Dance Exchange for many years. And second from, Washington DC based artist, Holly Bass. And we also get the chance to hear from Paul Hurley. Paul is the veteran who jumped on board Healing Wars and has been touring with the team since Healing Wars premiered in June 2014.

Knowing my background as a visual artist and my current pursuits as a curator, Liz connected me with dancer and choreographer Elizabeth Johnson.

**LIZ** She is an example of—somebody should write a book apropos these conservatories—about her, because she's the kind of performer that audiences adore, but peers don't necessarily. Because she isn't in the stratosphere technically.

**KIRSTEN** What do you mean by that?

**LIZ** I think in dance, and I think in classical music, technique is god. And if you don't have certain kind of technique people can be dismissive even though you are a phenomenal artist and performer. This is one of the things that I fought for so long. Technique is the idol—i-d-o-l—of the arts. And Elizabeth, the natural progression of an artist is into choreography. Elizabeth natural progression was towards engagement—and in now way diminishing her artistry, her worth, her value. And whenever she is on stage, that is who audiences look at. And here's a person who exceeded what even a brilliant technician would have done with their life. Elizabeth has exceeded it.

## **ELIZABETH JOHNSON**

**KIRSTEN** Elizabeth connected with the Dance Exchange after seeing them perform while she was an undergraduate student and she'll be the first to tell you that the experience brought her to tears.

**ELIZABETH JOHNSON** I started at Dance Exchange in 1998, the day after I graduate from Connecticut College. The Dance Exchange had done a two week residency at the Garde Art Center, and I was at the time doing community-based work without knowing there was such a thing as community-based work. I was apart of the community tour that was apart of that, and a class that I was teaching with mothers and daughters performed in windows. I was also making my senior piece that had 88 people in it, in a campus that had 1200 people. People were performing parts of that in a parking lot as apart of the tour. And then I saw the Dance Exchange company perform and I [said], "ok, I've never wanted anything more in my life!"

**KIRSTEN** I know exactly where I am supposed to be.

**ELIZABETH** Exactly. And I was bawling all the way through. Just heaving crying—I was just so moved by the performance. And I was still crying in line when I was going to talk to Liz. I [said], "I, I need to know..." I can't remember what I said, but [Liz] said that, "were starting this new intern program. We're having an 'institute' in a couple weeks. Do you want to come down to see how things go?" So basically, I got in my Ford Taurus station wagon the day after graduation from college, I went down to Dance Exchange and I stayed there for 12 years.

2011 - "It's Not Just Black and White" is a residency exhibition that considered the complex cultural, social and personal issues at stake in the day-to-day workings of the criminal justice system in Arizona.

**KIRSTEN** The project I specifically wanted to talk with Elizabeth about was called, "Its Not Just Black and White." In 2011, Elizabeth's colleague, Gregory Sale and other collaborators launched "Its Not Just Black and White." It was a three-month residency exhibition investigating the complex issues at stake in the criminal justice system in Arizona. The exhibition was apart of the university art museum's Social Studies series where the museum became an active laboratory and studio. As Elizabeth mentioned earlier she had been working with mothers, daughters and teens with the Dance Exchange. The project she facilitated in "It's Not Just Black and White" created a virtual space for incarcerated mothers and their daughters to dance with another.

**ELIZABETH** Within the scope of this project, I was thinking where are the women and thinking particularly about distance, and the relationship these incarcerated women must have with their daughters. And is there a role that dance can play. So we envisioned this project, that would have me working with the women in jail, concurrently working with their daughters in the museum. The museum itself was an open space. It had tables, modular furniture, and the museum itself was painted black and white stripes by inmates who were on a day's furlough. They came in and they painted, wearing their black and white stripes, they painted walls. There was a SWAT team member for each of the incarcerated men.

So I worked with the girls in the museum and I worked with moms in the jail. We did 6 weeks of programming. And Gregory and I both landed on the "pearl" as a metaphor for the work. Because the pearl is an organism that builds value under pressure. And although we never articulated this so clearly to the women or the girls. But there is something considered an irritant, and that in an enclosed space under pressure builds value.

And we thought that was a nice metaphor for thinking about what incarceration can be. I built that down into 3 chapters: beauty, change and value. The first chapter on beauty, both the women and the girls talked about what they find beautiful: their own images of beauty and how those might differ from how the media projects images of beauty, and specifically what they find beautiful about themselves, or what they find beautiful their mother or daughter.

The second part was about change. And we looked at different things that change, metamorphosize. And also did some writing, and thinking, and talking, and dancing about how we're evolving and how we are changing. The women really brought up how they were changing as a result of the incarceration.

And then the last one was about value. What do we value? And specifically for the women, what kind of values do they want to pass on to their daughters? And then what was lovely, Gregory gave the women pearls that he had from a collection. These tiny little mother of pearl pearls, and one of the last things is that the women had made jewelry for their daughters. So the culmination was not a performance.

Working with mothers at Estrella jail in preparation for the dance they would share with their daughters over Skype in a virtually connected dance workshop.

**KIRSTEN** That was going to be my next question!

**ELIZABETH** It was a workshop that was a virtually connected workshop. So that through a super tenuous Skype connection with the women in a courtyard in their jail, and the girls in the museum, they danced with and for each other.

**KIRSTEN** With our question in mind for today's episode, who gets to make, I asked Elizabeth why she advocates for and develops community-based social practice and choreography.

**ELIZABETH** I am somewhat uncomfortable with the wording of "gave power". And I think it just might be my own thing. We all have power and sometimes that's just unrealized or unrecognized by ourselves or others. And for me, if I am empowering someone, it means I have power and I'm giving my power in some ways to them—like some sort of hierarchical relationship—that I am empowering you. I think there is something about this work that provides space for something to happen that as a choreographer working independently or working with a group of dancers, there is only so much that I can make. That by us working with a broad range of diverse individuals, there's just so much more in the room. Because you have so [many] more facets of experience. So much more vocabulary to work with. So many more ideas. So yes, it might be a powerful feeling, and it might be empowering even, and I definitely think it was a powerful experience for the women, but I don't feel so much like I am giving that to them.

**HOLLY BASS**

**HOLLY BASS** My name is Holly Bass. I am a writer and performance artist.

**KIRSTEN** When I was considering who else to interview for this episode several colleagues mentioned Holly Bass' work. She is multi-disciplinary artist who's shown at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, the (e)merge art fair in Washington D.C., and internationally in Holland, South Africa and Italy. When we got together for our interview, we discussed one of her more recent projects, Black Space.

**HOLLY** The work I have most recently done is the Black Space house, and its a tiny house. Its 8 feet by 8 feet, and the foundation of the house is the map of Washington D.C.

**KIRSTEN** Where is it?

**HOLLY** It just came down, but it was first built for the (e)merge art fair. And it was outside on the lawn, and in addition to the house which functioned as its own installation, I stage a number of public performances and rituals. And then the house moved to Martin Luther King Jr. Library, the central library downtown. And it was there for a full month, and we also did a range of public programming. It was really exciting.

I did a rent party, which is harkening back to this Jazz Age tradition of hiring a band, and making food and drink, and inviting the neighborhood over—for a fee—to have a party, which then goes to rent. This was a Friday night tradition, particularly in Harlem and other black centers, cultural centers in the US. And then there were variations that continued in the 70s and 80s, but that would have been a DJ instead of a live jazz band.

So we had a house rent party, and at (e)merge I did a blessing, more like a house warming. So I had a Yoruba priest poet friend lead the blessing, and another cultural performer, Liz Andrews, was the

song leader. We did traditional negro spirituals, in particular, "I'm Building Me a Home". And then there's was a drummer and myself, and we guided people through, not only an artistic experience, but also— Well, one of the things I have been doing recently is taking the structure and outline of traditional worship services and applying them in an art world context.

My proposition is that if you live in D.C., regardless of your ethnic background, that you are occupying Black space. And that it is a cultural Black space, much like Harlem, Detroit, Oakland. And all of these spaces right now are having huge demographic shifts, and a major decrease in the Black population, as a result of shift in the social culture. This to me is not about debating gentrification or not gentrification. My thinking is that if we can shift our idea of cultural preservation so that it's not just about historic buildings, but cultural preservation meaning the energy and the dynamic of a people who live in a given place, and how do we preserve that. Again, it's very ephemeral, as is most of my work. Those are the kind of questions that I am grappling with.

**KIRSTEN** Holly Bass has been commissioned by many institutions throughout her career. One of my favorites commission came from DC Department of Public Works, and the performance is called the Touch Truck Ballet.

Part of the ballet includes two cherry picker operators gracefully moving their trusted equipment through the sky to Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World", and employees in full uniform dancing together to Pharell's "Happy".

**HOLLY** Following the trash and recycling guys, and how fast they are and how strong they are. And looking at their movement as choreography. There's certainly choreography between the crews. Like when you have a crew, a driver, and 3 people who are working from the back, there's a way in which it like a really well honed dance troupe. They know when someone is going to swing that can to them, and they've got to dump, and I'm going to run up here. There's very little verbal communication. We just going to work this street and get it done as quickly as possible. And so that was really wonderful to watch. I would have loved to—it would be pretty hard to stage, but get 50 people and say, "ok, we are going to stand at the bottom of this street and watch the crew go up the street, and do what they do."

**KIRSTEN** Did any of that natural movement for them find itself in the piece?

**HOLLY** It did! So, I had a series of moves, which I think we are going to try and highlight a little more [this year]. So there was "the can", there was..

In our first rehearsal I basically asked what are the movements that you do in your job. So if someone was with lawn care and greenery, we were doing "the weed wacker". You gotta start the engine, and the sweeping motion. Or the person who has the electric saw, who's in charge of cutting trees. And so all of those movements, even the parking enforcement. They have their little machine, and so we turned that into this sassy "I'm writing a ticket. I'm putting the ticket..." So all of that turned into movement which was really fun.

For the full production we conducted interviews with several of the workers, so their voices would be the prelude, the intro and outro to a lot of the pieces. So you would hear the director speaking, you'd hear someone from parking enforcement, you'd hear a trash working speaking. It was really amazing to have the voices of actual people, to see them in a different context, but still in their uniforms. And so for the public, I think it was this really eye-opening experience. It was fun, and it

certainly was a celebration, but certain people said, "I'll never look at the guys who picks up my trash the same way again." They shared about how difficult their job is, how thankless their job often is, but the commitment they have toward. And so that dignity and respect was something that was really important to convey.

I am looking forward to this year because we will have even more people wanting to participate—but I also just think so many of us love to dance and don't necessarily feel comfortable or welcome. So to have that opportunity to just express joy in that way is really incredible.

There's amazing precedent for this kind of work. Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles in the 1970's spent 85-hundred hours with sanitation department workers in NY. And there's Liz Lerman's pas de dirt performance. It was shown outside the National Building Museum in DC, where performers and bobcat operators danced to "Swan Lake". And there's also the documentary with contemporary visual artist Vik Muniz called WasteLand. The artist travels to the world's largest landfill in Rio de Janeiro, and develop art and relationship with the pickers there.

**KIRSTEN** What are the qualities of a non-traditional performer that strike you?

**HOLLY** That's a really great question. I think what appeals to me about a non-traditional performer is that excitement of transformation that often happens. It's also for me as an artist and educator, it's a really good reminder of how to go back to the beginning. And then the process, and you see someone who may have struggled with movement and now they have to master it, and what they have to do in order to get it down pat.

## **PAUL HURLEY AND HEALING WARS**

**KIRSTEN** With each performance of Healing Wars there's always a character played by a veteran, who's not a professional dancer or performer. For the last year Navy veteran Paul Hurley has been reenacting his story.

On stage, Paul is not playing a fictional character. Instead he describes and embodies his specific story. Paul is a single leg amputee, and at each performance he tells the story of how he was wound in Iraq. His fellow performers stand in as locals, and dancer Keith Thompson plays his fellow soldier and friend. As the group reenacts the accident, one dancer even plays Paul's seat belt.

Several scenes later in Healing Wars, Keith Thompson again has a duet with Paul. In the movement they support one another, stretching back and forth, and in one graceful move Paul also lifts Keith over his shoulders in a fireman carry. It's hard to explain but there's one moment that will always stand out for me. Paul and Keith are sitting side-by-side and hanging over the edge of the bench you see three legs, because Paul has removed his prosthetic.

Here's Paul, in his own words, describing how his duet with Keith developed.

**PAUL** But Keith started talking to me, and well from your story...

**KIRSTEN** So, he had heard that before?

**PAUL** We had just gone through that and then went out into a separate room where it was just Keith and I. Everyone else was practicing on some other stuff. And he was like, "Ok, let's try and

figure this stuff out. Just show me some of the movement that you may have made during this whole incident." Well, I was thinking about different things. One of the things that really stood out was when I got out of the car, and was staring up at the moon. And then, we started talking about therapy and being on the mats, and the constant work with the physical therapists. The duet is, it's me being in that moment and reliving all of these experiences.

**KIRSTEN** You already had a movement vocabulary, right? It just wasn't considered dance movement.

**PAUL** Alright, well I just keep working with you here and see if we can come up with something. Keith really made me feel comfortable and doing all of that.

**KIRSTEN** Paul's story, the veteran story, is what makes Healing Wars exceptionally authentic. Experiencing his accident, the loss of his friend, and his recovery at Walter Reed with each performance means Paul's had some more challenging nights. But more than a year later he also sees his performances as one additional component to his healing.

**PAUL** ...bring yourself back into focus. So sometimes it can be difficult, but other times it feels, it feels very healing. It really does. It's like, I feel, like after that talk or after the play sometimes I feel like I got something off my chest.

**KIRSTEN** Did you feel a little lighter?

**PAUL** Yeah! That was one of the things I liked about it, but it all depends. Every day is different.

## **AUTHENTICITY**

**LIZ** They represent and/or are symbolic of several ideas that matter a lot to me. And I don't know that dehumanizes them to suggest that I'm using them as a key into really big ideas I have about art. I really believe that everybody, human beings and actually a lot of animals, have enormous capacity to express. I mean I'll use the word creative, but there are a lot of small sub things inside that. That's a big word for the things that I'm talking about. I believe that a lot of that of those things get subsumed by whatever the current professional idea is in a given century. What becomes the dominant representation of art. And sometimes, that a lot of those sub things are lost inside what the professional deems important.

But the professional wraps itself up in some really cool stuff. That's very enchanting for a person like me. I love the challenge, I love the craft, I love the push, I love the dynamic, I love the isolation, I love the pursuit. All those things that a professional gets to have, I adore. But, in doing that, if I only live in that world I'm going to lose those sub-sparkles that are so important to me. And one of them is authenticity. One of them is a naturalness. One of them is kind of an innate beauty that you see for example, it's kind of like when an animal is curious you know how gorgeous they become. No matter what they are. When they get curious their whole body changes. Its like that, its like that deep kind of thing that's so innate and so beautiful.

So when you have a person like Paul or Deanna, or the dogs in the piece with the animals, or a person with a disability, or someone who's not able-bodied in a way that the other dancers are, or old people—cause the old people did it right away from the beginning—it does a couple things.

It forces the viewer to say, "oh, I guess she doesn't mean to say its about technique because they don't have any." So right away, you, you're the viewer, the person in the audience, if you are willing to say she must have done it for some reason. If that's true, then you go, "ok, what is that?!" And then you get an expansion of what art is. And I find that thrilling. Secondly, in the early years when I was doing this, I did feel that by having people who were much, much, much less trained in the room with those that are highly trained that you couldn't talk in code. You couldn't slide over stuff in this sort of sub, "wink wink" agreement that we have about what's good. You had to keep revisiting it. And that's really healthy!

So just the process itself was different. And then I have that expression, "the more you're you, the more I get to be me", that even though we are looking for common moments when we are together, and that might be expressed through unison or just through the fact that we are all together on stage, but when you have those kinds of extremes you can see the distinctions in such a beautiful way. And it changes the story. That's maybe the biggest thing. They are contributing to the story in a way that without them the story couldn't be told. And that's really important to me.

Oh! One last thing. Their authenticity brings out the authenticity in the professionals who you might otherwise go, oh ho hum. There's a 25 year-old woman up there who's been dancing since she was 8. Oh wait, let me see the specificity in her.

## **PARTICIPATE**

**KIRSTEN** The title for this episode is "Who Get to Make". In her book *Hiking the Horizontal*, Liz Lerman emphatically states, "I am interested in... performers who look like people dancing, not dancers dancing." After hearing from Elizabeth, Holly and Paul, I'd like to broaden that question a little and ask, "Who Gets to Participate?"

Who get to dance, sing or paint? And also who gets to watch, listen, and respond? Whose stories are you hearing in a concert hall or seeing at a museum?

For this episodes creative challenge I would like you to think back to Holly's choreography in Touch Truck Ballet and Paul's dance in Healing Wars. The movement in those performances from the everyday movement of the participants. So here's the question for you: what gestures do you make on a daily basis? And how could those movements find their way into a dance? Take a moment to consider what your "natural dance" is, and I challenge you to capture that via video or picture. And then upload your response to the website, [podcastsonprocess.com](http://podcastsonprocess.com) or use the hashtag on Instagram.

This episode and the whole series would not be possible without the incredible team around me. So I have to say thank you to a few folks. Thank you to the faculty of Curatorial Practice, to my extraordinary mentors, and to my support team from The Contemporary. The music you'll hear in this series was composed and recorded by the remarkable Ruby Fulton and the band, Nudie Suits. And thank you to Estelle Kline and Sean Tubbs, my audio engineer magicians. Thank you to my dear classmates and beautiful friends in Curatorial Practice and to my husband, my unwavering volunteer and MacGuyver on all of this.

And last but not least thank you to Liz Lerman, the stunning artist who graciously opened up her life and process to me.