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DANCE INTERVIEWS NEWS THEATRE

INTERVIEW: CUNY Dance celebrates five years with expansive festival

📅 March 18, 2019 👤 John Soltes 💬 0 Comments 📌 CUNY Dance Initiative, Gabrielle Lamb, Pigeonwing Dance

Photo: Bewilderness is a recent work by Gabrielle Lamb and Pigeonwing Dance. Photo courtesy of Charles Roussel / Provided by PR agent with permission.

The CUNY Dance Initiative in New York City is currently celebrating its fifth anniversary, and it's not letting the month of March go by without throwing a party. [On March 20-23](#), the arts institution will host a program called *5th Year Fest*, featuring a diverse array of dance artists and companies who have been associated with CUNY at one point or another.

Performances take place at the Baruch Performing Arts Center in New York City. On the bill will be routines by Heidi Latsky Dance, Sonia Olla & Ismael Fernandez, Andrew Nemr, Miki Orihara, Loni Landon, Urban Bush Women, Kinesis Project dance theatre, Gabrielle Lamb and Pigeonwing Dance, Parijat Desai, MBDance and Ephrat Asherie Dance.

Recently Lamb exchanged emails with *Hollywood Soapbox* about the world premiere her company, Pigeonwing Dance, will present at *5th Year Fest*. Questions and answers have been slightly edited for style.

What can audiences expect from this world premiere?

My five dancers and I are working on a new piece called *Tensible*, about the flow of energy and resources between people and within groups. We've been thinking about zero-sum games and non-zero-sum games, and how to embody those concepts in dance.

I am interested in the ways that individuals relate to collectives, so themes of belonging, separation and connection are through-lines in my work. Most of the time I try to approach these ideas using only bodies, movement and light; but this piece uses some props too (unless I jettison them at the last moment).

The Pigeonwing dancers are highly skilled, with extraordinary articulation, so I do my best to utilize their technical virtuosity. But they are also vivid personalities, onstage and off; so characters and storylines emerge easily, almost without my intending it.

Sometimes I feel I'm scrambling to understand the story that is trying to tell itself in front of my eyes. Hopefully the piece will be detailed, quirky and thought-provoking, without being literally political.



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What was it like to work with the music of composer James Budinich?

James and I met last year at the Next Festival of Emerging Artists, which hosted a Composers and Choreographers Workshop at the Center for Ballet and the Arts. We co-created several sketches in real time, with a studio full of dancers and string players waiting for our direction. I've never heard of any other workshop situation like that, and it was terrifying. But it was also inspiring and productive, and I think we learned from each other.

Because I was coming right off another commission this February, I didn't have as much incubation time with him as a choreographer ordinarily might with a composer. When he sent me a draft, I really had no idea what to expect. Happily I found the piece intriguing and full of possibility.

The music that he has composed for *Tensible* is unlike his other work, and it's also unlike anything else I've choreographed to. He has created a mysterious electronic sound world that processes and abstracts acoustic instruments (wind-chimes, mallet percussion, viola) into multiple overlapping patterns. I like that it's all one long piece, rather than a collection of episodes, which my choreographies often are.

Even though James and I have only talked about the compositional aspects, and how he created the various sounds and patterns, I do hear a story in the music. There are exciting arcs of drama and tension, and they are challenging in a good way. I had the piece on repeat when I created base phrases in the studio without dancers, so the music has informed every step of this process — which is not always the case for my choreography.

Do you feel you have achieved those initial dreams when you began Pigeonwing Dance? Do you keep setting the bar higher and higher?

When I started Pigeonwing, I didn't really understand why anybody would want the pressure of running a company. I had planned to be a freelance choreographer, and that was it. But in 2014 I was contacted by NY City Center, asking if I'd be interested in their Choreographic Fellowship. With 200 hours and a generous stipend, it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

I had to start looking for dancers, which was a very difficult process for me. (Up to that point I'd only ever hired two, for very limited engagements). I'm a shy person, and even though there are plenty of dancers looking for work, I felt intimidated.

Now I'm more used to it, and I have a running list of people in my head I'd be interested in working with. Over the years, I've come to understand the allure of having one's own group of collaborators. Between commissions with people I've never met, I want to be able to return to artists I trust, who trust me as well. I want to be able to explore weird, unnerving ideas that I wouldn't dream of trying with a group of strangers. I want to feel free to laugh with my dancers when one of those ideas turns out to be dumb or lame — and also to be able to follow some weird spur of the moment whim, knowing that they'll probably find that exciting.

I also want my dancers to be movers who can offer me something I don't already know. On commissions I frequently find myself in the role of educator. It's part of the process, and I do enjoy it. But with Pigeonwing I want my dancers to be able to do things I don't understand — so I can learn from them too.

When I first started the company I didn't quite get all this. But it's becoming clearer what I want Pigeonwing to be. With these dancers it's not just another piece of choreography. It's an opportunity to step over a gap in my understanding and keeping moving forward. We can set the bar higher and higher because we are standing on that solid foundation of our past work together.

When you're coupled with other dance companies for a collaborative evening like this, does that enhance your work?

I am excited about this festival because Alyssa Alpine and CDI have really taken care to diversify the programming and include many genres of dance. If program offerings are too similar, it's not good for anybody, artists or audiences.

Because of my background I'm usually programmed with more balletic choreographers, or sometimes contemporary dance artists whose influences are similar to my own. I've never been on a roster with tap or flamenco dancers, or even street dance artists like Ephrat Asherie; so I'm eager to see how my work appears in this new context. I hope it will enhance everyone's experience and impress audiences with the breadth and diversity of NYC's dance scene.

How financially difficult is it to run an independent dance company?

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It is not in any way easy to run an independent dance company. A journalist recently asked me what it takes to keep a company afloat. I had to admit that it's not exactly afloat. Sticking with the nautical metaphor, when there are opportunities and funding, I take the boat out on the water. Otherwise it's in somebody's garage. We don't work all the time; we work on a project basis.

In a less expensive city, perhaps I could ask dancers to work half-days, all season, with minimal compensation. That is a model I've seen, and I don't have a problem with it in principle. In this country we have a difficult climate for the arts, and dancers and choreographers are all doing this work because we have a passion for it.

Nonetheless, NYC is one of the world's most expensive cities, so the Pigeonwing dancers get paid for their time. A studio rented hourly, full of highly-trained people creating detailed work — the numbers add up quickly. It's too stressful to think a lot about the math, so I turn off the mental calculator when I'm in creation mode.

That's not hard, because choreography demands every brain cell ... I have, and then some. I apply for grants, residencies and fellowships all the time. Sometimes I get them, and then we can work on something. I'm not great at private fundraising. It still feels awkward, and I am enormously appreciative of the private donors we have. Also I'm clear that I'm first and foremost a choreographer, and I want to keep my priorities in the studio.

At the moment I have fairly regular commissions with companies and dance departments. That keeps me pretty busy. I wish I had help with fundraising for Pigeonwing; and if I get help someday, we'll probably be able to work more regularly. Even so, I'm not expecting anything to get *easier*. It will probably just puzzle me in new and surprising ways.

By John Soltes / Publisher / John@HollywoodSoapbox.com

Gabrielle Lamb and Pigeonwing Dance will perform as part of CUNY Dance Initiative's 5th Year Fest March 20-23 at the Baruch Performing Arts Center in New York City. [Click here](#) for more information and tickets.

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