

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A CONVERSATION WITH TRISHA BROWN

*Conducted by Edward A. Martenson
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Trisha Brown has been called the most widely acclaimed choreographer of the postmodern era. She has collaborated with Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and Laurie Anderson, among others. Brown studied modern dance at Mills College in the 1950's, and was a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater in the '60's. In 1970 she formed the Trisha Brown Dance Company – an all-female troupe until 1979 – and it has performed and conducted residencies throughout the US and Europe. The Company has a rehearsal studio and office facility in New York, where it rents space at subsidized rates to other dance companies and choreographers. Greg Kandel arranged for me to meet Brown, and she invited me to her studio loft on lower Broadway.



—EAM

Did you happen to know Darius Milhaud when you were at Mills College?

I cooked for Madame and Monsieur Milhaud! That was my job to make extra money. They were fabulous. And when the Budapest Quartet was at Mills, or maybe in San Francisco, they were brought to the Milhauds' house, and they made parties for them and that's where I came in. Madame Milhaud taught me how to cook, actually, the French way. She was my French teacher, also, but she failed at that task, unfortunately. [LAUGHS] They're very, very fine people. They had me to their house on Sundays for tea or something, so they weren't just

employers and I wasn't just a worker. I feel tears kind of rising because that was a very precious experience.

Milhaud had a different aesthetic from the one that became yours. When you knew him, was there ever an opportunity to talk about your interest in John Cage and Merce Cunningham?

No, no. I knew Merce was the one if I should ever get to New York, but I never saw his work on the West Coast, and I didn't search out John's music recordings because they weren't so available either in Oakland. But my music teacher at Mills was in

Edward A. Martenson conducted and prepared this interview as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described. Except as noted, all photos are courtesy of the Trisha Brown Dance Company.

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Trisha Brown, photographed by Lois Greenfield.

John's first percussion ensemble that toured the West Coast, and when they went to Mills for a summer program she dropped off and joined the faculty. She brought in that kind of music to my hearing and composition classes.

Is this when your aesthetic began to develop?

After Mills, I fell in love with the principles of John Cage, and then I learned about visual art. I was somewhat in search of a mentor, and although Bob Rauschenberg was one of the most extraordinary artists he became my friend early on. We were very close, and through Bob I got to the heart of the visual art world.

It has been said that the Judson Dance Theater changed modern dance forever. Why did you leave it?

Well, it was a collective weighted towards a couple of people, and that was unfair. I knew what a collective meant, with everyone putting forward their best ideas and positive spirit and "teamfulness." Then, when I was minimized as part of the group, it hurt. When one interviewer asked me about the use of time at Judson I told him to

speak to Steve Paxton, because he stood us all on our ears and was most provocative to the audiences. He was a madman! [LAUGHS]

I didn't know what he was doing whatsoever, and I was very fond of him, and I learned so much from him and he's still one of my best friends.) Then the writer asked me about improvisation, and even though I was one of the two people who brought improvisation back into a respectable place I kept saying, be sure and talk to so-and-so. So I'm partly at fault for being such a sweetie-pie, but I ended up in the back of the article, and that scalded me. So I buttoned up my shirt and I stopped giving my work away to other people. I said to myself, 'I want to do this, and I'm going to go do it.'

I remember a later moment when I was in Grand Union, another collective and egalitarian, and I was making one of my first equipment pieces, and they said in their jolly way, 'Trisha, why don't you bring over your set for *Floor of the Forest*, and let us just play on it.' And I said something equivalent, like 'Go f--- yourself.' [LAUGHS] 'Yeah, you want a set? Make it, or let's make it together, but no, you may not have the center of my new choreography.'

Do you think about why you've been more successful than your early colleagues?

Well, I'm asked everywhere I speak now, especially by young people, how did I do it? Because I am one of not-very-many women who've gotten to the top of the charts with their choreography, and I always just give them funny stories and "chin up" and like that. [LAUGHS] But I do think about the fact that I left Judson and went out into my own, and my colleagues in that era were on a different path. I had come from the great exploration in the forests, went fishing and hunting with my dad, and so I didn't need to go off to a commune. I grew up that way and I was coming to the city. I didn't take drugs. And I became observant of everyone around me, of those who were succeeding.

By the way, this will tell you something about Trisha Brown. I wanted to go hunting with my father, so I joined a rifle club in high school. I was a sharpshooter from the first minute. It was easy.

So going back to your departure from Judson, the collective was serving some individuals' needs, but not yours. Is it also fair to say, then,

that the primary reason to create your own company was to serve your creative needs?

Right. I really got wise, I think. I gained wisdom from that first experience. I didn't get the sophistication to make a formal company until '70, but after 1965—this was the National Endowment era—I was making my own work pretty much exclusively.

A lot of these things are in the makeup of the person's prior experiences, a person who's up there and out there. I'm very creative, and I have an imagination that is such a workhorse. (It charmed me when I was a kid, just going for a walk in the forest, because I'd have these thoughts I'd never heard before, and I'd start laughing, walking down some trail.) So I came to rely on the fact that I have so many ideas, and I continued to enjoy what my brain put out.

Some of that's competitive for sure, but maybe it's closer to determination. I had kidney disease and an emergency appendectomy when I was five years old, shortly after two of my cousins died from peritonitis. The family gathered, because it looked like I was next on the list. That was a very, very frightening time because I was that close. But I wanted... I didn't want to die.

But I think the biggest thing was that my creativity was fed so deeply by the ideas of how to make a dance that I learned through John. I learned that I had to write, as a modern dance choreographer, to make up the way that I made a dance, and that was the world. The issue was about editing, creativity was churning, it was about structure and form and vocabulary and composition.

So you became the leader of an organization. What was that like?

I think the administrative structure is the hardest thing for me to talk about, because I just had to give it up to someone else at a certain point. Not all of it, but when I first had a person come in to manage the company in about 1980, that was the first time I got a salary, because she got a salary and I got to have one just a little bit more than she did. It was not a success, and after she left and we got in there and fumigated her office we found receipts in a shoebox underneath her desk. But anyway, that was the point where I said, 'No one else cares about this as much as you do, Trisha, so you better get yourself into that office and find out what it is.' And I found a creative edge. I thought it was fun to raise money. You know, you can win! [LAUGHS] It was

really fun, and it just makes you a little bit stronger in yourself, and that went along very well.

Small organizations are every bit as complicated as large ones but often don't have the resources to afford the best administrative talent. On the other hand, you've got a loyal and supportive board.

I have had very talented administrators over the years and do now, but the staff is too small to meet all of the demands we receive. Bob (Rauschenberg) has been the central figure on the board. I remember once, back when he formed Change, Inc, a foundation that helped artists in need, I asked for support to perform *Walking on the Wall* at the Whitney Museum. He said, 'The foundation is out of money right now, but as soon as I get it I'll call you.' Four months later he called me and said, 'Now you can have the grant.' I said, 'Oh, I did the concert, Bob, I don't need it now.' [LAUGHS] Anyway, his friendship has always meant a lot to me.

Even though the administrative side has been a struggle, the organization has served your work pretty well. Have you been able to withdraw from the administrative side at all?

I had to, because I couldn't keep up with it. I could tell you stories; here's a typical one. I'm somewhere on the road, directing my first opera, and I get five pages of administrative questions on my laptop, with no printer to print them out, at the end of a day that has really fried my hide. And I'm sitting in a chair, just sitting there unable to speak because I've worked so hard, my neck is so on the chopping block. Then like 30-40 minutes later I would hear an internal voice say, 'How about food?' I get up in the morning, I take notes all day long, and in the process the scenes get out of sequence. So the mornings are spent re-shuffling corrections into the proper order to facilitate a smooth run. And I'm doing this day after day. So when the five pages of urgent administrative questions come in at the end of the day I just can't believe it.

This is a familiar story to anyone who is both an artist and leader of the organization. If you described these jobs on paper, listing everything that has to be done and the 18 or 20-hour day it takes to do them, most people would say, 'That's an impossible job.'

It's ridiculous, yeah. It's costly and I've paid the price.



Roof Piece (1973)

It has to be awfully rewarding work to pay that kind of price.

Well, I'm just not going to lose. I don't want to lose.

Even though you've withdrawn in some measure from the administrative side I think we can assume safely that the company would fall apart if you were all the way out of it. What organizational leadership functions do you fill because they are so critical that you must do them personally?

What comes to mind is my experience choreographing an opera in 1986. I learned that I should direct the opera the next opportunity in order to protect the aesthetic present in the choreography. My opportunity came with an invitation from Brussels but somehow, some people within the organization began to question whether the resident choreographer, me, should move to another genre. I did successfully go ahead with the opera, fell head over heels in love with opera to be exact, and began to strategize how to make the two separate enterprises, dance and opera, work within a dance company. My solution was to create a satellite company of ex-dancers or other gifted

dancers and I would work with them, I would build the material on them, and then after the premiere they would take it out on the road without me or my dance company.

I think what I'm hearing is that you are active in the overall company design? You put groups of people onto the right tasks?

I try to figure out how to make things work. I think about structure in my choreography so it's not a big leap to apply structure to organizational things. I try to develop systems, small or large, so that we don't have to invent the wheel every time we come up against an endemic problem.

What about motivating people? Do you have to spend much time on that?

I wish that they would do more. I have some people that are reliant on my opinion, and I really think they're better, they know the subject deeper, they're in it.

For example, our five-year calendar – which was also rejected at first – was something I put together so that we could see my obligations, when we could commit to make work, and how many

weeks I had the company available to me to develop it on.

I was getting like killed by late breaking news, like, 'Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry, you only have 10 weeks! Aaah!' [LAUGHS] That was a very difficult document to get people to read. I could get it constructed but no one knew how to read it, so the person answering the phone about a booking would say yes before they would review what the facts were. So you asked me that—what was your question? Do I have to motivate people? Yeah, I have to fight for some of my ideas but once they're accepted they're accepted.

What about money?

The only thing I have to fight continually is lack of funding. I do fundraise, but our budget tanked along with the general economy in 01-02. I've been understaffed for such a long time, and we struggle to maintain dancers weeks at 38 per year in this climate, with periodic lay-offs. We've always looked like a big company, with a strong position in the world of dance, but the staff is running with buckets catching water. If I need twelve dancers I rarely get ten.

You mentioned just a second ago that the company has a strong position in the dance world. I'd like to have a clear understanding of that. How would some other person knowledgeable about the dance world describe it?

In the last five years I've done so well. I've proven to everyone, even my staunchest critics that I am up there as an artist. I've had museum shows of my drawings, directed operas, and I just did my first ballet; I didn't even study ballet—don't tell anyone—and you could hear the word masterpiece from the stage; this was in Paris. And then in my own choreography, I'm doing really just the best work of my life.

I'm going to need some more help with that. You've described a level of achievement that is now recognized. But is there a way to talk about the position of the company in terms of its significance rather than its status?

I'm very, very proud of the work I've done in the last three years, maybe five, and how people are relating to me and to my work. The French are so faithful to me. I've been there every other year, sometimes three years in a row, since 1972. Writers

there say to me, 'After Merce, it's you.' The French taste in choreography is abstract—it's Merce—and Merce and John are loves of the French more than of the US. The French government gave out the money sooner than the American did, so that the sponsors in France could invite me long before the American could. So I got kidnapped in a way [LAUGHS], to Europe. On the other hand, I grew so by their support. And I think that my absence in America was a sadness, and Merce faced that. There was a time when he was nowhere here, even in Seattle, his home. And there is not the money to travel, talk to people, get the aesthetic clarified and appreciated.

In a company such as yours that serves the need of a particular artist, usually there's an implication that the company is not intended to have a life beyond her involvement. Will the company have a purpose when you're no longer associated with it?

I'm the only post-modern choreographer with a big presence in the world. My company owns that information: the rehearsal directors and dancers know it, they think like I do, they've been trained by practice. I hope there is enough time to do it properly, to set up an organization properly. I've already begun the process but I'm not very far along in it. But I think probably post-modern dance will go down the tubes [LAUGHS] if I don't proceed with some sort of a foundational organization that makes it possible for the postmodern school to go forward, to license my choreography, and maybe my opera stagings. I'm just not sure how to do it.

So you're conscious of trying to set that up in a solid organizational way? Are you concerned to avoid all of the mess that happened with Martha Graham's company and her dances?

That's correct, a few board members and my executive director have met with me through the winter putting one question on the table: 'What do I want to do over the next 10 years? You tell us what you want to do and we'll make it happen.' We came up with my three subjects of interest: Dance, Movement to Music (opera and songcycle), and Visual Art and Other Projects. This can now go to the Board for Approval.

Simultaneously, I felt an urgency to draw up a new will in order to clearly separate my personal life from the company that bears my name. That work has been accomplished. My lawyer is experienced

in handling the estates of choreographers and that work remains to be done as soon as possible.

You deserve congratulations for that.

Oh, thank you. But this need is very evident. Young dancers and young choreographers are the base for this. Students at Mills College, and in Paris, ask, 'What can we do? You did it all.' A dancer who just graduated from NYU told me, 'We all try to figure out what we can do because, in fact, what you did, taking a personal language of movement and vocabulary, and putting it to structure, you did it.' He and other young dancers seem to think that I have capped off a wave—a culmination—and there is no place for them to go. But nothing has been capped off; it has everywhere to go. So I'm very aware.

So you're not only conscious of following Merce, you're also concerned that there be people in that line after you to keep the flame alive?

Yes, I would like to support them.

That could be an important purpose for the company in the future, but how do you make the organizational structure strong enough to carry on after you're no longer supplying the glue that holds it together?

I'm not that exact in this portion of the dream. I want to figure out how to give scholarships to young choreographers, but I don't know how that



Five Part Weather Invention (1999)

all fits together. I don't know how we fund that. Maybe on a smaller scale it's similar to the Ailey model, which is to fund African American dancers to choreograph and give them a stage. Maybe, in a precise way, that notion of helping our most talented young post-modern choreographers could be broad enough or interesting enough a subject that people would fund it. I don't know.

Do you have other concerns that the company should address in the future?

I don't want to forget talking about the fact that I'm a woman. It's a factor in my inability to raise money, I believe. I have the ability to raise money, I just mean that the statistics as put out by a study that was done on women choreographers, that they get a much smaller proportion of the grants, of the bookings, of the awards. We women just don't have as much weight as you men have, [LAUGHS] which is alright, we're only looking for equality.

We had Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, and Doris Humphries in the beginning, but they were off the grid somehow and they couldn't perpetuate. Martha went down hard, and it was the men she took into her company who flourished.

Does it exist on the level of disincentives for women to get into the field, or does it exist on the level of their being present in the field but not given the same support?

I woke up to the problem in the early '60's. There are many more women in the schools as students than there are men, many, many, many. And so they give advantages to men; I do it myself, to get them in and try to train them up because I don't want to have a company of just women. I believe that this is an insidious fact inside everything.

My theory is that everyone loves a man, me first. Men like men, and women like men, but when it comes to a woman it breaks down, you hear it in the language. Men are great. They had a head start and they're great. I'm the first to say it. There are just a few women of broadly recognized achievement and not enough of us to provide the variety of choices that would give women more funding, theatre dates, and awards. I am sorry to say that the ratio in awards is often one out of ten. We are a gender of tokens. Why do tears rise now?

The arts funding positions in the foundations that used to belong totally to men now belong almost totally to women, but there hasn't been, therefore, any shift in this problem?

I hadn't thought about that, but I do know that women are very tough on women. I don't know why; I don't think it's something so cheap as competition or anything.

From my first collaboration, I made a decision to alternate the gender of my collaborators for each new choreography. With distinct exceptions, the women were more difficult to work with than the men. In a team of composer, set, costume and light designers, it was always possible to work with both men and women and I do to this day. My collaborators for the ballet I recently choreographed for the Paris Opera Ballet were all women. A fact that I publicly mentioned in my speech that followed the adornment of my quivering neck by the Minister of Culture with the *Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, onstage at Palais Garnier.

I just think this culture needs some time to grow some generations so people can get used to seeing women of achievement without thinking unconsciously that we're exceptions to some rule.

What's to be done?

I'm trying to make the best work I can. I believe that's the first step, to make the work scintillatingly gorgeous.

Also, I have decided to begin talking about it. I hit the latex ceiling, or is it mylar? [LAUGHS] I was socialized in a period where you really didn't discuss this. You got a backlash from it if you did. I haven't even had this conversation with the people I trust in the world. It's not a savory topic, and I've had people really argue with me. But I'm brazen enough now, and I'm talking to you about it. [LAUGHS]

Do you see an ongoing role for the company in trying to address this problem?

If we could figure out how to do it going forward, then yes.