

INTERVIEW

Tonya Lockyer interviews Zoe Scofield November 2011

TL: Hi, I'm Tonya Lockyer, a dance artist and executive director of Velocity, Seattle's arts center dedicated to contemporary dance, and I'm here with Zoe Scofield, one half of the collaborative team, zoe|juniper, which has the Seattle premiere of its new work, *A Crack in Everything*, December 1-4 here at On the Boards.

Zoe, because Juniper can't be with us today, I thought I'd start by asking you a question about your collaboration. So, you're credited as the choreographer of zoe|juniper and Juniper Shuey is credited as the visual artist, but having seen your work, there's a very performative aspect to a lot of what Juniper contributes to the work you make. For example, in *ACIE*, there's a beautiful video image that looks like gold ink smoking through a black ether, that really is sort of choreography in itself. And in an earlier work, if I'm correct, he placed red pieces of paper upstage, and he was on stage, and they were blown across the space... You also said that he helps shape the energy and progression of the work—he helps distill it. So I was wondering if you could just speak a little bit on how you collaborate and what roles you feel you play in creating the ultimate performance that we see on stage.

ZS: That's funny—I'm really glad that you asked that because that's something that Juniper and I have been talking a lot about lately. I feel like people want to pull things apart a little bit, and say that Juniper is a visual artist and therefore only contributes anything that has anything to do with anything visual, and I'm the choreographer and dancer and only contribute things that are performative, or what have you. And I think you're exactly right that his visual work and even his installations and photography that he does outside of the stuff we do together is very performative. And you having worked with him yourself, you know he has a pretty extensive performance background, and I think that my approach to dance and choreography is very visual as well. It's really not so much about—well, it is about physicality and energy and intention—but it's a visual picture I'm creating, this moving visual arc. So the lens in which we both approach and create our own mediums already blend over each other, in a way. And then, with this piece in particular, I don't think the boundaries of who contributed the visuals and who contributed the overall movement trajectory was very divided or different. There's a part in the beginning of the piece in which I'm tracing my outline on the wall and you could say, well that's a very visual part of the piece, but that was this idea that I had started with when we had this residency at MacDowell, and then we both started developing it more and more and more and then we kept distilling it again and again and again.

One of the things we're trying to do in the piece is with this video, this new editing process of video where [Juniper] overlays the images on top of each other so that all you see is motion in the video. So it's this visual thing, however it's really all about movement. So we have that being sort of a dancer at one point in the piece and that's the only thing that happens. And so to me it is really an integral part of the choreography in the piece and yet it's through his medium and through his lens—it's like the visual art element is the dancer and the dancer is the visual art element. So that's what's really exciting to me about working with him is that I feel like I don't have to get stuck inside of "I'm only a dancer," or that "he's only a visual artist."

As far as how the collaborative process goes together... it's a funny thing to talk about because it's sort of like saying, "Tell me about how this conversation started or happened"—it just spontaneously

starts to happen and it's just sort of a really natural progression of our interests and our relationship with each other. I think that we both use the different mediums and with this piece in particular, there's an installation performance that we're doing and a video installation and a series of photographs and that there's this overall desire in this thing that I want to make or this image I want to show, and that then we find the mediums that allow that to happen, rather than being like, "Juniper's a video and visual artist so, there has to be video in the piece," or, "We have to make a video piece," or, "There has to be a really involved set." Or, "I'm a dancer and performer so inside of these photographs, this series of photographs, has to have dance or performance in it." It's more like, "What is the medium that will serve the function, to make what we want to make?" So that's really been the process of working together, especially on this piece, and over this pretty long duration of making it—"

TL: It's been like two years, right?

ZS: Yeah, it's been two years—since 2009, in the summer. We had a residency in Budapest and New Zealand, and there's been sort of smaller performances of it, different iterations and it feels like it's really solidified this summer at Jacob's Pillow, and then the first installation version of it opened at the TBA festival in September, and the larger more fully realized installation and performance will be at Diverseworks in Texas in January.

TL: So do you bounce ideas off each other and then go away and you're responsible for the final execution of the movement, and he's the execution of the visual elements, or are you bouncing ideas off each other and they kind of evolve... are you outside eyes for each other? Do you give each other feedback?

ZS: Yeah, yeah, we definitely give each other a lot of feedback. You know ultimately I'm the choreographer, he doesn't create movement. I think in some ways how he helps form the movement is this thing with me saying, "This is the effect I want," or, "This is the thing I'm going for, let me show you what I'm doing," and he's an eye that's saying, "Yes, no," or, "What about if you did something like this," or, "Energetically, something needs to happen here," or, "Spatially, there needs to be something here." Or, we've played a lot with counterpoint. In this piece we tried to create a structure or almost a scaffolding—I don't want to say rules—but to create a sort of experiment, and say, "If I want to look at time, and I want to look at space and relationships and memory, then what are ways in which we can set out to examine that?" Like, what's a formula to make physically, spatially in space and time, you know, how do we create something that tries to move outside of linear time inside of a linear time experience? So what we do is we both sort of say, "This is what I want to have happen."

Like he had some super brilliant visual ideas that I was like, "Okay, but that's not possible," or, "We don't have the budget for that," so what is the essence of that idea, or what are you trying to get at, to make happen. So then let's find that essence and then go, what are other ways to get at that. And then he would do the same thing.

TL: Is there an example of that that we might see when we see the performance of something that's the essence of something that was a bigger secret idea that maybe you can let us in on?

ZS: Well, there was a lot of things. Like, this is sort of a round-about way of answering your question, but we have had this really amazing experience with On the Boards, and just relationship with OtB just over our whole career, but in particular, for this project, it was really taken to the next level and developed in an exciting way that we had this whole tech residency at OtB. We had two

weeks of purely getting to kind of make the final performance. So that meant we could try all the sort of tech elements, and as you know, that never happens. Unless you're like the Met Opera or something like that, and have a crazy budget. And so, we had probably the piece visually, sonically, lighting-wise, and even order-wise, and even some material, choreographically, that we came into this two-week residency with doesn't exist now. From what we found out and from what we did, we changed the piece. It's a very different—I mean, not entirely, but it's a very different piece in a lot of respects.

One of the things that you would see, when you were talking about the video projection, of what is actually white ink that [Juniper] dropped into a clear plastic container full of really really cold water surrounded by black curtains. So then he filmed it and it's upside down and it's super super slowed down, so you're watching this ink unfold but it looks like smoke or what have you. So the desire is that, you're right, it becomes a person, it becomes a body—the movement becomes a body and it doesn't matter that it's encapsulated in a dancer or not. And then it slowly reveals Raja watching it. And to me that was something I really wanted to show, was watching somebody watching time pass, watching somebody watch time unfold and move—that we're more interested in this idea and this feeling of movement than where it come from and who is doing it.

So originally, I had this idea that there was this person who would have a whole bunch of gold liquid in their mouth and they would open their mouth and you would watch the liquid pour out of them. I also wanted it to come out of their body in some way, that you would watch it slowly go down stage. And it's a great idea, however the practicalities of it working... we tried forever, I mean, God bless our costume designer and everybody else for trying to make that happen, however, it didn't work. So I was like, What is this getting at? What do I actually want? if the thing itself isn't going to happen, what's the larger picture. So then with Juniper, and the other collaborators and designers we work with, really trying to find, What's the other thing that can do this? And also at times, Is that necessary? A large part of making this piece and in the process with him and I together is editing, actually, and calibrating, and saying, "Is this enough?" or, "Is this too much?" or, "How do these things bump up against each other, how do they relate to each other?" and really trying to play kind of in that way.

Another way you'd see that is where there's this video with balls of light that are all over the place and seem very chaotic and random and then slowly come together and create this box in which Raja is in. I think that happens... but, he originally wanted it to be so that there were these balls that fall from the ceiling and the floor would have a magnet underneath it so that they would fall and there would be this random bouncing everywhere and then they eventually would pull into this place. Which is a great idea, but, I mean, we don't have a \$500,000 budget, how are you going to put magnets under, you know so on and so forth—

TL: If anyone's listening that has that kind of budget...

ZS: [laughing] Right, give me a call!

TL: You've talked about how you're just interested in movement. And you know, one of the definitions of choreography really is not about bodies it's about movement, it's about organizing space and time. And I'm wondering how you feel as someone who's dedicated your life to dance when someone might describe your work as "post-dance." Someone described your work as "post-dance."

ZS: Really?

TL: Do you feel your work is moving away from dance in any way?

ZS: [laughing] That's awesome. Post-dance... I don't even know what that means. I love that, and I think I would also have to have a conversation with that person, I'm very curious what their intention is in that, since it's not common vernacular.

You know, there's a really interesting preview of John Jasperse's new show in the *Sunday Times*, and I really respect him a lot, and he's a super conceptual, I think pretty contemporary, "post-dance" sort of person. And they were asking him about this new work and that he always comes back to form, he always comes back to that he has a lot of dance, and I guess in this piece, there's a lot of dance in it. And it's interesting that there seems to be so much apologizing in a way, or trying to make it okay or have this little conceptual dialogue around "Why are you using dance?" It's almost like painters having to defend making paintings now or something. And I found that really interesting and sad and sort of or I guess [under her breath] pathetic, that that was the conversation we were having... and I totally get it because ultimately, dance is the form and the medium that I'm in and I'm interested in, and it's what I know. I mean, I know other things, I'm interested in visual art, I'm interested in all these other things, but that is the medium in which I excel and which I understand how to express or actualize what I'm interested in doing and making. That's not the only medium and it's not the thing in and of itself. So I think what I understand and what I would agree about this "post-dance" comment is that I don't think I make dance for the sake of dance—and I don't make movement for the sake of movement. I'm not interested in that sort of—

TL: Post-modern, dance for dance's sake sort of aesthetic, perhaps?

ZS: Yeah... or even that, but it's like, Why am I making this big video installation piece? It's not because I'm like, Now I'm going to go move away from dance and make a video piece. It's because the video has the tools and does the thing than I want to do in this moment, right here, with this thing. So, it's just using the tools that I need, rather than being obsessed with the form in which it's happening.

TL: But at the core of it, it sounds like dance is a big part of how you access, the world and your ideas.

ZS: Yeah, I love it. At the end of the day, I love showing up to the studio, and pliéing! [laughs] You know, And doing tendues and I love doing that work and I love that physicality and I love the realness to that. And is it relevant? I don't know, I hope so. I hope that I find a way to make it relevant. And does it work for me right now? Yeah. And when it doesn't, it doesn't.

TL: Can we talk a little bit about the title? Maybe we should end with that. *A Crack in Everything*, only because for me and I imagine for many it reminds us of the Leonard Cohen lyric, "There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in." Did that inspire you at all... how did you arrive at the title?

ZS: Well, I found the Leonard Cohen song after we started working on this piece... and actually when we were in Budapest he was there on tour, playing, and there's been these little snippets of him throughout the process in these sort of beautiful serendipitous ways. But, no, it actually started from talking with a friend of mine, Stewart, who's a Religions professor, and we were talking about two things: we were talking about The Oresteia, and we were talking about this idea of original sin and this idea of missing the mark. That that is sort of what is human, and what is original sin is that you're always going to miss the mark but you always aimed. And to me, I loved that idea that there is

a flaw in everything, and that there is a space where our humanity and our fallibility is always there and is always present no matter the attempt to make it not, and an attempt to try and move away from that. I think that I got the title from a Czech poet that my Dad had sent me, and it was just this really beautiful poem and it just was like, this is what I need right, now. I need that reminder of our humanity and our fallibility, and that paradox between trying to solidify and tie down and make tangible the intangible, and make immortal our very mortal selves. I think in the piece it comes up in different ways, and maybe unobvious ways, but for me the way that feels the most obvious is the part where I'm tracing my shadow and this thing that's always moving and this thing that's imperfect. And yet I'm trying to, in this sort of sad and clumsy way, make it stay permanent and real. Which is also a metaphor for dance ! Or for anything. It's not real; it's not going to stay.

TL: That's one of the things I think is beautiful is that you and Juniper have this other collaboration which is the photographs, which are really exquisite, and in a way they kind of ensure that your work will have some kind of life beyond the stage. Does that matter to you? Do you think about that?

ZS: A lot more lately, yeah! [laughs] Maybe getting older... makes that happen? To me they're able to do something that dance can't do. I think that's really at the crux of everything—the mediums that we work in, is that it's able to do something that the other thing can't. I love the intimacy and the time that is allowed with photographs. You could look at something forever, and that people can really imprint themselves upon it in this way that you can do in dance, but there's the experience that you have as it's happening, and then there's the experience that you have in your head in your memory as you sort of re-create the performance as you need it or want it to be. And so, I think that's fascinating to me—I really love that.

So I guess going back to that other question, that is what I'm interested in about performance and why I love the form of dance is the three different versions that happen. There's the thing that happens in time and space. Let's say you and I are performing on stage. There's you and I on stage, there's the audience, like, this is happening. There's that version. There's your experience of it as it's happening in time and space, there's my experience of it as it's happening in time and space, and then there's the audience's experience as it's happening in time and space with their lens and how they see the world and how they take things in and their preconceived ideas of it. And then there's the version that in their memory, they re-create the performance. They're consciously or unconsciously editing it, shifting it around, exaggerating things, moving things around. So there are three different pieces that happen.

TL: Part of what I think is so beautiful about dance is that there's so much room for movement in that. When Robert Spinston was here with Cunningham, he talked about the very unique "specific un specificity" of dance—so specific, yet so much room. So I always feel like there's a movement of thought, all inside of that, of what you just described, that's also really dynamic.

ZS: Right, right. That's so funny that he would say that—such a Cunningham thing, right? This ultimate paradox. But yeah, I think with the photographs, I'd never thought of it as being something that I'm trying to solidify and leave these sort of artifacts out into the world of dance, but you're right, I mean that is what it is, that's part of it, for sure.

TL: Well great! There's a chance for folks to see a preview of this work—you're having a fundraiser this Sunday (Nov. 20), at Velocity, 6:30-8:30, Capitol Hill. Well, I could've talked for another hour, but we were only supposed to talk for ten minutes! So, thank you so much!