

Choreographing Community
*Brenda Way and Alonzo King in conversation with
John Killacky, Program Officer for Arts and Culture*

Brenda Way and Alonzo King have a longstanding commitment to building community throughout their stellar careers. In the 33 years since she helped found ODC, Way has made 84 dances with the company. King founded LINES ballet 22 years ago and has made 145 dances since then. It has not always been easy, but their companies are flourishing: this season ODC has 43 weeks of work and LINES has 38. After decades of choreographing, they continue to create astoundingly beautiful new dances.

John: Let's go to 1970 in New York. Alonzo, you were just out of college and had just arrived. Brenda, you were leaving to go to Oberlin, where you set up an inter-art program. Tell us about the dance scene at that time.

Alonzo: Well it seemed like a really big family. I was on scholarship at Ailey and ABT. I remember that Ailey was working out of a church, and something happened where they lost that church, and they would come over to ABT on 61st street and rehearse, they would use the studios, so I would see both companies there. I also remember people really supporting each other; dancers went to see everything. Also we were paid to study at Ballet Theatre, School of American Ballet, and Harkness. You had a stipend... so you could live.

Brenda: It was the end of the '60s and I was taken by the "Just Say No" movement...Down with traditional technique (all my early training was in ballet). We were making pieces in the streets with everyday people. I was doing a radio show and I interviewed Twyla, who talked about dancing in a museum. I felt that the dancer's relationship to the pulse of the community had been broken.

We were dropping out... we were trying to create alternative structures for everything, including our art. Alternative families. Collectives. We wanted to make our own world.

I tried actively to change my body into a more proletarian instrument. I moved on, but it was an important radical re-thinking at the time.

John: When did you come to San Francisco?

Alonzo: I came toward the end of 1981. I grew up in Santa Barbara and missed being surrounded by nature. When I was in New York, in the beginning I thought it was the only place to be, but after a while I had to make an effort to go see the sky. I missed open spaces and I thought this isn't how humans should live. I needed breath.

Brenda: I taught at Oberlin for six years, started a company, and was ready to find an urban base. We had explored [our vision] in private and were ready to take it out. We chose San Francisco for a variety of reasons. We felt we would have the freedom to diverge from the single choreographer company model. We liked the open space and also appreciated the fact that the experimental urge was valued in the West. I also thought a city that had a Hotel Tax Fund (to benefit artists) must be a city that really valued what I did.

John: What was the dance scene like then?

Brenda: Shortly after I came (in 1976), I was asked to adjudicate the first performance series run by the dance coalition. I sat for three days straight to look at over 100 companies, many culturally specific – it was all one world. In that era, there were three dance critics at The Chronicle and as many as 10 who wrote about dance with some regularity in different periodicals. Margy Jenkins was another reason I wanted to be here— such an intelligent presence.

Alonzo: I remember part of my decision was also where, outside of New York, I could find a huge dance community where I could work.

John: Right from the beginning you both built community; not being content to merely go into the studio. Talk about those dual commitments.

Alonzo: There is something about a home base for artists. My experience had been the introduction of art at home from my parents, and afterwards furthering that introduction through institutions and schools, which are really communities and families. There is also something about having a dream that is inclusive, so it is not a selfish dream. It has to be larger than you. It also feels good to be able to help people, watch people work, to have a sense of community. When you get out into the world there is so much fear and so much isolation that in these communities people have a sense of being at home.

Brenda: When I rejected technique in the '60s, it was in favor of a more probing quest of what art could be. I felt at that time, the refinements of technique were getting in the way, but I really needed a human environment in which to pursue these issues. That's why I started a collective and that's why we started our programs— other artists to push and talk and interact with. When we came out here we started a performing series, we started a magazine. We offered an aesthetic seminar and it was packed. Those were the days when all of the tenets of classical art were thrown up in the air. Building community wasn't about altruism; it was from artistic necessity.

John: Why have you been able to keep your companies so vital, while some others have not?

Alonzo: I have been surrounded by believers, but who isn't? It is really hard to know the why.

Brenda: I think we had the advantage of a few things... having our art form talked about in the paper as something that was interesting and important, being sustained by a spirit of rebellion. And rent was very much cheaper; ODC paid \$200 a month. So I had time and space to develop into the willful persistent creature that can keep something together.

Alonzo: But didn't other people as well? There were people here for years that had the same tenacity, that same cheap rent, but they are not here. Can we say that we were more ferocious; they didn't want it as much?

Brenda: There must be some personal choice, some core of intention in our lives that this is how we wanted it to be...I have been making family settings all my life – children, studios, an academic department, dance companies, that's the environment that feeds me and I think it is the same for you, Alonzo. That feedback system is the very center of our artistic passion. I know my partnership with the other choreographers has been key, even though the nature of the company has evolved away from a collective; the strength derived from the team was a big part for me.

Alonzo: My co-artistic directors, Pam Hagen and Robert Rosenwasser, have been sturdy pillars in this organization.

John: How do you make a case for the relevance of dance today?

Alonzo: If there is a world that wants obedient non-thinking sheep, avoid art. Art produces thinkers, lovers, examiners, and excavators. You look at everything in a different way. It forces people to see for themselves. I think the gift of art is a glimpse into the answer to the questions that everyone is asking: Why am I here? Where am I going? Who am I? Art has to be part of education. To take the fertile and open mind of a child and harden it by extracting all of their possibilities for new thought is cruel. It is like planting the same crop in the same soil year after year after year. The soil is stripped and ruined.

Brenda: I was thinking of my impulse to dance in the '60s, and my wish to replace theatrical artifice with an intense experiential relationship to life. There is a reason why contemporary dance really took off in this country. It was related to a hands-on American spirit to build and make things and to come up with new ways of looking at things. Making something from nothing is what dance is. You have the most marvelous metaphor for how children might go about their lives: Take hold and make something from what you have, just what you have. Blood, bones, heart, and a head for problem solving...the strategies of contemporary choreography - take this constraint, make something gorgeous of this constraint – seem to me a brilliant metaphor for what this generation needs in order to survive.

Alonzo: An intelligence that is beyond measurement in its highest form is a knowing that doesn't need validation; it is intuitive. Intuition has been ignored in our society, but it hugely important...Even the CEOs of the largest institutions, presented with all the demographics in the world, inevitably draw from the gut. The crime is not to develop the intuitive door in children.

Brenda: The mind is a muscle as Yvonne (Rainer) said; so flex it! Imagination— isn't that what distinguishes us from other forms? So why would we ignore the cultivation of the very thing that distinguishes humankind?

Alonzo: When the mind is being expanded, the concomitant is the heart. That mind-heart connection works together opening and expanding. They work together, that's why

Einstein was such an incredible humanitarian.

John: At a time when there are diminishing resources for dance, you are making some of your lushest work, while at the same time expanding facilities and making space available for other choreographers. Everyone else is retrenching, and you two of you are expanding. How is this possible?

Brenda: It is completely connected to everything we have been talking about. We imagined the world a certain way and continue to build it. Working in a vacuum, as an artist, for me is an impossibility. We need a fully loaded art world with other thinkers, performers, and artists. We need young and old players.

Alonzo: Diversification, broadness, including others.

Brenda: Remember about making something from nothing; this is what choreographers do and we will continue to do on the stage and on the street.

Alonzo: It never stops

John: Brenda, talk about the genesis of Choreographers in Action.

Brenda: As things got worse financially, foundations asked me to convene groups to talk about the state of dance in the Bay Area. At one of them, Joanna Haigood said, “Let’s not keep meeting like this. Why don’t we do something?” Margy Jenkins, Joanna, and I put out a call to see if anyone would like to get together. Just choreographers, no support staff, to investigate what we can do for each other and ourselves. I said in the first email, “generosity is the price of membership.” Thirty-nine people wrote back. Now there are 124 people signed on.

It is a very fluid group. We talk about aesthetic issues and practical things, about how it is when dancers are injured or strategies to persuade the paper to hire a critic. People have formed action committees and are feeling better to be doing something rather than feeling helpless.

John: Most companies have less touring, but your weeks on the road are increasing. How?

Brenda: Perhaps because our goals are much broader than solely what is on the stage. We like partnerships, coming into a community and connecting our artistic vision with as many different kinds of people and activities as possible. And we include families in our vision. Many presenters share this view.

Alonzo: A huge difference has been going in-house because no one can speak like you can for yourself.

John: How important is touring?

Alonzo: I get to see it, share it with people, talk about it, and the dancers get to grow in a work. If you are in a place where you’ve done a premiere – it’s like text, you want it to have some

weight and take on some meaning from experience. Then, as Brenda was saying, to get into a community and to share and to see dancers grow and ideas be made clear and get feedback – all of that. The bottom line is the communication of ideas and you are continuing to do that on larger platforms around the world.

Brenda: A dance doesn't become itself until it's had about twenty performances. As with anything, you get a glimpse of what can be. You have the outlines, but the actual fullness of interpretation of the participating dancers begins to make a piece that transcends itself after a certain amount of time.

It also makes you appreciate, at the most profound level, how different lives are around the country. There will be something I think is whimsical and we will go to some place and it will appear entirely serious. That is completely fantastic; to try to understand where that is coming from. Some places you find the actual bodies are the whole message of the concert. What the colors of the faces are and the shapes of those muscles - that is what people are most astonished by. What the work was about, they don't particularly notice. So, it is a revelation. This is also true for the dancers. And this includes the social dimension of being an emissary for dance; I think this really expands the personality and heft of the individual dancer. It gives them a greater role in the future of our form.

Alonzo: It is also interesting at festivals when dancers get to see dancers from all over the world. Then it becomes a larger family that is really informative.

Brenda: They have to know why they are doing it. In order for dancers to ask these questions, they need perspective. We do after all work eight hours a day; it doesn't leave a lot of time to gain perspective, so traveling really counts.

John: What advice do you give dancers beginning their own choreography?

Alonzo: The most important thing is Socrates' dictum "Know Thyself." That is where your search begins. The more honest you are with yourself, the clearer your observations will be. See everything. See how everything is constructed from a broom to a barn to barnacles. Every single thing: a safety clip, baskets, eyeglasses, rooms, and nature. See how everything is assembled: stars, constellations. That is hugely important.

Keep choreographing until your investigations start talking to you. Your work doesn't have to always be in a proscenium; it doesn't have to have a large cast. Start with one other person in a garage, on the beach.

Brenda: See everything. Consider every site a performance site. Take every opportunity, small or large to work your craft, and use everything that comes in. Don't be shy. Don't worry about not having a singularly original response to something – use everything, because eventually it will go through the filter of your developing perceptions. Just find the juice.

Alonzo: Sometimes young choreographers think they have to have the most amazing dancer to work with, but work with who is there.

Brenda: If you really are looking at everything, you will find the possibility in that person who is willing to work with you. For developing creativity, that is going to take you a lot further than if you have the most refined instrument available.

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