

Transcripts: ICPP Interview #1 with Jennifer Harge

Wesleyan University

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Guest Artist

Jennifer Harge

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Deborah Goffe 0:10

Hi everybody.

That's Jennifer Harge joining us from Detroit and Jennifer is going to give you sort of a point of entry to who she is and that sort of thing. But I guess I wanted to tell you what we're up to. Since we did this last with Kaneza, Jennifer and I had a conversation about some questions that we might start with for today, and then set another opportunity to have a quick phone chat and by the time I got back to the next phone chat, Jennifer had sent me an outline pretty much answering all the questions, and making something of a map that I might call a kind of nest. And

so that was really exciting. We've actually made copies of them. So, I'll pass them around.

I'm also sending around questions. There are a lot of them, we will not get to all of these today, but there were some preliminary questions that I sent to Jennifer that resulted in the outline that you're now getting. And then as a result of the outline, we realized that there were some other questions that the outline made us also want to get to. What we're going to do today is address some of the questions in A and give Jennifer a chance to kind of talk us through the outline and start to flesh that out a little bit, and then we'll move to some of the questions in B so just so you know what's up. So here are those questions.

And so we'll start here and obviously, as we're going along if it feels like there's a good place for questions that you might have that begin to make this more dynamic, we'll do that as well. To begin, I'm going to start with the very first question, asking you to talk about your work and what's brought you to that work and just a little bit about who you are.

Jennifer Harge 3:24

Sure.

So hello again everyone, my name is Jennifer Harge, and I'm coming to you from Detroit.

First of all, thank you for this invitation. I was saying this to you and someone else this morning. When I got the invitation in the beginning, I just thought "did they know this is what I was thinking about for the past six months and I was shaking as I was thinking about it. So this opportunity to think through this notion of an entrepreneurial strategy with other folks is right on time. So thank you, all of you.

I am living in Detroit, kind of from Detroit, and have worked as a performer/choreographer/dance artist since the beginning. [...] I was working primarily as a teacher, teaching from primary, secondary education. It was my post-BFA life, and then I got a masters at University of Iowa through an MFA program. So I was out of that, I was like, "oh, I'm just gonna be choreographing and making dances and teaching in a college." I felt my life was going to be, "I'm gonna apply for some professor jobs, and then that is what we're going to do. I'll move to Detroit." And I did that. I did adjunct and full time lecturer positions and it became clear, like, two, three years ago that that wasn't enough. It didn't give me enough space to make the work that I was being called to make, and there wasn't enough space to choreograph. I had to use freshmen in college. [...] the things I was trying to set up...just didn't even have a frame of reference for what I was talking about.

A year or so after moving to Detroit I founded a dance collective called Harge Dance Stories, and it really was just a way so I could practice making dances in the way in which I wanted to make dances. I wasn't actually thinking [...] like, 'and now for my company!' but if I would have known what I know now, I probably would be like, 'just leave it alone.' But it was really just a way to make and hold myself accountable to making. Once I started doing that I was just like, 'oh no. This is how I understand the world is through making. This is how I understand myself is through making.

I started at the time that I was teaching at three different institutions as an adjunct and driving all around Southeast Michigan. This is winter. You know what I mean? It just got to a point I was just like, this has to stop. And soon. I would drive to one school and my chest would be tight and have an hour 15 minutes drive to another school the same day. So I'd go teach freshman Modern, I would go to U of M and teach like Senior Modern, I will come back to Detroit to dance in community. So we weren't even talking the same language across classes. It just was, "y'all good? Next. Y'all good?" It just was doing that. That wasn't going to be a way to sustain us. I knew that. So I started saying a couple years ago, I think I just need to be an artist. So I would keep it to myself, but those words were really scary to me; that still is scary.

I just then started kind of putting it into the world, so I reached out to folks, and would be like, 'hey can I come set a piece with your students or your company members,' and I'd reach out to people who I knew have had access to that. So I had a friend at Dayton Contemporary Dance inside of the second company, so I'd set a work on DCDC. Or I had a friend teaching at a high school, so I would go just to like practice what it meant to make again outside of the confines of the universities I was teaching. And then things really transitioned into more of a making focus, I would say in 2017, when I applied [for a] fellowship in Detroit--through the Kresge Foundation--called Crazy Arts in Detroit, and that's an arts fellowship. And I applied in Dance and didn't get it. I applied the next year in Performance Art and did; that's also a transition to be like, 'oh maybe I'm just not doing just dance.' And it took me to be recognized as a performance artist to be like, 'I thought something was wrong about just doing dance.' I didn't know how to like, just come to realize it. And so that has helped me shift my practice into...from a dance background for sure, and also learning that the more I go into visual arts world, to like be clear that I'm a dancer. They love to be like, 'oh you do performance art, or 'you do...', I'm just like, 'first and foremost I dance' and then we do other things, with [...] installation or whatever. So my practice now is very dance installation, site specific--that word is weird, but you know I'm talking about--and weaving those things together, and trying to live in that as my job.