

Transcript of *In Conversation* with Erik Lee

In Dance Summer 2021

In Conversation theme music: Calming mid-tempo new wave meditation music that you may hear in a massage therapy clinic

[Theme music plays, then fades out slightly to play in the background of the introduction]

Andréa Spearman: Dancers' Group is experimenting with new ways to unify, strengthen, and amplify voices in the Bay Area. We're excited to share a variety of ideas and stories.

[Theme music fades back in, then gradually fades out entirely as Andréa begins to speak]

Andréa: Welcome back to *In Conversation* with Andréa Spearman.

Today's guest, Erik Lee, was born in Oakland and began his formal training at UC Berkeley, where he earned a BA in Dance & Performance Studies and a BA in Art Practice with a concentration in painting in 2010. Erik joined Dimensions Dance Theater (DDT) as a company member and modern dance teacher for the Rites of Passage summer program. For four years, his passion for youth and dance converged in Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp as a group leader and later Co-Managing Director. In 2017, Erik earned his MFA in Dance from Mills College. Erik served voluntarily in dance ministry with the Worship in Arts Ministry (WAM) at Covenant Church for 11 years and for seven years served as Artistic Director and Choreographer. His most recent commissioned work in 2019 included *Armed with Joy* for Dimensions Dance Theater and *Com. Devices* for UC Berkeley. He has worked and collaborated most recently with James Graham Dance Theatre, Zaccho Dance Theatre, and PUSH Dance Company.

Erik, we welcome you!

Erik Lee: Thank you, thank you! It's so great to be here.

Andréa: Thank you so much for joining us! Give the audience a peek into your artistic background. How were you first introduced to dance?

Erik: Yes, I love this question. People have been asking similar questions. I'm going to bring it all the way back and say that my first introduction to dance was from three places: 1) My family. My family loved to dance and just that social atmosphere of dancing to great soul and funk, R&B music, as well as gospel so in that arena, dance is always present. Also KQED was probably the first time I had seen ballet televised and I was extremely captivated. I don't know who was performing, but I just remember seeing ballet and being amazed. And then third place was music videos – namely, Michael Jackson. The ["Remember The Time" video](#) is forever etched in my mind because that was the first time that I had seen all Black dancers dancing with such virtuosity, being so captivating,

so beautiful, all these different skin tones were represented and [it was] just incredible. Those were the first three places in which I was introduced to dance.

Andréa: That's wonderful. To be able to see artists on screen that represent you. And to be inspired and sparked by that [Erik: Yes.]. So then that kind of peeks into the next question: Why do you dance?

Erik: Yes, I dance honestly because I was made to do it. It really does contribute to what I believe is my overall purpose in life and that, for me, I believe is ever unfolding. I don't think we really get to a place where we're like, "Oh, this is my purpose and this is what it is only." I think we really come to understand it more as life goes on because we serve many different purposes and things branch off from one thing to another. But yeah, dance is just my passion – it feels like fire in my bones. It is the way that I connect with people, it's the way that I ultimately connect with God and praise dance and liturgical dance. It's spiritual, it's everything. So for me, it's like I don't have a choice [*both laugh*], but I also love that I don't have that choice. It serves this great purpose and has this great presence in my life.

Andréa: Yes, serving purpose and being present. It's so interesting, just reading your bio and seeing the range of folks that you have worked with, performed with, studied under – what are some of the most important things that you've learned?

Erik: Yes! One of them is that dance exposes your character. So if you're shy, if you're arrogant, if you have an ego, if you are a sensual person – all that comes out in your dance. The parts of you that you may want to keep hidden, they come out. I love it because it works both ways. It doesn't necessarily have to reveal the bad parts of us but it also reveals some of the wonderful, rich parts of us that we may have a hard time sharing with people in other settings and maybe in conversation, but in dance, you're able to express a broader range of who you are. And so I love that about dance.

Spatial awareness is another one of them. I'm so acutely aware of people around me and being courteous and being consistent and being able to *share* space whether it's walking down a sidewalk or being inside of a building, waiting in a grocery line... I'm hyper-aware of spatial awareness.

And I think another thing that really has completely blessed me that I've learned more recently in dance is to use what's available. And whatever's not available means that you didn't need it or, if it does become available, it was available when it needed to be available. And this came from my introduction to and practice of Gaga. We were exploring this concept with James Graham who was teaching the class and already I was making spiritual connections for myself – I didn't need anyone to do that, I'm already kind of in that mindset with whatever I'm doing. I'm like, "How can I apply this to my life as a whole and my spiritual journey?"

I remember we were being coached to just move our body and to be aware of what's feeling tense, what muscles feel like they're stuck and the encouragement was to just move what your body is able to move. And that even goes for injuries, you know? It's to not feel limited but to feel like, "Okay, I have these members or these parts of my body that I can move and I'm going to use those, and that's enough. And whatever's not available, it's okay. I don't need to try to force them to become available. It's fine, I have what I need." And so I started applying that to my life as a whole – to my relationships, to my professional development – that I have what I need. Whatever's available is what I need. And what's not available, I don't need that right now.

Andréa: That is something right there. Use what you have available, don't force what is not. And then, on the flipside of that question, what have been some of the hardest things you've encountered through dance? What do you struggle with?

Erik: [*laughs*] Honestly, my body – like accepting my body. At the beginning of my training, the one thing that I would hear all of the time is "Oh my gosh, you're such an amazing dancer, but I just wish you were a little bit *taller!*" [Andréa: Ooh! Rude.] And I was like I can't do anything about that, nor do I want to do anything about that. I'm not interested in receiving surgery to extend my lower legs [*Andréa laughs*], what have you. I had seen that before and I was just like, "Okay I'm not interested in that." I really had to accept the fact that I was a man who is of short stature but also very petite. After a while... It took a while for me to really embrace that. It wasn't until I had a teacher just say to me like, "Yes, you are an amazing dancer and you're petite, but you just have to move your body slightly differently. You just really need to extend. And it's not you trying to be someone else. It's really just for everyone to see all the beautiful lines and things you can do with your body as you are." That was a great shift for me.

Currently, it has come up again, but not in the sense of my stature. But just in the way that my body has changed during COVID. My body has changed; I have gained some weight. And so for me, it was very interesting because I'm so body-positive in cheering other people on and seeing different body types onstage and so on and so forth and when it came to me, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I don't like this. What happened? I want my old body back." I've been on this journey – it's been like a year since last March – to just say, "Hey, this is what you have right now and you need to love it. All the ways that you've cheered other people on and championed them for the body that they have and the curves that they have, you now need to practice all of that for yourself."

Andréa: Yes, yes. Seeing other bodies onstage, seeing all different types of bodies onstage – is that something about dance that gives you joy?

Erik: It does! I mean you talked about this at the very beginning when I highlighted my amazement with watching Michael Jackson's video – it's representation. I saw myself on screen. And these beautiful elaborate costumes, I saw myself highlighted and uplifted in a way that I don't think I had before. That didn't seem common, right? It does so many

things that we don't realize. It helps to strengthen our own sense of self-worth, it gives us something to aspire to, it gives us a sense of pride in who we are. It is important for me to see different bodies on stage because people who are watching will be able to say "Wow! That person looks like me." And even if they're not interested in being a dancer or engaging in dance, it's still gratifying to know that what they're seeing in an artistic realm is being reflective of what their daily life looks like – the people they pass in the street, or family members that they have. I think that's the beauty of being in an art form that is reflective of our greater society is for people to see themselves. It makes it more tangible, more real, and gratifying.

[Theme music fades in, then gradually fades out entirely as Andréa begins to speak]

Andréa: It's so funny that you continue to bring up that first inspiration from Michael Jackson and his dancers on a beautiful display. What inspires you nowadays?

Erik: Ooh. I'm inspired by storytelling. So similarly, I didn't make the connection until last night because I just rewatched the video to jog my memory [*both laugh*] of why I loved it so much. Another element to that video that I see happening now that's very inspiring are these film-shorts. Musical artists producing what are now being called visual albums. So we have Beyoncé who has done [Black is King](#), the [Lemonade album](#), and I really had to pause and I was like, "Wait, people have been doing this before – like Michael Jackson was doing this in the '90s." We were just calling them short films but it was the same concept. There was this larger story that was being told and the music was there to help support this larger story. It extended it beyond just the lyrics of the song, beyond the 4-6 minutes of the song, and then there's all this attention to costuming and actors, and so I loved that aspect of it becoming this – not just something that's easily consumed – but something that really has more depth to it and people can engage with it in a variety of ways. I love that, I love the storytelling aspect of it, so that really inspires me.

Also, just film in general. I think one thing that I've been inspired by is, being in this time of the pandemic, it has highlighted my appreciation and love for dance films and engaging in video production. It's been awesome to be able to use the camera as the way of framing as well with the story. I'm always interested when people are watching dances, the angle we get to have as the audience and how we experience that. In addition to being in and around, where a dance can be seen from all different directions or from one very acute vantage point, I also love the camera for that reason. You really get to guide the viewers and how you want them to see the work.

Andréa: Yes, dance films have become very prevalent to the dance ecosystem and especially, as you said, right now during this specific time – during quarantine, during lockdown – folks have had time to really sit and view them with that thematic eye and also look within themselves to create and produce them.

Do you feel that's something that has been a greater addition to the dance community? And what are some things that you feel could be added to our Bay Area dance ecosystem?

Erik: Yeah, I definitely think it's something great. I think it provides artists with another way of exercising their artistic muscles. I think it allows for artists to collaborate with other artists in other fields and that's always exciting for me. You know, how can we come together and make something that we're all really proud of that involves all these different disciplines and expertise?

In terms of the Bay Area dance community – I like that word “ecosystem” – I've had this conversation with a few colleagues and company members: having a little bit, and this is not really related to technology, but just having some history being taught in technique classes. Because I find that I have a greater appreciation and I'm able to settle into the movement that I'm engaging in when I know some of the history of it: where it comes from, why someone made this artistic choice. Because as dance professionals and pre-professionals, one of the things that is taught, and is important that it is taught, is that we're having to figure out which decisions we want to make. It helps us to form an artistic identity for ourselves. Without really knowing the choices we're making, I sometimes feel we can get lost and feel overwhelmed or feel like creating something is this huge burden that we can't manage. But if I had an awareness – a greater awareness – of what I've learned while I was doing it, where it comes from, then I can value it and appreciate it in a different way. I think also this would help mitigate some appropriation.

Andréa: Well...

[both laugh]

Erik: I think it would help students in composition also because you would have that thought of “I want to tell this kind of story” and then they would be able to say “I want to use this kind of movement because of what the movement means and where it comes from. It helps me to support my story.” Like it may make sense for me to use jazz because I'm telling this kind of story, and jazz is the movement language that makes the most sense for me to tell this story. Or I'm going to use specifically this Horton technique because I want this piece to embody strength and resilience and this technique has you build a lot of strength and a lot of endurance.

Andréa: Horton is not for the weak!

Erik: It is *not* for the weak! And so it would be great to not have to wait until you were accepted into a university and you take that academic class, or maybe an extracurricular class that you take that's not mandatory, but you just want to dive a little deeper. It should be available to everyone. And it doesn't have to be much! We know that dance class is

typically 90 minutes, but just spend a few minutes talking about what's the significance of this movement that we're learning and exploring.

Andréa: Yes, so a shift into more education around movement.

Erik: Yes! Because many people have had this experience where sometimes things are just said and formulated that make us cringe because those who have taken the time to learn the education behind some of the dances we're doing, we know that it's not necessarily new, that it comes from a specific place. And then people think they're creating something new and they're not... I feel like it would be so, so helpful and also gives honor to those who have been in a form that may be popular now but wasn't popular a long time ago. Then we're able to give that justice and that adoration to the folks who have put in the time and the labor to investigate this movement form. It would be amazing.

Andréa: Absolutely, absolutely. What do you think are the opportunities for change or growth that would allow the dance community to, as you said, shift instruction to include education? Are there any other opportunities that you think would allow the community to thrive in a different way?

Erik: I'm thinking, not necessarily in this order, but the first things that are coming to mind: In a university setting, I think there's an opportunity for faculty to have a conversation about how do we include historical context to the movement forms that we're exploring in technique courses? What amount of time are we going to spend just educating students about what they're doing and why? Maybe they have to do small research projects of seeing that particular technique and how it's being applied. I know when I first started, I was like "How is this technique being applied?" And I wasn't always able to make that connection. Now I can start to see people's influences, but in the beginning I couldn't and I was just like, "Okay, I'm just seeing someone dance fabulously," but after a while, I was like, "I can see their movement vocabulary. I'm seeing bits and pieces of things." It's exciting to be able to see that in a dancer and to be able to identify.

I think at a grade school level, it's partnering with organizations so that youth can see performances more often. I love the idea of schooltime performances. I know that Cal Performances, whom I used to work for, did that with Ailey and other professional companies and I think that it's so important that we make arts accessible – again, that word "access" – to youth because I *wish* that I had seen more art like that at a young age. I did go on one field trip where we went to see a ballet company at Zellerbach, but I wish I had more opportunities because there's so much more programming that happens. There's circus performances, there are theater companies that children can be watching and be inspired by, and to not allow those ideas of these high ticket sales to be off-putting, but how do we bring the community and bridge that gap to make it more accessible?

And I really love this opportunity that people have been exploring now of having a performance live but it's also streaming. We have this hybrid of in-person and virtual. I love that! We've had little bits and pieces of that in past performances. The first thing that came to mind was Coachella with Beyoncé [*both laugh*]. I think it's great for everyone: people who don't necessarily have the means or the schedule to get out and see the performance, but still want to engage with it; I think it's great for the artist that their artwork reaches a wider audience of people; I think it's great in terms of revenue, so you're not limited to just physical ticket sales and the people in the seats, but people who are watching from the comfort of their home. I think it has just so many benefits.

Andréa: I agree. I believe that the combination of in-person and virtual performance will only expand the artform, and will only reach more people. As you said, those who can't necessarily afford a \$75 ticket to Zellerbach or Palace of Fine Arts or various larger venues, and it really brings it down to a community level of being accessible.

[Theme music fades in, then gradually fades out entirely as Andréa begins to speak]

Andréa: You said that you're having these conversations with people. What other conversations have been talked about? What should more people know about?

Erik: I think one of the things that I've been in conversation about is space, particularly for dancers of color and companies of color to have access to spaces that are in good condition. Owning space, being able to rent space – it's always the prevailing issue of: Where do we rehearse? And hopping from one space to another, and the rental fees being high, and there being few spaces where people can come together and dance and it's adequate.

I think we as dancers have had these experiences of dancing in shoe boxes, of dancing in spaces that were very nice but were just one-time things because they were so out of budget, or buildings that seem like they're falling apart but they were available and the price was right and so we're using them. I think that's a larger issue that has to do with just overall society and government and the funding of the arts. I was so amazed to learn years ago that there are countries who actually have full government funding – like they have the ministry of the arts and there's all this money that's allocated to art and funding art and giving artists money to have space. And I'm like, "Really? [*both laugh*] Come on America, get it together." That was very eye opening to see the ways in which many parts of the world recognize the importance of the arts and value it with *money*. They put their money literally where their mouth is in terms of talking about how important it is and seeing it as ways that continue to build, strengthen, and enrich culture.

I was a part of a project with PUSH where they are looking to acquire some space and we were being surveyed as dancers on what things we would love for this space to be used for, who is it used for, and what kind of atmosphere we want it to be like. It was great to be in conversation about that.

Andréa: Where is the space? Who can access the space? How much time can folks get? What's the pricing going to be like now that we're moving from this scarcity of being able to be in space? The pandemic has affected so many of us artists. How do you move forward while having to hold still during shelter-in-place? What's been your experience?

Erik: There's so much to unpack with that. A few things that the pandemic really impressed upon me is that it made me reevaluate what was really important, and it also made me aware of who was really supporting me. People who had my best interest in mind, versus those who had more of a beneficiary relationship [Andréa: All right now]. Diplomatically, people who were using me for what they knew they could get out of me. In that, I was able to make a shift and a change to focusing on those that I really needed to lean on for support.

And so artistically, it was really great to see Dimensions Dance Theater just be incredibly supportive and loving, and being very communicative about how they would support us through this time. We met over Zoom weekly and initially it was just to come together because we knew that we needed to just constantly be in contact with each other and be in community. We kind of took a step back from doing hard-core work and just sharing information with each other. Anything that had to do with movement we would just share it. Everyone got to be a clinician for a week, so we were learning from each other – kickboxing or doing yoga or ballet floor barre – we were doing so many different things and it was very nice just to have that community and to be strengthened in that. So really, I think it highlighted all of the things that we *could* do so it didn't feel like, "Oh, we're so limited," but it was like, "Okay, we're not able to be with each other in person, but let's find ways to connect. Let's find ways to look at this as an opportunity to shift and change in a different direction."

For me artistically, the same thing happened. I found myself doing things that I had wanted to do but that I was afraid to do. The pandemic also illuminated to me what my fears were and how to overcome them. I started a Facebook Live class and I was teaching dance and it was so great because I wanted to see the people who were taking my class, but I love that other people didn't have that fear of being watched or being judged so people could join from the comfort of wherever they were.

Andréa: I took your class!

Erik: Yay!

[both laugh]

Erik: And it was so great. I had people who were dancers, people who were not dancers, people who were on their lunch break at work were taking my class [Andréa laughs] and I thought it was just so beautiful. And they were doing it for various reasons. Some

people just wanted to get their body moving just for their own health, their mental health, their emotional health; some people were doing it to stay in shape, so it was great!

And then I started doing video projects, started dancing outside which was a beautiful experience. I was staying at a friend's house and he had this beautiful backyard and I was like, "I don't have the full-on marley that some of these other wealthy dancers that I was seeing on social media have, but there's the backyard, there's some grass and I'm going to make this work." It made for a very beautiful experience. I found ways during this time – the pandemic – to see all the different ways that we could take advantage of, again, what was available and using that and seizing that and relishing in that.

But it also pushed me to be more tenacious, so I'm starting a dance company this year and that was always something that I kind of shied away from [Andréa: Whoop, whoop!] [laughs]. Yes, it was just so impressed upon me – this is the time where, because you see that there's so much limitation, there's actually an opportunity to just break out and do everything that you've ever thought of doing. And the joy of the journey of discovering how to achieve what you've always wanted to do. In a time where there were all these terrible things happening, it was still an opportunity to grow and expand and I held onto that and I just have been moving forward with that ever since.

Andréa: That's so wonderful – taking this time to really assess and readjust and connect at that level. What does reopening mean to you with all of this transition to virtual work and being able to change your space of being outside like you said, or moving things around in your living room so now you have this space – what does reopening mean to you?

Erik: "Reopening" for some reason feels like such a confining word because my position on reopening and returning has been that I don't want to do that. I want to open new.

Andréa: And that's okay.

Erik: I want us all to say, "Hey! This happened so what does this mean for us going forward? What kinds of shifts and changes do we need to make? What kind of policies do we need to put in place?" We talked about this with technology and having in-person performances and performances that are also streaming virtually, but I even think about work conditions. I found that some people are experiencing the joy of connecting with their family because they were forced to, they were sheltered in place. They were able to complete their work and actually rest.

As an artist, I *did* lose my jobs and that was very scary. But at the same time, it afforded me an opportunity to just really rest! I didn't have to run from San Francisco to San Leandro to downtown Oakland and then back home. I was able to see the beauty of being able to slow down [Andréa: Yes.] and find balance between rest and productivity. I'm very much so interested in this idea of opening new – it's not a reopening, I'm not trying to return to the way things were before – I'm really invested in how we move

forward. Yes, I am excited that we can congregate more, that we can start to have more people in person and interact, that we need that as human beings and it's part of how we're made, but how do we do it better than how we've done it before? How do we respect people's boundaries even more? Our hygiene practices [*laughs*], being courteous. I mean gosh, wearing a mask as a symbol of courtesy, of protection, and yet we still saw people who just refused to do it. For me, I was like, "Wow, this is a larger issue of pure selfishness." So no, you may not have COVID, you may not have contracted anything, but it's courtesy to everyone else that we demonstrate to each other: I care about you and if I have something, I don't want to infect you with it.

I'm very much so on that track where the reopening for me, I'm like, "Ehh. It's more like opening new." In some ways someone could say it's the same thing, but I think it's a different perspective on the idea of what it means for us to move forward.

Andréa: Yes, absolutely. And as you said just now, interacting with folks who are not quite showing that courtesy, how do you ground yourself during these turbulent times?

Erik: [*laughs*] In the simplest ways, it's like, "Listen, I'm going to be vaccinated and still wear a mask because as you learn in your driver's training, that you're not just learning how to drive well for yourself. You're also learning how to drive well to safeguard yourself from people who aren't driving well. [*Andréa: Yes, snaps!*] [*laughs*] It's similar! I'm partially vaccinated now, I have my appointment in early June and I'm still going to wear masks in certain places because I don't trust that everyone is going to be in concordance with what the regulations are. It's not worth it to take the risks, so I don't mind taking a little extra precaution. That is one just very practical thing that I'm keeping in mind.

In terms of just being grounded also, it's just knowing that there's so much opportunity for us to build and to refine how we do things. I'm also grounded in the hope in what we can create in the future and that's artistically, that's in terms of government at all levels, and just as a society. I'm really very hopeful for what we can do moving forward and just looking at how times of crisis can help refine who we are and allow us to self-examine and make changes that are beneficial for others and beneficial for ourselves.

Andréa: Yes, yes. Speaking of the future and moving forward, I have to congratulate you as one of our [Spring CA\\$H grant recipients](#) [*Erik: Yes!*] [*Erik cheers, Andréa laughs*]. In your proposal, you talk about creating a new company, so what's next on that track?

Erik: Yes, this is one of those things that I have been running away from and it just accosted me. I'm very excited. As my bio says, I've been in dance ministry for 11 years and I've always had visions of seeing it done in larger venues. I've seen all the ways that it can completely bless and change and alter people's lives, and I knew that something needed to happen to help facilitate that and I didn't quite know what. And then once I received the vision for the company, I was nervous about it because it's larger than me and naturally there's always a tension there of: "Am I going to be able to do this?" "Do I have

the resources?” “Am I good enough?” – all that internal dialogue. It was so much more important to just push all of those voices aside and move forward and so this company, His Legacy Dance Collective, is something that I’m very excited about where dance ministry and professionalism and theater come together and collide and create this really beautiful experience where people can enjoy it and grasp something from it even if they aren’t members of the faith, but if they just love to see dance and love work that has positive messages that are uplifting. I’m very excited to have been a recipient of this award and to be able to lay the groundwork of getting it going, putting the name out there, and hiring dancers.

Andréa: For those who aren’t familiar, please explain what dance ministry, what praise dance, what spiritual movement is. What does that actually mean?

Erik: Yes. Praise dancing, liturgical dance – there’s so many different names – it is essentially dance that is a form of worship in the Christian faith. What I like about it, and what’s unique about it also, is that it is not genre-specific in terms of movement. You might see praise dance that’s ballet vocabulary, or modern dance, or hip hop – what have you – as long as it’s rooted in principles of the Christian faith, of the Bible, in the purpose of guiding people towards God, Jesus, and developing and strengthening their devotion. That is praise dance.

I will just say to add to that, it’s something that has kind of been in-house for a very long time. I know that it’s important for this company that I’m starting really just to open up the spaces in which people can experience it. Again, people are excited about returning back to the buildings of their church, but I have always been more interested in how we can do what we do without those four walls and how we reach people in different spaces and really go *out*. It’s something that is a tenet; it’s foundational that we bring this good news to the world and go out and do it, and not just be confined to buildings and places.

Andréa: Thank you for expanding upon that. To wrap up, Erik, tell the people where they can reach you, where they can find you to follow your artistry and your next movements.

Erik: I am on Facebook as [Erik K. Raymond Lee](#), so it’s almost my full government name and bringing out my rich family legacy. I’m also on Instagram as [@raycreational](#). I also have a greeting card business called Raycreations Greeting Cards which you can also check out on [Facebook](#) and on [Instagram](#). Those are the same handles, just [@raycreationsgc](#). And yes, a dance company is soon coming so you can definitely look out for that as well.

Andréa: Thank you so much for joining us today!

Erik: Thank you for having me. It’s always a privilege and an honor to be asked to participate in rich conversation.

[Theme music fades in, then fades out slightly to play in the background of Andréa's closing words]

Andréa: Thanks so much for joining us for this audio experience. For additional content that reflects our dynamic dance community, visit our *In Dance* article archive at dancersgroup.org.