

In Conversation with Sarah Bush

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[00:00:00] **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.

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Welcome! We are back with In Conversation. An audio series of interviews exploring intergenerational conversations about the art of dance and different folks' relationships to dance.

I am your host, Andréa Spearman. I'm a light-skinned Black woman with my dark brown curly hair in two-strand twists up in a loose bun and wearing black and brown glasses. Today I'm wearing a black hoodie with the queen of Tejaño music, [Selena Pérez](#) printed on the front.

Today we have with us powerhouse, Sarah Bush. Sarah, please introduce and describe yourself for our listeners.

[00:01:04] **Sarah Bush:** Sure. Hi, Andréa. I'm so glad to be here. My name is Sarah Bush. I use she/her or they/them pronouns. I'm a middle-aged white woman currently sitting in my very sunny kitchen in Oakland, California, which is on unceded occupied Ohlone territory.

I am wearing a peachy pink sweater, where you can see a blue t-shirt collar poking out from the top. And my daily necklace that I wear every day, it has three little gold pendants on it. And I've got curly, gray and brown hair. It's a little frizzy this morning under my headphones.

[00:01:40] **Andréa Spearman:** Well we are so glad to have you here. So Sarah, tell us briefly about your background. How and where did you grow up?

[00:01:48] **Sarah Bush:** I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, and grew up dancing. Like my earliest memories, my identity, my whole life has been around dance and I was dancing around in my living room and swinging off of rope swings in the backyard and wearing pool floaties as tutus at a very young age. My parents always say they don't remember where I learned, really, about dance, but that for my third birthday, I said I wanted a leotard. So they were like, "Huh. Okay.

Well, I guess we'll look into that.” So yeah, my childhood started in Lincoln, Nebraska, and so I was there until I was seven, and have lived also here in the Bay Area for part of my youth and then Salt Lake City, Utah for a big chunk of time. And then back here in the Bay Area.

[00:02:36] **Andréa Spearman:** Wow. What a journey.

Sarah Bush: Indeed. Yeah.

Andréa Spearman: That's so interesting that you mentioned these far away places, and now it makes sense for some of the work that I've seen you do.

Sarah Bush: Mm, interesting.

Andréa Spearman: So if you would tell folks [Sarah Bush Dance Project](#), how did it come to be?

[00:02:54] **Sarah Bush:** Hmm, let's see. I guess I officially say it started in 2007. I guess it started because I wanted to apply for a grant I think and wanted to make a show. And so I was like, “oh, I guess I need a company to do that.” I've had an interest in being a choreographer my whole life, and from a pretty early age, loved dancing, but also loved creating dances and coming up with processes. In junior high, I remember creating a system to notate choreography with a friend of mine. Always very interested in that process.

[00:03:29] In high school was when I was first introduced to modern dance. And that was this eye opening experience of, oh, this art form felt—like the way I was being taught—it was very much about “this is about your own expression versus other forms that might be about someone else's expression” and that modern dance felt like there was more personal expression.

[00:03:47] So yeah, I've had an interest in doing that and I guess it was in 2007. I picked the name, sort of randomly. I was having a conversation with another dance friend colleague, who was like, “You should put your name in the title so that it's sort of like people get to know you and they get to know your company. It's sort of double exposure.” So that's just what I did and have stuck with the name.

The first show was a collaboration with [Freeplay Dance Crew](#), which is primarily a hip hop company, though we all kind of dabbled in a lot of different styles, had a lot of influences amongst us. That was produced at [Dance Mission Theater](#), where I had a group of dancers with Sarah Bush Dance Project and

Freeplay Dance Crew had a group of dancers and we put a show together with both groups.

[00:04:34] But I started choreographing more seriously in college and very early on was choreographing for nightclubs in San Francisco. I've choreographed for a lot of churches and a lot of nightclubs [**Andréa:** Ooh.] and a lot of outdoor spaces. And I feel like that variety has been a real passion, a real drive for me. And I've had a hard time sort of staying in one lane with my work. I'm always really interested in trying something a little bit different and how those different places influence the work.

[00:05:09] **Andréa Spearman:** Yes. And speaking of influence and environmental influences, you've been around the US and I've seen videos of yours of traveling and gaining inspiration from back in Utah and various outdoor places and gardens here in the Bay Area. Do you feel that you specifically have an inner workings with nature? Is nature calling to you to create?

[00:05:39] **Sarah Bush:** Yes, I do think though, one thing that's true is I'm a very visual person. I'm obviously a very physical person with choosing dance, or having dance chosen me. And I'm very spatial and very affected by environments, and that includes indoor environments. Like I also love a theater or I love beautiful architecture. A church, a space that feels holy. So yes to the outdoors. Absolutely. I think my spirit, my emotional/mental health is greatly impacted by spending time outside. Even before doing this conversation with you, I stepped outside and I was like, "oh right, get a little breath of fresh air and some sunshine."

[00:06:19] And so as a human, I'm definitely drawn to being outside and I love dancing everywhere. And I think dancing outside provides this different set of stimuli as a performer and as a choreographer. So there's incredible things about the canvas of the studio and the canvas of the theater, where you can create these environments. And there are certain things you can rely on in those spaces. Like the floor is gonna be pretty level, you know, things like that. And outside you have all these unknowns that feel so *real*. Like the dancing that happens outside is responsive and active and alive and reflexive. And you have to make a lot of choices in the moment, even if you fully choreograph something, just, there's more chances that there's a pebble under your foot or a dog runs by or a siren, whatever it is. And I think as a performer and when I work with other dancers, seeing them as performers, I love the way we all deepen in our performance when we spend time outside with the material. That

we learn more about all of our senses and how those senses can show up in our performance.

A lot of the work I do is performed both outside and inside a theater at different points. So even if we're developing work indoors and outdoors, if we're performing it in a theater, my hope is that we've spent enough time outside where I can say to the dancers, or I can say to myself, "remember what it was like when your hands were *actually* touching the water." I perform differently if I have that physical body memory of running my hands through what is now air, but remembering what it was like to run my hands through water. I think that those nuances as a performer are really rich. And what it means to balance on one foot if you're standing on a rocky river bed that has rushing water pushing against you, how do you have that same alive responsiveness balancing on one leg in the theater then?

[00:08:28] **Andréa Spearman:** Yes. I love that you said that. You're making your place both indoors and outdoors and creating versatility there, community there [**Sarah:** Mm-hmm]. Those are some of your core values—diversity, excellence, authenticity, innovation. How did you come to these core values to make them part of your company?

[00:08:49] **Sarah Bush:** Hmm, that's a good question. I did come up with those a long time ago. Good research on your part.

[00:08:56] Hmm. I'm pretty sure it was just a brainstorming of things that felt true. I have a very hard time narrowing my focus as you might be gathering. And I felt like even coming up with a mission statement/sentence felt limiting. And so it felt more like, well, what are these qualities that I want to remember and hold myself to and feel aspirational as well as hopefully true?

[00:09:23] **Andréa Spearman:** Yeah. Also I think another thing that's not stated here, but it's been felt in your work is the spirit of feminism and putting women first.

[00:09:33] **Sarah Bush:** Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:09:36] **Andréa Spearman:** Why do you feel so led to lead with womanhood?

[00:09:40] **Sarah Bush:** Such a good question. I have to say it's just the way I grew up. As a young girl, my mom was feminist...is a feminist. I believe she holds that title still, claims that identity. She really raised me with a lot of focus

around women's music, women musicians. I grew up listening to in the '70s and '80s women's musicians, and women who are making music. It was music by, for, and about women.

[00:10:13] So I grew up with that. I grew up with my mom changing the words. I had like Disney *Cinderella* story books as a kid, but my mom would go through and type new words and put them underneath the pictures in the book, [Andréa laughs] so that there was a more feminist, empowered ending for the princess at the end of the story.

[00:10:36] That was very much ingrained in me and I'm very grateful for that. I really grew up with a sense that I could be anything I wanted to be. I grew up with a lot of role models around women being strong and diverse and independent and being *artists*. Choosing to live a life as an artist, as a woman.

[00:10:56] So I feel like I grew up with a huge privilege there with just having the support and the belief that that was a fine choice for me. And yeah, I came out as a lesbian when I was 16 in Salt Lake City, Utah. And I think the nature of being lesbian is I'm around a lot of women and I've grown up around a lot of incredible women artists. Been a long-time dancer and taiko drummer and martial artist with Krissy Keefer's [Dance Brigade](#), another feminist dance-theater company that I feel so honored to have been part of that lineage, of that company. I think it was one of the first all-women dance collectives started in the '70s as Wallflower Order.

[00:11:39] And so it's very natural. I think the values I grew up with, the artists I've been around, who I'm drawn to. I've certainly worked with a variety of genders and all kinds of artists, but that is sort of where I come from, I think it's very much a feminist community, a feminist upbringing.

[00:12:03] **Andréa Spearman:** Very nice. I love that from your mom. Recreating these stories.

[00:12:08] **Sarah Bush:** Yes. Yeah, she has instilled a lot of incredible values in me. I'm quite grateful.

[calming, mid-tempo music plays in background]

[00:12:16] **Andréa Spearman:** We're gonna take a short break and we'll be back with Sarah Bush.

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[00:12:33] Welcome back. Let's rejoin our conversation with Sarah Bush.

So whenever I've attended your shows, other audience members always have so much to say, like so much praise to share about your concepts and stories. What's your choreographic process?

[00:12:50] **Sarah Bush:** Hmm. Thanks for coming to so many shows and being part of this process. I'm really appreciative of your support, Andréa. And I think just to speak to people having a lot to say—one of the things I love about live performance, or sharing performance in general, is that feedback, is that chance to hear from audiences, have it even feel collaborative in some way. That's a huge part of the work for me.

[00:13:22] I really care about how the work lands with other people. I really think I have had an interest in making work with the non-dancer audience in mind. I love all the different communities I get to dip into and be a part of. And I think because of dancing in churches and nightclubs too, it's like making dances for people. For people who want to feel moved and it feels less about making dances for abstract arts audiences or more traditional dance audiences.

I really hope to make works for all kinds of people. And I think about that in my choreographic process—about what makes dance as an art form, what can help make it feel accessible and feel inviting to folks who don't identify as dancers or dance lovers even. I've had people say to me like, “Oh yeah, no, I don't really like dance. I don't get it. I like going to the theater, but I don't know...” And so I think about that a lot of like, well, what is it? And how can I... What are the inroads, the choices I can make as a choreographer and as a performer? I think it's very much both those elements to invite people into the work and relate to it, so it doesn't feel like it's something outside of them that feels relatable.

So in choreographic process, gosh, through the years I've had a real variety of different ways I've approached making work. It's changed a lot through the years, and even in the last couple projects. Right now, I'm at a place where I'm at the very beginnings again, of a creative process, which is exciting. It's been a while since I've been there and I have an idea for a new big show I want to make.

Andréa Spearman: Yay.

[00:15:12] **Sarah Bush:** Yay. So I will describe the process I think I'm about to have. Many times, and this time I'm gonna try this again, I'm gonna start with a book. And in some ways it almost doesn't matter what the book is, but taking an

actual paperback book. And often it's about some kind of something related to the arts. Maybe it's a biography or an autobiography or a memoir from another artist. Often I pick a book that feels somehow, of course, thematically related to the work I'm gonna create. And I try to sit with that book every morning as I drink my first cup of tea with a pencil in my hand and let it inspire me in whatever way. It might be that a word jumps out at me that I think is interesting or a concept or I read one line and it gives me a visual of something I might wanna see on stage. And there's something I think in my creative process, that's about wanting input, direction, stimulus, limitations from some source other than my own brain. That if it's just me feeling like I have a blank canvas, a blank wall, an empty studio, it's too much. That there's some like providing language, it just gives me a direction to leap off from, and then I feel like it's just a fun ride to go on.

[00:16:33] So language is often a part of the creative process. My mom's a minister. She used to be an English teacher, great lover of the written word and poetry. My brother is a writer. I enjoy creative writing as a hobby. And I think that translation between art forms is also just like translation between spaces, about outside/inside, that translation between art forms I think also is a great generator for me. If I'm only doing just the movement that feels good, it's missing something. If I only write about it, it's obviously missing something, but it's like going back and forth between writing ideas, the written word, what a written word or poem or passage might inspire in the movement—that's a fun process for me and definitely use language a lot.

A lot of the site-specific, which actually I'm trying to say “site-inspired” more often or “site-responsive,” ‘cause it's not specific. We move the pieces around. But yeah, site-inspired work, site-relational work. The dancers that I'm working with and I or all the artists that I'm working with, we'll have a writing process in the space if we have enough time, where we each sit with a notebook and spread out in the environment and write from each of the senses. So I'll set a timer for one minute sometimes and we'll just write everything you see, just write it out. Write everything you hear, taste, touch, smell, imagine, feel, sense, remember. And we gather all this language that then serves as inspiration for creating gestures or movement phrases, but also serves as reminders for again, when we leave that space. Those words can call us back to the textures and nuances of the place.

[00:18:22] So I've used a lot of written process, language in that creative process. But, you know, boy, earlier in my career it was really musically driven. I was like, “I love this song,” [laughs] or I would just make playlists. I love music so much. Music is one of the biggest joys of my life. And I would make a

playlist of like, “well, I wanna make a piece that feels like it's about anger.” So I would just make a playlist of all the songs that felt aggressive or angry or sexy or sad or whatever it was. Or songs that had a particular word in the title even—these sort of themed playlists. Creating from a musical place is really joyful for me.

[00:19:06] **Andréa Spearman:** Yes. Joyful!

Sarah Bush: Mm-hmm. I have to remember that. It's so easy to get in my head like, “I must make work and it must be good and I should be an artist alone in the studio” but also it should be joyful and how to find joy in the process and let it come from that.

Oh, I also think, I should say in choreographic process and artistic process, what I'm describing is very much like, again, I'm at the beginning stages of a new show, but so much of my work, especially during the pandemic and since—or whatever time we're in—during this pandemic time, definitely working more and more collaboratively. The dancers are all, like I said, contributing language, they're contributing movement. We're all sharing how we're feeling and our responses to the work and what we wanna change. And it feels very, very collaborative now, too. And again, early in my career, I felt very much like in order to have the identity as a choreographer, I needed to come up with *every* single movement and *every* single count—that that was sort of the definition of that job. And as I've gotten older and as I'm rethinking ideas about power and leadership and community, collective creativity, and care, that it's much more collective process in most of the work that I do. I really try to make sure everyone feels like if they want to bring their own movement and voice and opinion and story and input, that there's, that is in the process.

[00:20:38] **Andréa Spearman:** Yes! So you said your mother is a minister. Do you consider yourself to be very spiritual?

[00:20:44] **Sarah Bush:** Yeah, my mother's a minister. She is retired from a congregation, but just like, I believe we all get to be dancers our whole lives. I think you have that title your whole life. And, yes, I think I am spiritual and I have had people reflect that to me, from seeing my work, from seeing dance performances. Even ones that weren't in churches, ones that I wasn't thinking about as spiritual at all, having people say “Oh, there's a sense of spirituality in your piece.” And I was like “huh” and “of course,” like how could I avoid that looking at my life and influences and upbringing? So if we think of spirituality as a desire to be in touch with a sense of spirit and spirit feeling both within the body and greater than the body and feeling moved by connection and the wider

world...yeah, I think I do feel like a spiritual person. I think, again, outside is a place where I feel that and in the theater. I mean, I think that's why I'm drawn to dance. That dance is a place where I have felt spiritual. [**Andréa**: Mm-hmm] I have felt in touch with my spirit and with the spirit of other people. I mean, I think that moves me and my work. What can I create? Along with others, what can we offer to people to touch their spirit, to feel either their spirits are reflected or recognized or lifted or moved? I do think I'm looking for that connection of spirit.

[calming mid-tempo music plays in background]

[00:22:21] **Andréa Spearman**: Yes. Spirit-filled connection.

[calming mid-tempo music gradually fades out entirely]

[00:22:34] **Andréa Spearman**: What's a future goal or dream for you and the company?

[00:22:39] **Sarah Bush**: Uh, right now, calling it in. I want to bring in another person to the team of Sarah Bush Dance Project. I'm really open to what the title of this job should be, taking suggestions. But I keep thinking of them as sort of an opportunities manager, but some people would maybe call it a Company Manager, but it feels more like sort of an Opportunities Manager that through these, I guess we're in our 15th year? Is that right? I've got a collection of a lot of work, a lot of dance pieces. And also since the pandemic working with a lot of artists of other mediums, we now have a bunch of dance films. We even have watercolor prints that visual artists have made about the work. Writers— yourself included— have contributed poetry and writing about our shows.

[00:23:22] We have so much material. We have so much art that relatively few people have seen, especially during the pandemic. We haven't done large shows still. We've done intimate performances, which have felt very valuable and very moving. But there's all this art and all these artists whose work, I really want people to experience.

[00:23:49] So, and it's more than I can do. And just where my strengths and motivations are. I feel motivated to create the next thing and to bring together the next team and produce the next work. And I feel very excited and supportive of getting all this other art that's already been created out into the world, but I don't have the logistical focus and energy to actually do what it takes to get that done. So I'm hoping to bring someone on who could do that. Could, you know, take our *MURMUR* show that— you know, we had these incredible bird

costumes by [Colleen Quen](#)– that we could book the *MURMUR* show in all kinds of outdoor spaces for all kinds of audiences.

[00:24:30] Same with a lot of the repertory work. It really could travel and someone could print a book of all of the artwork that's been created, all the poetry. So that's one thing I'm excited about and hopeful about for the future is bringing on another sort of collaborator in that capacity.

[00:24:54] And I do hope that there's more opportunities to travel and tour and present the work in more places. And at the same time, I am really feeling spiritually excited and fulfilled at the idea of beginning a new show. It'll be a long term process. My idea's a large one. So it could easily take, you know, several years. Yeah, those are exciting things I'm looking forward to.

[00:25:18] **Andréa Spearman:** Thanks so much for chatting with me, Sarah. Please tell the audience where they can learn more about you and Sarah Bush Dance Project.

[00:25:27] **Sarah Bush:** Thank you. Yes. I do hope people will follow us on social media. That's where we definitely share the most content on Instagram and Facebook. All one word, @SarahBushDance is the handle for both Instagram and for Facebook, Sarah Bush Dance Project on Facebook. We also have a website, SarahBushDance.org. And I try to update that. [laughter] Getting a little slow on that, but that is where you can certainly learn about the company and different things we're working on. And I really love conversations like this. Thank you for this opportunity. And I enjoy connection. So I'm always like, “Let's have a conversation, let's dance in the park together.” Like there's all those traditional ways to learn about the work, but also like I really encourage people to reach out and always looking to collaborate and have conversations. So, thank you for this.

[calming mid-tempo music plays in background]

[00:26:22] **Andréa Spearman:** 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.

Mentioned in the recording:

- [Freeplay Dance Crew](#)
- [Dance Mission Theater](#)

- [Dance Brigade](#) (Krissy Keefer)
- Wallflower Order
- [Colleen Quen](#) (Costume Designer for *MURMUR*)

For more information:

Sarah Bush Dance Project

- SarahBushDance.org/
- Facebook: [Sarah Bush Dance](#)
- IG: [@SarahBushDance](#)