

Danspace Project

Conversations Without Walls:

Kyle Abraham & Taylor Stanley with Benjamin Akio Kimitch

December 12, 2020

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Welcome to Danspace Project and this Conversation Without Walls with Kyle Abraham and Taylor Stanley. I'm Benjamin Akio Kimitch, Program Director and Associate Curator at Danspace and I'm also an independent choreographer. It's my incredible pleasure to be here today with you, Kyle and Taylor, in our virtual squares. Thanks so much for being here. Hi. To begin, I pay my respect to the Lenape people past, present, and future. I acknowledge that the work of Danspace Project is situated in Lenapehoking, the Lenape homeland. Behind the scenes today, we have our amazing Production Manager, Yolanda Royster, running the show. And I'd like to thank everyone at Danspace who's helping us to reimagine all of our programs in virtual space this season, especially my colleagues Judy Hussie-Taylor and Seta Morton. So, Kyle and Taylor, I thought a good way to start would be to invite each of you to introduce yourselves to everybody. Kyle?

Kyle Abraham: Sure. Hey, everybody. Kyle Abraham, Artistic Director of A.I.M. I am here in Brooklyn, Fort Greene, Brooklyn, otherwise known as part of Lenape land. You're going to hear a lot of sirens and subways because I live above them.

Taylor Stanley: Hi, everyone. My name is Taylor Stanley. I'm a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet. I'm currently on Munsee Lenape and Mohican land, now known as Millbrook, New York, up in a ballet pod/bubble, getting ready for a production up here. So, thank you for having us.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: So, the big question, how are you doing during this pandemic? How's your creative life? How are your colleagues and communities? What's up?

Kyle Abraham: I'm hanging in there. I mean, aspects of this are very challenging for sure, but you know there's also, you know, massive time for, you know, being really reflexive and I'm really--reflective rather, and I'm taking a lot of time to do that and find new points of entry into making and planning. And I love to plan (laughs).

Taylor Stanley: Yeah, likewise. I mean, I feel like everything--I feel like every day is so surreal still. You know just being nine months down the road of all of this happening. I've experienced, you know, all of the ebbs and flows, the the ups and downs as we all have of just assessing my identity as a dancer, and an artist, and just a human trying to navigate all of this. I feel like things are coming around, but it's still--there's so many question marks at the same time of just how

things are going to progress forward. But all in all, I think it's--this has been a challenge to just really stay as present and in the moment, you know, as, as I can be, for my own sanity, for my own functioning. So, yeah.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Yeah, no, I feel like this is--a colleague of mine once referred to 2020 as kind of like a fallow year, sort of gardening term, but it's really it's like a turning over. Like, I think there's something, you know, hopefully that can really come out of this in terms of real reflection and real change and like a sort of test of values on an individual and even institutional levels. That's been really interesting, but also, I think, pos-- you know, promising to observe. But you two have actually stayed pretty busy in terms of pandemic projects. I mean, Taylor you're in a bubble now, but I've seen you've--you've actually been collaborating with a lot of choreographers sort of outside of the usual City Ballet routine. How has that been?

Taylor Stanley: Yeah, that's been, that's been the silver lining I think of all of this. And I think I had, you know, put it out into the universe in some way before all--before the pandemic and, and just wanting to explore these different avenues of dance and, and especially with people that I'm familiar with. So Kyle, being one of those people, and I've gotten to work with Jodi Melnick a little bit, and Andrea Miller, who produced, and directed, and choreographed a beautiful film for her company GALLIM. And have gotten to do a few projects with City Ballet. They put out these wonderful films for some of us to be a part of. And yeah, it's that--those have been kind of the silver lining moments of this. And I feel like what I, what I spoke out into the universe kind of like happened during this time. And just having the time to, to give, you know, my full attention to each one of these different projects and different people, that's been kind of amazing. Just I feel more expansive and more things on the horizon in that way, which has kept me excited to dance.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Awesome. Yeah, no, I was tuning in to New York City Center's Fall For Dance—the digital reimaged— Festival, and I was tuning in to see Calvin Royal perform Kyle's piece "to be seen," and then they did a nice little feature I was like, "Oh, you two are back! The team is back collaborating in the studio."

Kyle Abraham: Back again. (All laughing)

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: How did you--How did that come about? How was that?

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, I mean, I--so well, I mean to get a little bit of a backstory on that project is Calvin had reached out to me asking me if I had work that was of a certain length. I was like, oh, sure. What's it for? And when he told me, I was like, oh, well, that's a different--I have different answer then. But I was like, I don't know what I have in my rep that would be a good fit, but I'm totally open to like, you know, whatever, whatever you are interested in doing. Trying to make that happen in some way. And I said at the end of the call, I was like, well, you know, if you want me to do it, you know, I'm open to doing it. It's just, you know, my schedule is really limited. So, Calvin reached out to the folks at City Center and told them that, you know, I would also do it if that was of interest and they were interested in that. So I was like, okay, great. Let's try and

figure this out. And what I realized when, when it came up that Calvin was going to be in a bubble himself for the entirety of the creative process, I was like, well, I need, I need someone to work with in some way in person, even if it's virtual, that I know can kind of help get the information to you. So I asked Calvin, I threw out, you know, Taylor's name and another former dancer of mine that Calvin knew to see if he was comfortable with one of them helping with the process. And he was like, oh my god, yeah, it'd be great to work with Taylor. So, reached out to Taylor to see if he was interested and available and he was. Yay! And from there Taylor and I, we were able to get a couple--I think we were in the studio maybe three times--two to three times? (laughs) And that's with like all of our COVID testing and all of the protocols, people. We did all that, but like, I think we probably had like three rehearsals. And, you know, luckily, Taylor was able to work with Calvin without me because I already had a really full schedule, doing stuff with A.I.M or some of the other companies that I'd been making works for during this craziness that we're in right now.

Benjamin Akio Kimitich: And you were recently in your own bubble, Kyle, with your company, right?

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, yeah, we, I think actually when the solo premiered, I was at Jacob's Pillow for the bubble that I was in there. We had a really beautiful residency in the Duke Theatre before, you know, everything happened.

Benjamin Akio Kimitich: Oh my god, yeah I wasn't sure which one it was.

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, we were in the Duke. I mean, it was--it's such a magical space. So like, we actually had the Duke and we had the Perles Studios that we had access to. And anyone that knows me when I'm making, I like to work on more than one thing at the same time. It just is good for me to have like two things at least at the same time. So we were working on maybe like four dances at the same time. And I would send dancers to one studio, some to other studios, some working outside. And it was just great and super productive for my personality. (laughs) Yeah, but yeah, it was a really, really great experience. I'm really, really grateful. It's interesting actually to think about--I was looking at an image today from that bubble residency at the Pillow. And I was thinking, oh, my first one was 10 years ago, when I was preparing "The Radio Show," which, you know, had its New York premiere at Danspace Project. So really ironic and beautiful, kind of like full circle moment while looking at photos today.

Benjamin Akio Kimitich: Aw. Yeah, I think "The Radio Show" was the first piece of yours I ever saw also, way back then. And you had a--I didn't see it actually, but you had a show--a shared evening at Dance Theater Workshop a few years before that, while I was an intern there.

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, 2008 with Layard Thompson.

Benjamin Akio Kimitich: Layard Thompson. Amazing. Well look, I'm actually very curious, I mean, we're in the present now and going back, sort of what's the dance origin story for each of you? How did each of you get started in dance?

Kyle Abraham: You going first Tay-Tay?

Taylor Stanley: (Laughs) Sure, I'll go first. So I started dancing when I was three. I'm from the suburbs of Philadelphia and my parents took me to a show at the Pennsylvania Ballet and said I was enthralled with it and I was dancing around the house and trying to do all the moves and everything. So they just put me into a dance school, which was right down the street from our house, formerly known as Westchester Ballet Theatre, but now known as The Rock School. And they have two branches, one in Philadelphia that's primarily ballet-based, and then a branch in the suburbs that has all the different genres of dance like ballet, tap, jazz, hip hop, modern. And I grew up just attending that school up until sixteen doing, you know, different styles and doing jazz competitions and things like that. And then I transferred to the ballet school downtown, in downtown Philly for a year. And then my senior year of high school, I joined--or I went to SAB, School of American Ballet, in New York City. I got my apprenticeship after a year at the school and then a year after my apprenticeship, I got my corps contract with New York City Ballet in 2009, that was. Yeah.

Kyle Abraham: A year! Um, my origin story: I, um, the more I tell it, the more I think about these little random nuggets of dance that were part of the story that I always forget about. But I think it's important for people to know that I first went to Catholic school and got kicked out on the first day for dancing. I was in (laughing), I was in first grade. So I wasn't--I couldn't go to a Catholic school for more than a day. And I didn't really study dance until my senior year of high school. Prior to that, I was a big rave kid, grew up playing a lot of different instruments and whatnot. But I went to see the Joffrey Ballet performing a program to Prince's music. I'm a huge, huge Prince fan, anybody who knows me or new, new friends that I will hopefully meet from this (I dunno). Um, but yeah, huge, huge Prince fan. Ironically, thinking Jodie Gates was in that performance, who used to dance for Pennsylvania ballet, full circle. But I was so excited by like, what I saw in that performance because I only went because it was Prince. I didn't go because it was dance. Like it didn't mean anything to me with dance. I'm like, just play some Prince. But my friends just saw how excited I was and they got me to audition for our high school musical. I had long hair at the time. You wouldn't believe it because it doesn't really grow anymore. (laughs) Just here, um, but, uh, that musical was "Once On This Island." So, I got cast as a dancer. And they gave me a scholarship that summer to get better at dancing for the next year's musical because they were doing a review the next year. I was like, oh, awesome, yeah. I was totally down. And my whole dance journey has been about a lot of suggestion and support. My first dance teacher is a guy named Buddy Thompson, a woman named Leslie Anderson-Braswell. Both of them suggesting that I go to the performing arts high school half day, so I could still do my academics and play cello at my initial high school, Schenley, which is where Andy Warhol high school (hey!). Um, but then I went to CAPA, the Creative and Performing Arts High School the second half of the day. So, you know, their suggestion got me there. Their suggestion introduced me to artists like Bill T. Jones, who came to do a lecture demonstration at our high school. They exposed me to, you know, Ulysses Dove, Garth Fagan, Bebe Miller, just a wide range of artists that I still have a lot of admiration for today. From there, I went to college in Baltimore for a year because everyone in my family had gone to historically Black colleges. Unfortunately, they didn't have a

dance program, although they told me they did. (laughs) But I wined up studying with this woman, Stephanie Powell, while I was there for the year. And that was really informative. Introduced me to a lot of really great dancers at that time, that really helped me to grow from just watching other dancers. And I wined up auditioning for Purchase College because a lot of the dancers in Bill T.'s company had gone to Purchase and I just developed such an adoration for, for his work during, in particular, that year of college in Baltimore. So I decided to go to purchase. Went there for four years. Didn't really have an interest in dancing after college. I wanted to make dances, but I also wanted to make music. I'm going to skip a very long story to say that I eventually went to grad school at NYU for four years after Purchase and focused on primarily on choreography while I was there, and met other dancers that were doing both the bachelor's program and some that were doing the master's program, taking classes on the weekends as one does, meeting other dancers and dancing for a couple other companies that were kind of project-based. And some of that led to me meeting some of the dancers that I worked with when first forming my company.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Was ballet sort of in the equation within any of this?

Kyle Abraham: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, Leslie Anderson-Braswell was my ballet teacher. And she was like, I mean, talk about huge support. She was like a massive champion for me. She would actually drive me to dance class and drive me home. If my parents couldn't, she would drive me home. And we would talk about Prince the whole way home. (laugh) And she was like, I mean, the first dance I made in high school, she was like, "You get it! You get it!" (laughs) Yeah, just such a huge, huge support. Still to this day, just like massive support. Yeah, but ballet has always been part of it. Um, I mean, the first thing I ever studied was Luigi jazz and, and like a Balanchine style ballet because Leslie studied at DTH. So that was the first thing, and then it was modern and tap. But I was really bad at tap. (laughing) Not only did I not stick with it, but my teacher was also like, Yeah, maybe not. (laughs)

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Move on (laughs).

Kyle Abraham: She, I mean, she literally said, "Yeah, you can't tap it, but keep shaking that thing. Keep shaking--" Yeah.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Good advice. So I want to talk about "The Runaway," which is--I'll set the scene a little bit. It's a piece in 2018, Kyle, that you created for New York City Ballet. Sort of the post-Peter Martins City Ballet. Justin Peck was in the interim leadership team and I understand he called you, Kyle, to invite you to create a piece. Um, and I actually saw it, I mean, and I'm still like buzzing from that experience. It was just like you pierced through --we could have spent an entire hour talking about it-- like so many layers, sonically, formally, informally, choreographically in that space, in that piece, in that institution. I just--what I most remember are these tracks from James Blake, Jay-Z, and Kanye West coming through the sound system. Pre-recorded music in that space is just so unheard of most of the time, or all the time maybe.

Kyle Abraham: Blasphemy! (laughs)

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Um, but anyway, it was a ballet for eight people. Taylor, you were included in that very talented bunch. Taylor, is that where you first met Kyle?

Taylor Stanley: Yeah. I mean, I had heard of him obviously. And, and I had watched, you know, a few of his pieces on, on YouTube or wherever they were posted. And I had--I didn't have an idea of who he was, but I knew who he was. And so hearing that he was going to, you know, be creating a piece for New York City Ballet was just--I was super excited and just kind of felt hopeful about our future, or the company's future, you know, choreographically. And was just so like felt like a breath of fresh air, you know, having him come in and make this piece, you know, as a whole, and really make something that unified us as, as dancers, and taught us so much about who we were as dancers, and how to bring that to this piece. Myself, especially, like, I don't want to--I don't want to jump ahead too much. But I just felt like he brought things out of me that I feel like he saw in me when, you know, we first met and first started creating or when he first started creating, and I tried to follow as diligently as I could. But yeah, just throughout the whole process of the solo work that he created for me and the group work, I just felt like he pulled things very much not tethered to, but related to my, my humanness and my identity as me, which just allowed me to make a lot of self discovery, which I felt-- I always called that ballet a gift because it brought me so much self realization, which I just crave all the time anyway.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: That's amazing. It's really embedded into--I mean, these all too rare kind of collaborative friendships that feel so honest and generative even to this day. It's super special. I wonder if we can jump, Kyle, you actually uncovered some rehearsal footage while you were in the creation process of "The Runway" at City Ballet. So let's--Yolanda if you can bring it up and we'll watch it and then we'll keep talking a little bit.

[*The Runway* rehearsal video: Recorded music by Nico Muhly plays. In this minimalist piece, we hear the sounds of a piano and string instruments. The pace of the melody moves between slow and fast throughout the excerpt. We hear the sounds of Taylor's feet gently stepping and squeaking on the studio floor].

Kyle Abraham: Good, good, good.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: I love a rehearsal iPhone video because there's always this little like, "Okay, good. Oh no great. All right, eh." (laughs) So Kyle, where does that sort of, where does that-- well actually I want to quickly say, imagine that movement, but the piece had these incredible, fantastical costumes by Giles Deacon, that I'm obsessed with. Google it and look it up. They're really--I love them. But Kyle, where did that choreography sit in the piece?

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, well, that clip that you just saw would have been in the middle of the piece actually. That actually winded up being a section that was performed to "Watch the Throne" by Jay-Z, Jay "Zed," (laughing), Jay-Z and Kanye. "What you need"... Which is interesting, I think, in that process I-- I mean, I love Nico Muhly's music and I love Nico, so it was

one of those things where I was working with his music. I had all these different possibilities of things that I was interested in exploring with the work. But actually, yeah, I think when we were working on it I think this is what we used. I think maybe that first audition day, where it was like a bunch of the guys and Gina Pazcoguin like, I think that's when we we played the Jay-Z, the "Watch the Throne" at that moment. But other than that, we were rehearsing to this. And it wasn't until I was talking with--I sent Taylor an email while we were on a break from this rehearsal process and also showed a video to Dan Scully, my lighting designer, to just get their thoughts on what we were working on. And it was kind of an option between using the contemporary like hip hop, r&b music, and pop music, and using Nico's music in that section in particular. And Taylor was like, "I think, I think you should shake, you know, shake things up." He's like, "Whatever you do, I totally support it. Um, but it might be interesting or exciting to shake things up." And Dan was kind of, well basically saying in the nicest of ways that the--making that switch would be that much more exciting for, for an audience. That's the nice way that he put it, that way. I think in some ways he was also just maybe thinking about maybe the works that I've made in the past and how to really show myself in there. Because, I mean, honestly, it's a, it's a whole complication being a Black artist coming in to New York City Ballet in particular, and being concerned with not only expectations, but certain prejudice that, you know, maybe an audience might have over me without knowing me or my work. Not knowing my history with music in general, let alone classical music. So that was part of what drew me to using classical music, but then that's also what got me to decide to totally kind of switch gears and go into that hip hop music when we did.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Yeah, no, it's so interesting, that point about the expectations of race. And there was-- I remember there was a lot of media attention around it, especially because I think, I looked it up and there were only like four Black choreographers commissioned by City Ballet prior to you. So having all this focus on you as a Black choreographer coming in when there's all these many intersectional ways that you're actually shaking things up and coming into this company. Yeah, I can just imagine it, it's just this interesting balance and almost, you know, an expectation that's not asked of a white choreographer that's coming in to make something.

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, I mean, it's also you know, I remember Wendy Perron wrote, you know, to also keep in mind that I'm also a modern, contemporary dance choreographer, too. So like, that's a whole other layer to me coming in and trying to make sure that I am really present in the work, but also to acknowledge the opportunity that I'm getting to work with dancers that have a really particular type of artistry with the ballet idiom itself. I mean, I don't really know if there are that many other companies that can move their legs as quickly as dancers from City Ballet. Let alone you know what that Balanchine port de bras has in its own storytelling, you know, with that kind of like delayed wrist. I just I love that. That's just like--So having dancers that can play with that quick and slow like that, it's just like, I mean, that's totally kid in a candy store for, for any choreographer.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Well then Taylor, I mean, what's it like for you working with sort of someone who comes from a more modern, contemporary lineage where you have--there's typically a year long process and even the creation process is kind of totally different, a different

level of collaboration, this even dissection of a Balanchine wrist concept. I mean, so how was that process for you working with someone like Kyle, versus maybe the typical structures you might find in the ballet systems of creation?

Taylor Stanley: Right, right. I mean, I feel like as I've gotten older, or have just explored other ways of dancing that have intrigued me or have interested me and just feeling like I come from a background where I was--I kind of had my toe in different ways of dance, like different styles of dance. Having--knowing that a modern, contemporary choreographer was coming in to make something--I felt comfort in that. Knowing that I could move in a way where I didn't have to be so, not classical necessarily, but like princely or upheld, you know. I love experiencing the sensation of weight and weight transfer and all these things that I haven't like learned in, in school in a university setting, like in a dance program, but just things that have caught my eye watching other types of dance. So, but I also had this expectation, and as we're talking about the Balanchine technique, that was something Kyle really wanted to maintain in a way and showcase. And I remember like, there's this movement where I just lift my arms up and he really wanted, like he just did, that delay of the wrist and to not only show that but to feel like the essence of regality, like in my own body. But the combination of that and then transitioning into something that's very smooth and linear, that was very interesting to play with within my own experience. So yeah, it felt amazing to have someone like Kyle come in and set a piece and to, you know, bring his dancers into the mix as well, who also helped with just the vocabulary of shifting your weight and dropping your weight and what that should feel like or what that can feel like. And I just think it's a nice balance to how we're expected to be, you know, throughout the rest of our day or on stage in a Balanchine ballet or a Robbins ballet or--most of the rep we do. It's just in our nature to be very upheld, and tight, and crisp, which I think blended really beautifully with, you know, what Kyle and his dancers were expanding our own minds with in terms of physical sensation and all of that.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: And I feel like you move so seamlessly between these--the spectrum so well. It's almost like you see--it's the same kinetic attention to detail no matter what you're performing, whether it is kind of a more classical style or something more flavor that Kyle's bringing to it. I mean, do you ever like, now find yourself doing sort of the Balanchine and Robbins repertory with any different approach after --I don't know-- after that? Is that a silly question?

Taylor Stanley: No, it's a great question. Yeah, I mean, I think my goal as a dancer is to use as many tools that have been shared with me that work to keep my body healthy. And also work to keep my body and keep my performance form, or whatever that means, the most efficient and the most enjoyable and pleasurable for my--for me. And whether that means--I think it just means finding different sources of energy to draw from or finding different memories to draw from. And that helped me kind of move past any, like, barriers or limitations that I may feel bound in. Just be it like being supposedly a classical ballet dancer, which I don't know if I identify with that, or if I should identify with that, or if it's not necessary, or if-- I don't know. Needless to say, I think I'm just trying to find a way to be okay just being a dancer, you know, whatever that means for me because there's so much comparison around that. And that's my

most major--I've talked to Kyle about this, comparing myself, which we all do, I think as artists in general. Like, I am trying to back away from feeling too interested in how I, how I perceive myself versus how others perceive me in this dance world, and yeah. That's kind of going off on a tangent but--

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: No, no.

Taylor Stanley: What I'm trying to say is that finding the comfort, the true authentic comfort in my own body, is what I'm trying to exercise more of mentally and physically.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Yeah, it's interesting this individual or sort of 21st century entry into ballet. And for those of us who love ballet and love its form and its history, but like what's the context of it today? It makes me think a lot about the work that--you mentioned Georgina Pazcoguin, who was in "The Runaway" with you, is working with Phil Chan on this initiative called Final Bow for Yellowface. And they're both like, very vocal, big fans of ballet. You know, We love the ballet. We love the Nutcracker, but like, let's check some things. Let's come correct on certain things. So how can you love this art form, but also be a constructive critic of certain things that need to, I don't know, just move forward in a different kind of a way. I feel like that's what a lot of this work is. So it's not about cancelling out a form, but it's about asking deep questions to reinvent it for now, and for us, and for who's on stage, and so you're seen in the way you want to be seen, on your terms. That's interesting to me. And you guys. Um, I want to shift us now to one of your recent collaborations, which was an invitation from Lincoln Center and New York City Ballet, titled "Ces noms que nous portons." And this was created during the heat of COVID-19 in July of 2020. During the pandemic, but also national protests happening after the murder of George Floyd. Forefronted, but also I think kind of a little tangentially, we also had Gay Pride the month before. So I'm curious, we'll watch it, but before we do that, how did this invitation come about? And how is that experience in conversation with Lincoln Center?

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, I mean, it's, it's funny, because ironically, I think when Jonathan Stafford and Jon Nakagawa reached out. They were interested in seeing if Taylor could possibly do "The Runaway." And I was like, sure, but I don't know what that's gonna say. What's the what's the point? Like, hey it's gonna look beautiful. Sure, 'cuz he's gorgeous. But like, what's the point? So I said I'm sure we can make something new. And luckily, they agreed to that. And that was the massive kind of jumping off point. I think the other things were just knowing, you know, not only what kind of crazy timeline we would be under, um, but also thinking about really things like music rights. And, I was like, I'm totally fine to approach this thinking about something that would, you know, we could easily get the rights to something that's pre-existing and kind of go from there. But then it was just really just seeing if Taylor was down. And the process was crazy because I was still in Los Angeles at the time and Taylor was in New York. And it was just, I mean, luckily, I was given access to a studio in LA, Brockus Studios, to work from for a period of time, which was super helpful, not only for this dance, but also to my spirit. Um, but that--without that space, I don't know if I would have been able to really create in some way, but Taylor was like learning it in his living room.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Like over Zoom?

Kyle Abraham: Not, not, no, not over Zoom. I sent him the video, which I do a lot. I like, you know, I record myself doing the material, then send it over. And then I would send, after Taylor learned it, I'd send a couple notes with time markers from the video that he would have sent me. And then we'd find time to then talk. I can be really anti-Zoom, so I think we probably did like FaceTime or something else. You know, this whole square thing, it's a lot of things, just a lot of things. So we, yeah, we made space to do that, which was important because I think more than just the steps, whenever I'm working, especially on a solo, but really in any capacity with an artist, I think it's really important for us to have conversations around what we're doing, and why we're doing it, and what also they're going through in their life. So, you know, we just had some really great, powerful conversations, which I think not only led to the work itself, but also to other things that we wanted to address in the process of getting the work out to a larger audience.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: So let's watch it. Yolanda.

[*Ces noms que nous portons* video: "Gnossienne No. 3" by Erik Satie plays. A lone pianist softly plays a melancholic piece, which becomes lighter with time.]

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: I love that piece and I'm realizing, I don't know if I should be sharing this, but when it first came out, and I'm only realizing this now, I like at the time wasn't ready to take it in, in a way. And now it's sort of like November, however many months from then it is. You can finally reflect on that time that was so dense, and crazy, and emotional, and tumultuous. And it's such a-- it gets me really excited about what an important capsule that is of that moment and something that I feel like the two of you captured in it. I mean, there's so many layers to it. The, the gestures, and the evolution of them, and the sort of choreographic construction, but also the environment and the kind of superficial beauty, but then also the subtlety of what you can tell that the artists are doing in that space. Yeah, I mean, I love the message that you added to it at the end. I feel like that's just as important as the piece itself. I don't know if you have anything you want to share about creating that message and the decision to include it.

Taylor Stanley: Yeah. Yeah, I think we both felt like just doing a--just creating a dance was like, not empty, but with the time that we were in, I felt--we both felt like we could add more to it by using words and using, you know, putting our thoughts together and also not wanting it to just be like a piece in front of Lincoln Center and these fantastic lights, you know, commemorating Gay Pride and, and all of that. It felt kind of like it needed something more to, not to describe like why or what we were doing or saying with the piece but yeah, just something we needed to add a little bit of our hearts in there like through, you know, written word. It's kind of how I took that.

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, and it gets, you know, as I was saying before, when, when we are making work, you know, it's really, really-- Those conversations that we can have are really integral to that process. So really just kind of like hearing, you know, if I'm posing certain questions to Taylor, like hearing his response to them, and then trying to put some words to

what that could encapsulate for the both of us was really key. But also, more than that, just really kind of like learning your power in a way that, you know, sure we can, we can do this dance collectively for these institutions, organizations. But will you allow us to also have this messaging? Will you also allow us to, you know, will you also stand up and make a public statement if you haven't thus far? So those things were really important to us, to the process, and to the words that we put together to kind of like, honor not only the work, but all the lives we've lost, etc. Because that was really integral to, to what we were hoping to do with with this creation.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: And it's so great. I mean, these institutions, kind of the biggest you can think of in New York almost, Lincoln Center and New York City Ballet, being open to a conversation and a dialogue and listening to you, and trying to find a solution so that you're seen in the right way, in the right light, and on your terms. It feels really, like a kind of special shift for those places.

Kyle Abraham: It was really awesome. Like, I felt like, you know, everyone was as quick--let's say, I think everyone moved with a certain sort of urgency. I think, even if certain things were in motion, because this was important to all of us, I think if they were lagging on certain aspects of a movement of sorts, I think this really made them really question what the lag was on that timeline that they might have been having in a way that realized its urgency, and its power, and importance, obviously.

Taylor Stanley: Yeah.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Oh, go ahead, Taylor.

Taylor Stanley: No, I was just gonna say, I think what Kyle said is so true. And for me, coming out of a place where I feel like I shed a skin or a layer that I didn't realize I was presenting with, which was just a fear, maybe a fear to speak up, or a fear to be involved, not knowing how others may respond. You know, do I deserve this to represent this message and to have the weight of these issues, like to carry them in this piece? But I think, you know, speaking to Kyle, and creating this with him, he really encouraged me to find that power within myself, that confidence to speak that truth, and speak that hesitation, or fear, or whatever it was, and to not move past it, but use it in a way that, you know, says this is bigger than us, really. And so I feel like I gained an individual confidence in being a part of this as well, which was enlightening for me, personally, which I felt grateful for and I loved.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: I mean, Taylor, I feel like you've been part of some big moments at least that I've been--I've observed. I feel like I'm like maybe one of the few sort of downtown folks that makes the monthly journey up to Lincoln Center and really enjoys it. But anyway, I remember seeing you in Justin Peck's "The Times Are Racing" in a same-sex, romantic duet with Daniel Applebaum. And it just like, it totally struck me to like-- for me to see that, to see myself, to see my sexuality performed on stage. And now talking to you as someone who performed it and was part of, I don't know that, again, that shift that was happening under

Justin's watch. I don't know how is that for you to perform that, to perform yourself, your own love, like that on stage?

Taylor Stanley: Yeah, I mean, that was just awesome and surreal that we could, you know, come to a place where this could finally be presented on a stage like New York City Ballet stage, you know. It's like, same-sex romantic pas de deux don't happen too often. They rarely happen at all. But, you know, some select choreographers have made those changes for us, you know, to kind of be who we are on that stage. And, you know, Justin, this--one of the central pas de deux in "The Times Are Racing," you know, this pas de deux was choreographed on a heterosexual couple, for a straight, you know, partnership. But the the looseness around that made it so that two men could dance it together. And there is an essence of romance in it and an essence of finding or like love-at-first-sight kind of kind of idea. And yeah, just getting to feel that on stage. Not--I mean, through the choreography, but like, the first thing that happens is this hug. Like slamming into each other and hugging, embracing. And that in itself is so powerful and real and sets the tone of that pas de deux. And for me, you know, as a gay man, queer man, I just felt so in my skin and protected by this change and by this, by doing this pas de deux with a colleague, Daniel Applebaum, who has danced in the hetero--as the heterosexual male, you know, not not heterosexual or anything, but has danced like the role of the man with the female, like in that pas de deux. But he also got the chance to, you know, be in his own skin dancing it with me. And yeah, just butterflies throughout the whole thing. All of us were in tears, like, we were in tears on stage. People in the wings watching were in tears offstage. And it was just like crying and tears and joyfulness and laughter, you know, throughout the rest of the piece. So it was such a momentous moment for, you know, the gay and the queer community there in general. But yeah, I think for us, it was just really special to get to do that. So, still buzzing from it. Still daydream about it, you know.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: There'll be more.

Taylor Stanley: Yeah, there'll be more. There will be, for sure.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Well, I mean, to close it out on maybe another positive note, a question for each of you. What right now makes you the most hopeful for the future of dance in New York? (laughs)

Kyle Abraham: Yeah, please go Taylor because we know we know I can be a bit of a downer. So I'm going to try and think positively. (laughs)

Taylor Stanley: I mean, yeah, I have a side to me that is, you know, somewhat down as well, but I'll try and keep it positive for now. Yeah, I just, I think that the more research that we've been finding around like creating these pods and getting to be in groups with people, you know, with with protocols in place, and just the the amount of like collective hopefulness that so many dance institutions and organizations and companies--like the hopefulness that they keep close to their hearts in wanting to continue making dance, producing dance. Surely, so many things are on film now. But, you know, we're discovering the beauty in that, and kind of exercising new

facets of ourselves to try and just keep the art form alive. For us as dancers and for viewers to feel like, you know, they can they can feel rejuvenated as well. But, yeah, I just hope that more pods can happen and more of these bubbles can happen so that we can just--we as ourselves, as the artists can, you know, if the work is available to us, we can continue to just experience ourselves as who we are, you know, as artists and dancers and what we've been known to do for so long now. And, yeah, I hope, you know, dance just continues to thrive in some way. Super positive, sorry Kyle.

Kyle Abraham: I think maybe, maybe I'll do both, you know, I will like my beard is salt and pepper. Because I think, you know, I think the complicated thing about the pods and the bubbles are like, yes, they are great for those who have access. But there are a lot of people in our community, especially when we think about downtown community that--I don't know how many bubble residencies or things like that are possible. But, you know, on the positive side, I think for everyone in a universal way, this is a time for everyone to really think about the thing that we've all done at the source of what connects our souls to dance and to movement. We have all danced in our rooms, at some point in our lives. You know, this time--gives us the possibility to return to why, why you love dance, whether or not you are a dancer, a choreographer, or dance patron. The fact that we have to find this space to connect with our bodies in a way that maybe is--maybe rooted in--through our emotions, as it was for me as a teenager, and still at my age that I'm in now. There is something about that, that makes what we do as dance lovers, let's say, that much more palpable, and creates hopefully another level of empathy towards the arts and to what it means to not only celebrate our art form, which there could be a lot more celebrating of dance beyond what we see on the major networks. But hopefully, it draws people into why people choose dance as a career, why we shouldn't be called a hobby, why this is beyond a passion for so many. Hopefully, this time gives everyone that level of entry and empathy into what it is that we love about this art form. But it's a crazy time.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: And to not be complacent in the positive. This is just the beginning. There's still so much work to do.

Kyle Abraham: There's so much to do. There's so much to do. I mean,

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: So much.

Kyle Abraham: I mean, listen, another another little positive thing. You know, I made a duet in the park, in Fort Greene Park-- Socially distanced people, socially distanced--that I love. And I did it because I was like, you know what, why not? Why not? We can't go into a studio. We can go to the park. I mean, it's a duet. We can go the park. And I could say to the dancers, You can't touch. But just know at this this moment here, this is gonna be touch. And then let's just keep moving and keep making, and just kind of like working within the parameters that we have. Yeah, in my apartment, I have to do some of these, you know, virtual creation things that, you know, I've been doing with other companies internationally and stuff, which is really painstaking because I don't really have a space that's setup for recording myself getting my groove on. Um, it's just, I don't have that space. But there's other ways and it kind of makes me have to think

about what that means. You know, there's some partnering material that I made during this time with one of those companies that I really love. And it's not really a strength of mine making like ballet partnering. If it wasn't for the assistance of Ashley Boudier and Roman Mejia on their some of their partnering moments in "The Runaway," I don't think they would have existed. I said to Ashley, when we were making it, I started laughing because I was like, This is the lowest grade I got in college was in ballet partnering. So here I am, partnering with Ashley Boudier. Take that, faculty at SUNY Purchase. (laughs) But you know, whatever. Started from the bottom, now we're here, aye. That was nice. It was a great opportunity to kind of continue to think about what we can do in these times, but with even whatever my limited vocabulary is with that part of the work. Trusting collaborators in new ways is always something to be thinking about. Which actually brings me to the first question you asked about how we're doing and what we're doing during this pandemic. And me saying that I've been really reflective or reflexive. The thing for me has really been thinking about trust and I think that there's this whole other awareness around the trust that I need to have for other people. And the trust that I also need to receive in a creative process. And I can definitely say in every, every moment of having an opportunity to be in a space with Taylor, that trust is always present.

Taylor Stanley: Likewise.

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: You guys, this was a lot of fun. Thanks for doing this. Um, a few thank you's. I want to thank Jon Nakagawa and the team at Lincoln Center. Thanks to Jon Stafford, Wendy Whelan, and Justin Peck at City Ballet. And of course, thank you again to you two, Kyle and Taylor for your time today. I really look forward to seeing the ripple effect of all of your work and the work to come and what you'll be up to next.

Kyle Abraham: More to come...

Benjamin Akio Kimitch: Bum bum bumm. All right, goodbye.

Taylor Stanley: Thank you.

[Outro]

Seta Morton: Thank you for joining us for this Conversation Without Walls. The Conversations Without Walls 2020 digital series will be broadcasted on YouTube Live for one time only viewing parties. Don't worry if you don't catch us there. The conversations are all pre-recorded and will be posted ultimately on the Danspace Project website in our online Journal in Issue 11: trembling archive. Our Journal Issues accumulate over time, with new material added regularly. Apart from this series, you will find video, audio, and written work by Danspace Project artists, curators, and writers. Please also check out Issues 1 through 10 to find work that centers the Danspace Project past Platforms, seasons, experiments. The online Journal is really a place to get more insight into some of the internal conversations, research, and work that goes behind our more mainstage, public facing programs. So check out the online Journal, and we look forward to having you at the next Conversation Without Walls.