

## Ranardo Domeico Grays FINAL Interview -- A Choreographer's Journey

Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Following a year and a half of lockdown, New York's performing arts are coming back! With us today is Ranardo-Domeico Grays, founder, artistic director and choreographer of VISIONS Contemporary Ballet. The company is preparing for their upcoming performance, *In Truth and In Light*, which will take place on December 3 and 4th at New York City's Flea Theater. Ranardo, thanks for joining us. Welcome to the podcast.

RDG: Hi Vanessa. Hi Kathleen. Thanks for having me.

KK: Our pleasure.

VC: So, let's start from the beginning. For those who don't know the company or yourself, why don't you tell us about VISIONS Contemporary Ballet?

RDG: Okay, so first, a little disclosure about VISIONS Contemporary Ballet, Vanessa Corwin is the company's production manager, stage manager. She does dual things. VISIONS was established in 2007 and I've been chipping at it slowly but consistently ever since then. VISIONS is an ethnically diverse contemporary ballet company and we basically are interested in performing artistically excellent contemporary ballet works in concert dance performance. We're rooted in the African-American heritage with multicultural influences and I like to say that we present to a wide range of communities. It's important for VISIONS to uplift, celebrate diversity and promote healing through our work. I like to provoke thought and educate our viewers through our work. It's important that my work continues to be inspirational and most of all its exploring the human experience, exploring life.

KK: Who influenced you the most as a choreographer, other choreographers?

RDG: I would say some of my influential choreographers were Ulysses Dove and Alonzo King. I also like works that were performed on Alvin Ailey and Dance Theater of Harlem. So Ailey Company and Dance Theater of Harlem Company was a major inspiration to me as a kid. They were the first companies that I saw live on a big stage at the Music Hall in Detroit, Michigan. I was pulled up on stage as a young person and got to work with Arthur Mitchell when he visited. I worked with the Ailey Company in a special class with Renee Robinson when their company visited. But with Arthur Mitchell, I actually took company class and I got to

perform as a super in *Firebird*. That was a major moment in my life. I went on to study at Marygrove College and I actually started on the intermediate/advanced level on a full scholarship. And went on to attend Interlochen Arts Academy on full a scholarship. And I got a scholarship to attend the Julliard School here in New York. But going to a school like Julliard –I actually graduated from Cal Arts, California Institute of the Arts and that also influences my work today because I was able to study with premier dance teachers. I learned that Cecchetti was the style for me in terms of ballet so you can see a lot of that in my work. It's the basis of my work and I also did a lot of Graham and Horton. Other techniques would be Limon. I also have influences of ethnic dance like African in my work because of my background, and the church, there's a lot of influences of spiritual dance, lyrical.

KK: When did you realize this is what you wanted to do? How old were you when you said I'm going to dance?

RDG: I had kind of been dancing for as long as I can remember, along with playing violin. I was a violinist and I won several competitions on violin and I was always singing, I was in the choir and I had done some acting growing up so I guess I would say a lot of this was going on when I was in grade school and middle school but it was when I got to high school when Star Search was on and I said hey, I want to do that. I figured violin wouldn't be the thing to do so I said, you know, I can dance, I'll dance. So I went to the high school dance teacher at the time, Leslie McCurdy, this was Cooley High School, and I just had this real drive to perform no matter what it was going to be but, so I would see Miss McCurdy, Leslie McCurdy working with the dancers when we were in gym class and one day I went over and I said to her, hey, can you teach me a routine? And she said sure, meet me after school at such and such a time, and she told me, you know, you're way better than just background dancer or a commercial dancer. You should really be doing this. So it was actually her who introduced me to Marygrove College. So she said, go over and do this audition for dance for the scholarship program. It was really interesting because I hadn't had formal ballet class. It really wasn't for beginners. It was at the college. So I said, look, I'm just going to watch everybody else, I'll be a split second behind the person in front of me so everything that dancer did I did like a split second right after she did, because I didn't know what the teacher was saying when she said tendue, or rond de jambe (laughter), developpee, you know, so I was just mimicking, gettin' it on and I got that scholarship. I continued to get scholarships. I auditioned for the Ailey program and I got a full scholarship to that school. Yeah, so I was just like moving really fast and the whole time I was getting more and more interested in concert dance. I still wanted to act. I still wanted to perform in other areas but it takes so much discipline and so much focus to work as a concert dancer for like a professional dance company in modern and ballet.

VC: Going back to your choreographic influences again, so faith is a big part of your style, shall we say, or what you express in your dances, would you say that's so?

RDG: Yes, I would say that my spiritual background is definitely something that influences my work tremendously because it's what gets me out of the bed in the morning. It's what allows me to sleep at night; it's what makes the wind beneath me move me. It's being able to give thanks to the Lord so I pretty much describe that as the African American experience. My African-American experience is that connection growing up with the church. My grandfather was a Deacon. His parents both were ministers; my dad was also a minister-preacher. It just goes on and on and on. So I come from a family that was basically, you know, prayed into this world so my work is definitely motivated a lot by those traditions and that experience.

VC: You are a seven year cancer survivor. Congratulations. Does this inform your work? And if so, how?

RDG: I choreographed a piece in 2017 called *Through the Valley*. This was a piece that I had been working on throughout the years and didn't know exactly how to put the movements in what order, you know, and I didn't know that these movements would all come together nor did I know that the name of the ballet would be called *Through the Valley*. So ironically enough the company had been performing in Making Strides Against Breast Cancer in Central Park. I was diagnosed with brain cancer and so this was just one month after we were supposed to have performed. We were going to perform in October of 2014 and that's when I had what I call my accident. So we didn't get to do the performance. As I was preparing my body for the performance and rehearsing, on this particular day I just kinda passed out in the gym. And this led to ongoing tests for one month and then lots of prayers with my friend Lajedo Robinson. With prayer I just stayed driven but brain cancer gave me the unexpected space I needed to organize what I had already been doing for years. So much clarity came to me during my healing process and helped me sharpen my craft of storytelling through dance. The time that I spent in bed and the time I spent relearning how to walk, and straighten up, and regain my balance and even my memory allowed me to organize years and years of work. So I choreographed *Through the Valley* not necessarily about my experience with cancer or brain cancer but one of the treatments that I underwent was a bone marrow transplant. And that is a grueling, painful experience and so much light came out of it.

KK: You have been extremely creative during lockdown but after what you describe in your life that's a piece of cake, right? Being locked down for a year and a half? Now that we've got this incredible background, that you told us, talk about your newest work which is *Shattered Lives*, am I correct?

RDG: *Shattered Lives* is a new ballet that I was recently commissioned by the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning for the Making Moves Dance Festival – *To Life*. When I saw that title, *To Life*, I thought, this really encompasses the theme of my work overall and I was really excited about applying for this opportunity and it worked out. *Shattered Lives* is about vulnerability, devastation, and lack of control while facing unfortunate events and negative situations. It really encompasses a lot of what's going on in not only the past year but in the past few years for a lot of us. The music is by Vir Amicus who has been creating music on VISIONS and lighting for the company since the beginning. We went to college together back in 2000 BC (laughter) and Patrick Avalon who I attended Interlochen Arts Academy with. He's an amazing composer and created *The Graceful Goodbye*. When I heard it I had to incorporate it into my work, and *As Yet Untitled* by Terence Trent D'Arby. It's a song that I've loved ever since high school. After deciding to add it to my work I found out that he wrote the song with Nelson Mandela in mind. I mean, come on, Nelson Mandela? That pretty much sealed it for me. The program that we're putting on December 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, will also have two other heartfelt works, from my repertory, *Still Healing*, inspired by stories of people who experience pain and suffering through no fault of their own yet they persevere and *Roots*, an all-time favorite of audiences which I like to have presented with each concert. *Roots* is rooted in prayer and it's about self-growth.

VC: What comes first when you choreograph? Is it the music, you hear music and then you develop the choreography or do you put some steps together and then say oh, let's get some music? How does that work for you, that process?

RDG: So with this ballet in general, I did a little bit of both, Vanessa. I did some choreographing and then adding the music and I did some kind of, music-listening and then setting the steps. I use different elements to choreographing. Sometimes I give a phrase, or a couple of phrases, or a step and I have the dancers, you know, I give them tasks to work with those steps and help hone, shape and bring it all together.

KK: Speaking of dancers, who is in your troupe this time for *In Truth and In Light*?

VC: Yeah, you're working with all women for this performance, and so tell us about sort of, the dynamics of working with an all-female company as opposed to working with men and women. And *Shattered Lives* is new, of course, but does that also influence the dynamics of the choreography of the repertory pieces.

RDG: *Shattered Lives* was actually choreographed earlier this year when I was commissioned by JCAL, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning and we had a young man in the company. Now we don't have any male identifying dancers in the company currently, although I've always used males, male-identifying dancers in the company. This year, we're going to be presenting the concert completely with female-identifying dancers. They are extremely talented, some of New York's finest dancers. And so we're going to be working with Alexandria Paige Amstutz. She's actually also the rehearsal director. Alexandria has also been with the company, now she is in her 6<sup>th</sup> season with VISIONS Contemporary Ballet. She started with me in 2016 when I returned to dance after a two year hiatus from brain cancer. And we'll also be working with Anna Antongiorgi, Mahalia Brooks, Hope Formica, Rachel Schmidt and Lia Gagianas. A whole cast of female dancers! This is exciting. It is something I'm new to because as a male dancer I always want to show the male perspective in my work. Oftentimes you see the male dancer hoisting the other dancer, whether male or female, into the air. This isn't something that I'm used to doing with female dancers as a pair. And I also am excited about expressing my work where it's not gender-conforming.

KK: I think that it sounds like you had some challenges doing your choreography for just the women but it sounds so exciting and different.

RDG: Challenges bring opportunity and I'm now aware of the limitless possibilities of casting that I can have with my work. I also intend to recognize non gender conforming artists by reaching out more to them as I do with artists of color. I think those challenges really bring opportunity.

VC: Securing funding is always a challenge for artists. So how has that process been for you?

RDG: Well the process is always interesting. *In Truth and In Light* is made possible in part with public funds from Creative Engagement supported by the New York Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and administered by LMCC. That's the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.

VC: Now we ask this question of everybody. What advice to you have for aspiring artists?

RDG: I would say we each have our own path. I basically want to always encourage other artists and especially young people because I really believe in the future. And I say, continue to persevere. I've been chipping at VISIONS for so long, I mean I really worked with VISIONS as an artist through The Field, who is my fiscal sponsor. So I still have goals, you know. I'm looking towards becoming a 501-C3 and being an independent company. Getting a fiscal sponsor is definitely something that I would advise someone who is an

artist and wants to present work. That's incredibly important. I also want to continue to say, don't be distracted by things that don't seem to come through. They just may not be meant for you at the time. So I would advise artists to stay the course.

VC: And you have certainly stayed the course over the years, Ranardo. You've also been fortunate to receive a number of grants that have helped you move forward and take your work to the next level.

RDG: This year I was lucky enough to receive the City Artists Corps Grant by NYFA and that was just so amazing because it allowed me to completely fulfill my obligation with the Making Moves performance at Jamaica Performing Arts Center.

KK: Your next performance will take place at The Flea Theater in Tribeca December 3 and 4. Tell us about that and where people can go to learn more about the company and get tickets.

RDG: I would direct people to get tickets through; we're on the Eventbrite platform so you can go to Eventbrite dot com. If you're not aware of Eventbrite it's spelled Event, brite, b-r-i-t-e dot com and type in VISIONS Contemporary Ballet Presents *In Truth and In Light*. For more information on VISIONS you can go to VISIONS Contemporary Ballet dot com, that's the website. On Facebook we're VISIONS Contemporary Ballet. On Instagram, @VISIONS Contemporary Ballet.

VC: If they go to your website, visionscontemporary, is there a link where they can get tickets also on the website?

RDG: Yes, on the website you can find the ticket link under Calendar.

VC: Perfect.

KK: We'll certainly be looking for you, and looking forward to December 3 and 4 at The Flea Theater.

VC: Yes everybody. Please go on line, get your tickets and come on down. It's going to be a great show! Ranardo, thank you so much. I know this is such a busy time for you, thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us.

RDG: I am really happy to be able to speak to you today and thank you guys for having me.

KK: It's our pleasure.

RDG: It was a pleasure for me too.

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