



Gerald Casel: Smart B o d y, S e n s i b l e M i n d

Born in the Philippines and raised in San Jose, Calif., dancer Gerald Casel had his first dance-related experience twirling a rifle in his high school marching band. He went on to graduate from Juilliard's dance program, but says dancing in the Stephen Petronio Company has been his best education. Casel recently spoke to DoaL's Jennifer MacAdam about the "daily revelations" he makes in his work.

Photo: Anja Hitzenberger



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Gerald Casel: Smart Body, Sensible Mind

JM: Tell me how Stephen's work feels as a dancer.

GC: I've been here for five years and I'm just starting to learn what Stephen's work means to my body. I'm learning about my body through his work, which is exciting.

A lot of the work is a set of problems that we solve. So, the problems are always there and then on top of that you have your own personal problems--like if my knee hurts or my back hurts or there's someone missing or the floor is sticky. So, there's that problem on top of the problem you already have as a dancer, to perform a solution. It's a lot more complicated than doing any other work. I cannot relax, I cannot just walk through a piece. You have to stay completely on top of it. I've seen it in the other dancers--I've seen that kind of determination, that kind of understanding and commitment to the work. Which is what makes it really special. We go through extreme shapes very quickly and I've really had to learn how to drop my weight in order to move that quickly and to be in those extreme places.

I've been thinking a lot about this because I've just started to teach. And when you teach you have to really believe in what you're doing and understand why you're doing it. And I've been tempted to leave the company, seduced by other opportunities. And I've decided not to take those because I'm not finished here. I'm still learning. I'm not ready. I know that there's a lot more I can learn here.

It's such a collaborative effort, Stephen's company. Everyone counts. And their minds count as much as their bodies. And I think that's really important for dancers. We're all told what to do in some form or another. Stephen says, 'do this, do that.' But how you do it is a personal choice. And it goes back to that problem-solving process of working.

JM: In rehearsal, I noticed that you guys all give each other a lot of comments and help. And you all seem really open and receptive to it.

GC: One of the best things about being in this company is that you really start re-training your eye. I would never see things that I see now if it weren't for Stephen. I can see when there's a physical problem that, let's say, Tony's having in "No More Heroes." I can see certain things that he's doing and I

can say 'try this.' And then it might help. And usually it works.

I learned a lot that way. I learned from corrections from Becky [Hilton], and from Mia [Lawrence] and from Jeremy [Nelson]. They all were great teachers. A lot of it is because they're great dancers. But you also have to be a great student. You have to open yourself up to that next step; to re-train your eye to see how one way works and the other way doesn't. It's amazing how I can see people change in Stephen's company: how much I've changed; how much Ori [Flomin] has changed; Kim [Olson], in a matter of two years; and even Tony, in one year. It's amazing to see how far they've come. And I think that there's a lot of space for mistakes. We don't try to be perfect. And Stephen always pushes us to take a lot of risks. And I think that's healthy in a way.

JM: Do you ever feel that you might get hurt if you try something?

GC: No. I think my body's smart enough that I wouldn't do anything crazy. I mean, it's pretty crazy what we do, but it's not. It looks violent, but it's not.

It's more that you don't have to rely on an outside eye to tell you where to go. You start relying on your own instincts. And he always says, 'Gerald, you're much more instinctual than that. Go with your instincts.' When you start thinking too much it becomes ordinary. I know when I plan something... Like, let's say, inside my head I plan an entrance. And I'm gonna use the phrase that Ori's using while he's on stage to go around him, and I'm gonna turn it around this way. When I plan something like that it looks boring. It looks planned. But then when you just go ... you know Ori's gonna do that phrase. I know his timing so well that I can manipulate it. I can speed up and do it twice in the amount of time he does it once. And just know that your body will tell you which way you need to go.

Sometimes we fight and [Stephen] says, 'just trust me.' And I resist. I forget sometimes that he is the audience. He is watching from the outside. I have to really trust that he knows what he is doing. And to be in a group setting like that you have to really let go of your anarchic instincts. Because when you tell dancers to improvise and go into the space, the first thing they do is go crazy, go wild. And so, I have to really trust Stephen when he says 'you have to be the anchor here.' Instead of resisting, I have to accept that he is the outside eye. Dance is a visual art, it's not just physical.

JM: I think that's something dancers tend to forget. The audience doesn't always know where you're coming from.

GC: Yeah. As a dancer, when I see a dance concert, of course I know what

their background is. I know where they've studied. I know where they're coming from. But to a person who doesn't see dance, they can't see the concepts. They see these human beings doing weird things. I see a lot of downtown dance that is very indulgent. I can see that they're enjoying doing these beautiful movements. But because it is abstract, or the movements are not emotionally specific, you lose it. You can't see anything except arms and legs and people having fun.

I like Stephen's work because it is arms and legs moving around really fast and people having fun. But also it's an extension of an idea; it's an idea put in motion. It goes beyond the steps and intricate footwork.

JM: Are you interested in choreographing?

GC: Uhhmm, I don't know. It comes and goes. Yes and No. I think some day. I'm just not there yet. I'm afraid that if I choreographed now it would look like Stephen, or any downtown choreographer. I don't even know if I should. I mean, it's what's expected. You leave the company and then you choreograph.

There's one other thing I should say, going back to the question you asked about how we're open and receptive to comments while we're dancing. About a year ago Kristen and Stephen threw in this thing in rehearsal about remaining teachable. And I think that really shows in their collaboration. They keep teaching each other new things. To me, it's amazing to watch. I think because Stephen and Kristen set such a great example, it makes it more comfortable for the other dancers.

JM: How exactly do they work together?

GC: Sometimes they go off and create a piece for another company somewhere. And when Stephen is making a solo for himself, he uses Kristen to set it on. He uses her body to see the space, which way he needs to go next. It's really great how they inform each other. To remain teachable for so long is really amazing. And it's a great lesson to learn for everyone. I think it's a Buddhist thing.

Don't you think that a lot of people have a preconceived concept of Stephen's work even before they've seen it? Or after they've seen one concert they say, 'Oh, it's about violence, homosexuality and dah, dah, dah.' I think that's really funny.

I think people sometimes only see the top layer--fast, virtuostic, crazy necks. People are always saying, 'don't you hurt your neck?' But I think there's a lot

more in his work. It's really touching how crazy the human body is...and how fast it can go and in such extreme shapes.

I think it's hard to see his work because it's so dense. And so you're like [he shields his eyes with his hand] 'It's a chore and I'm afraid to watch it.' So, whenever you're afraid of something, you label it. 'Gays are weak' or whatever.

But I really would like to hear...No one has ever said 'I hate Stephen's work. It's awful.' I've never heard that before. I would like to talk to someone who hates it, just to see why--not to be defensive, but just to hear them out.

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