

KRISTEN BORG:

ONE

DETERMINED

CHICK

A product of the open classrooms of the '70s, Kristen Borg developed the ability to clearly define and pursue her goals early in life. At the age of nine, she homed in on dance. At sixteen, she graduated early from high school and moved to New York to study at Juilliard. After working with choreographers including Sara Rudner, Twyla Tharp, Dan Wagoner, David Parsons and Trisha Brown, she zeroed-in on Stephen Petronio. Twelve years later, she is the assistant artistic director of the Stephen Petronio Company. Last year she won a Bessie for her powerhouse performance in Petronio's LAREIGNE. In a conversation with DoaL's Jennifer MacAdam, Borg reflects on her relentless career.

Photo: Beatriz Schiller



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Kristen Borg: One Determined Chick

JM: How did you meet Stephen?

KB: I met him in 1984 at an audition for Trisha. He was still in the company then. My version of the story is that he came up to me at the audition and asked me if I could come back to the callbacks. And I said yes. And he said they're on Sunday. And I said great. And so I went home and I was waiting for someone to call me and tell me what time the callbacks were on Sunday. It turns out they were on Saturday. He swears that is not the story. He swears he told me the right day. I think it was a bit of sabotage [she laughs].

And from the first moment that I started working with him it was like 'Wow, I've never been asked to do stuff like this.' It was just such a challenge to me. And so exhilarating physically and intellectually. It was nothing I had ever encountered. I mean, the Twyla stuff was really hard. Her [choreography] is intellectual and it also is very physical and very appealing. But working with him is all of those things and even more, for me. That's why it remains so interesting to me to this day. And this is my twelfth year. It's still never, never boring.

JM: What about dancing for Stephen appeals to you most?

KB: To me, as a dancer inside of it, and also as I get older, I find so many more nuances in it. There's so much room for nuance instead of just the basic, obvious physicality of it. And that has to do with phrasing and attack and interpretation--in a subtle way or in a really large way. And so, to be inside of it is very empowering for me. Because you're being asked to do incredible stuff. You're being asked to do wacky, wacky, wacky things. But wacky things that somehow feel right and very challenging in my body. Not wacky things that just feel horrible. Which is sort of what ballet felt like for me. Sometimes when we're working he'll ask you to do the weirdest things imaginable. The human brain would want to right away say, 'Oh, that's impossible.' And then we'll just try it and it will happen.

JM: What are the dynamics in the company?

KB: The company has shifted a lot in the last year. We've hired four new dancers. We lost four and we gained four. So, that's been a really, really big change for us. Because, historically, he's always worked with the same dancers. Like for me. He did one concert before I met him, when he was still

dancing with Trisha and he just sort of gathered a few people together. And after that he got a group that he started working with consistently that became the company. And those people, most of them, stayed with him at least six or seven years. I'm talking about Jeremy Nelson, and Susan Braham, and me, and Mia [Lawrence] and Becky [Hilton].

Those people were my peers for a long period of time. And that, as a dynamic dancing-wise, was just fabulous. All of those people were strong individuals, and really strong dancers and really smart people. And so, it was an honor and a great learning experience to be able to dance with those people for that long. And, speaking personally, it was a big deal to lose Becky and Mia. We were sort of a team. Even though we were individuals, we were a force to reckon with. We always got recognition for how strong the women were in the Petronio company.

But, it's interesting to watch the progression. I'm really proud of these new people. Plus, it's just proof that the work is a living, breathing entity. And the people who embody the certain roles bring a tremendous amount to them, but the work lives on. And there's something so cool about that. Because Stephen's company is so young--it just had its tenth year anniversary--we haven't really been through that. I mean, if you're in the Cunningham company you're like 'of course the repertory lives on.' They're doing pieces that are from the '50s still. But, for me, to be there and see it have new casts and see it still be breathing, living and exhilarating is really gratifying.

JM: Tell me about the new piece you're working on for the season at the Joyce.

KB: The new piece is called DRAWN THAT WAY. And he is, in that sense, working pretty literally. He was interested in a force pulling groups of people, or individuals being pulled in different directions. He's working with lines of people moving through the space and sort of erasing the space and then going back in the space. There's a distinct organization of the space. And then, at the same time, there's also the highly orchestrated chaos that goes on. But, I just feel that I'm not able to be very enlightening about it because I'm still struggling so much with getting to the point of understanding what it is.

You're rehearsing in silence for a really long time. And it definitely has its own breathing and rhythm and natural life without music. But once the music comes, it shapes the piece. And, because I enjoy dancing to music so much, the pity for me is that we don't get the music for premieres until very, very close to the show.

I know this new piece will change dramatically with the music [composed by

Andy Teirstein]. And it's an interesting process. Because you formulate your opinion of this piece without that. You formulate your opinion purely on your own involvement and your dynamics with others in the piece--the physical journey that you go through in the piece. But it will change dramatically when the music comes. And also with the lighting. The lighting designer [Ken Tabachnick] is just brilliant and creates moments of devastating beauty, I think.

JM: What are your thoughts on the content of Stephen's work? I've heard comments from people who think it is cold or soulless or too aggressive. But I think maybe they aren't looking beyond the obvious speed and virtuosity of the dancing.

KB: I can see how people can get blinded by the technical bravura. I'm sure it can be blinding because you go 'what did I just see?' Personally, I think you can see the same piece quite a few times and see many, many different things--look at it on many different levels. I can't imagine being able to go to see his work once and saying, 'Okay, seen that, done that, understand that, caught all those moments.' Because it's so dense. There's just so much to look at. And if people just don't get the feeling that we're a nice slice of humanity, well that's not always the major thrust of it. So, maybe they're right.

I think often, because his work is so challenging to look at--it's so challenging to go into that world--you can see how people would be grasping desperately to have something that they understand. His work is really dense. And it's very challenging to any viewer, I think, regardless of how long they've been viewing dance. Some people really need to cling to a narrative to be able to watch something or to feel that they understand what's going on--either a narrative or music that they understand. But, I think a person who just loves movement can have a field day with him. That's also why, as a dancer, it's so fabulous to work with him. Because there's so much movement, you get to dance so much. There's only eight of us and we all get to dance a lot. It's not like there's only three who dance a lot and four who don't.

As far as aggressiveness, I don't feel like I'm going around like a bitch ... I guess that's why instead of using the word 'aggressive,' I use the word 'empowered.' I'm being asked to do a lot of different things. Some of them are physically very extreme, which I guess some people could call aggressiveness. But there are also a lot of different uses of aggression. Whether it's aggressively moving through space or whatever. If anything, it's that there's a certain bite and attack to a lot of his movement, which can often be followed through with a release or a stop on a dime--which is what makes it so exhilarating. I think his work is very dramatic in spite of being non-narrative. It's intense.

JM: How do you feel about aging? And what do you think you will do when you stop dancing?

KB: The life span of a dancer has certainly changed from the time when I was a young dancer at Juilliard. I can't really say that I ever thought I'd be dancing this long. But I never really thought about it. I just thought that when the time came to quit I would know. Because I have no desires to be a choreographer. I don't really have any strong desire to teach. I don't really have a strong desire to stay in the business when my performing career is over. I need to do something else with my life; what it is, I don't know yet. But I need to do something that is as gratifying, and hopefully more financially secure.

Physically, I've never felt stronger and more capable than I do now. And it's sort of funny. I would never have guessed that I would be dancing as well as I ever have at this point in time. I'm finding so many more nuances to dancing than I ever had before. You realize that you don't have to be like 'blah, blah, blah' with your tool. You learn how to control your energy and just find many more interesting dynamics and nuances. I guess that's why it remains interesting to me, besides the pure physical delight.

The worst thing about it, what really sucks, is that the physicality of the human being naturally goes into decline as your age--and for women, so do your childbearing years--at the same time. You're pushing both envelopes as much as you can: your childbearing years and your performing years. That's a dilemma I find perplexing.

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