

Connecting globally, dancing locally:

Marylee Hardenbergh at Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne

Elizabeth Mackenzie

In January 2018, Marylee Hardenbergh directed Melbourne dancers who have a love of community performance in a site-specific summer outdoor choreography. Dancers and audience progressed to different sites around Abbotsford Convent, now a community arts space with cafés and picnic grounds. Abutting inner-city suburbs, the convent grounds are bordered by the Yarra River and walking paths.

The convent featured a farm situated along the river banks, that is now the much-visited Collingwood children's farm. There was a school and an orphanage within the convent, and a large Magdalen laundry where young women who had breached the mores of the day (1880s until at least the 1960s), were placed by families, police and the Sacred Heart 'rescue movement,' and worked long and hard for their board and no pay. The laundry buildings were being renovated for a new life as studio spaces while Marylee was in Melbourne.

The convent garden was designed by landscaper Ferdinand von Mueller, who also designed the beautiful Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne.

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Marylee carried the Bluetooth music player, and the dancers gathered their audience as they moved from site to site in the convent grounds. A small group of dancers stepped out at each chosen site. They disappeared among enticing foliage to emerge and engage with garden features. They recalled the hopscotch of childhood and the derelict aspects of inner city life and a mysterious old shed. They materialised from along convent walls to dance serenely on lawn, around a stately tree and within a small, domed rotunda with Greek-style columns. They evoked the spirits of boulders, loose stones and the rustling wind in a gravelled garden. Different dancer-directors led parts of the finale, where all the dancers came together for their dances to flow in and out of a colonnade of arches...

Melbourne dancers who studied the Graduate Diploma of Movement and Dance at the Institute of Early Childhood Development (IECD) hold rich memories of dancing on the wooden floors of Rosina Auditorium and other spaces at the convent.

The dance studios of Dorms One and Two and Rosina Auditorium (with a different floor) are now frequently the venues for DTAA workshops and events, so the convent is a special place for many Melbourne dance therapists.



Marylee Hardenbergh in Melbourne

Marylee is the founder and director of the Global Water Dance project. Trained under Irmgard Bartenieff and Penny Lewis Bernstein, Marylee has led many movement choirs and loves to use Space Harmony in her work. For over 30 years, Marylee has been known for her outdoor site-specific choreographies. The numerous awards and grants Marylee has received include fellowships for choreography from the National Endowment of the Arts in the USA and the Soros Foundation. Marylee brings in a therapeutic sensitivity to all of her choreography.

....Marylee spoke with Elizabeth Mackenzie, Jane Guthrie and Maria Sangiorgi on the veranda of a convent café, after the performance.

We spoke about the inspiring sense of connection and resonance felt by the dancers, and then we asked Marylee the questions that follow.

E.M. I am fascinated with the **Global Water Dance project**. What was your impetus to begin that?

M.H. I created a dance along the Mississippi River in 2006. It was called 'One River Mississippi'.

It was a huge project, but it was my brainstorm. I raised a lot of money and hired choreographers from seven cities up and down the Mississippi, from the headwaters on to St. Louis, Memphis and New Orleans: 7 cities in all. My idea was to connect the river's length by doing the same dance at the same time with the same music.



"One River Mississippi" choreographers from 7 river cities gathered at the riverbank to allow the site to inspire movements for the performance (St. Louis, 2006)

I travelled to each of the cities and found choreographers, and the funding allowed the choreographers to meet together. During one of these choreographers' summits, we went down to the river, where I asked people to let the river tell its story through their bodies. That gave several movement phrases that I used to choreograph the unison part.

Then there were the radio stations that played the same music at precisely the same time.

There was a film of it: Karen Bradley, a Laban person in the U.S., put together a weekend at Schumacher College in England, at Dartington Hall, where Laban had been, for dancers who were interested in the environment.

She had brought the film of 'One River, Mississippi'. There were sixteen of us there. When they saw the movie, people said. 'Oh,

we want to do something like that, too!' Martha Eddy, a Body Mind Centering and LMA person said, 'Let's make it about water'. We formed a steering committee, and Karen said to me: 'You are the only one who knows what you are doing, so you have to direct this project'. I spent the next two years on that, getting it ready, creating the website and so on, with input from the steering committee.

I used the template from the One River Mississippi project: if you are the local choreographer, you plan the local dance, choose your local music, you choreograph something that is about your site, and find someone to do the honouring; perhaps a Native person, or, as in New Orleans, there was an African person who was a shaman.

That template was so successful it became the template for the Global Water Dances.

The Global Water Dance choreography template

- Section 1: Honouring your local water site
- Section 2: Site-specific choreography and music
- Section 3: The universal, synchronised dance and music
- Section 4: Engaging the audience in your dance performance

E.M. I read, of your Mississippi bridge dance where dancers were in costumes that were inspired by the architecture, an observation that the audience did not want to go home after the performance; they wanted to stay.

M.H. That was my first river dance, in 1985. There were nine big concrete drums in the Mississippi River, that were part of the navigation system of the locks and dams.

It came about in this way: I was walking on a bridge over the river one day, to get an ice cream cone, and I looked back, and thought 'Each of those drums could be a stage for one dancer!'

One of my favourite stories about this project is that I found that I would need to get permission to use the drums from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. When I called them, out of my mouth popped unexpectedly 'Could I speak to someone with an open mind, please?' They said 'Oh, you must mean Roger.' I took Roger to lunch and told him my idea. He said 'Well, we'll kick it upstairs; you go home and write it up and send it in.'

I wrote that the dance project was going to be educational, free and open to the public. The reply took over a year. Eventually I got a call from a man saying, 'Well, they said yes!' and I replied 'Who is this?' It was Roger - and the Colonel had agreed to it!

These dances turned into annual performances honouring the Mississippi River on the longest day of the year, which eventually morphed into the One River Mississippi project.



Solstice Falls on Friday, a dance on the mooring cells of the Mississippi River to celebrate the Summer Solstice, Minneapolis, MN, 1985.

Global Water Dances reached such a wide audience because the five people in the original steering committee were from various places: Germany, New York, Washington DC, Minneapolis and Canada. As Martha Eddy from New York, Antja Kennedy from Germany and Karen Bradley from the Laban Institute of Movement Studies were teaching all around the world, we had contacts in different continents. We also had a website and we were inviting people to join the project. The fun part was that we thought we might get seven or eight sites; we had sixty in this first year, 2011! We wondered at so many people signing up!

We could not have done it without the Internet. It connected us! The Internet allowed people living literally anywhere to sign up; it allowed us to share the choreography; people could download the music. It was important to me that the people who showed an interest in joining felt responded to immediately: there was a great deal of administrative and email work.

By 2013 we had eighty sites; in 2017 we had 108 sites. We have always had dances on six continents!

E.M. I note the emphasis on site-specific choreographies, and it is interesting that people are making a connection through the Internet to their own local specific sites.

M.H. We are creating a container. We are not asking people just to do our water dance, but we are saying 'We want to honour you, your site and local water issues; and then everyone will do a short global section that unites us all, too.'

The template is good, going from local to global to the audience participation. I am quite interested in the concept and definition of synchrony: I surveyed some of our illustrious dance therapists when I was writing my Marian Chace lecture, asking them about the difference between "unison" and "synchrony". Hmm, they all said they had never been asked that before. But all said more or less the same thing, that there is a deeper emotional/spiritual aspect to synchrony.

E.M. Synchrony...?

M.H. What connects us is time, the simultaneity: the dances are happening at the same time, or at the same hour in each time zone; or on the same day. I am not sure why, but when things happen at the same time, at places far apart, it is thrilling to me!

M.S.: I am interested in what took you to dance?

M.H. Mmm! I was dancing to Neil Young; I felt so alive, so right! I thought I could see myself on the 'big stage', but in case the 'big stage' wouldn't have me, I would study psychology - I had recently been told that I was good with people. So I was studying dance and studying psychology to become a psychologist. Then while working at the psychiatric hospital, I attended an in-service training in Dance Therapy: "Wow! What is that?" It turned my life around.

I admire people who say they have always danced and couldn't live without it. I love dancing and how it makes me feel. I love the social dancing, especially waltzing: I always fall in love with whoever I waltz with. I love dancing in the movement choirs.

I think dancing is part of my seeking. I like the connection: I love the yummy-ness of moving together in rhythm with people.

M.S. You loved dancing and you danced!

M.H. Yes.

J.G. I am interested in performance. What you did over the weekend was beautiful; you found the sites, you put us in groups, you were interested in our connection with the place. But I noticed also, when I was communicating with you, that you were really interested in the history of the place. You were interested in the history of the laundry and thought there might be a dance for the souls who were connected by working in it, such a beautiful idea. As it was we created something different and that was perfect.

But I am interested in how you create a dance: in fact, the laundry was not available to us, because of renovations to the building; but could we have created a healing dance?

M.H. It is a fascinating history of the women who worked there. However, there was the information that the laundry area was unavailable because of building renovations. In addition, Maria was speaking of someone she knows who was a medium for the souls of the people there. What comes up for me is: do these souls want a dance? Do people want healing?

I had an epiphany to go to Sarajevo in 1995 and work with the three groups who were fighting each other - the Catholics, the Orthodox and the Muslims; that is the Croats, the Serbs and the Bosnians. A little voice kept saying I should go there and make a dance but include a lot of dance therapy in the rehearsals.

I did that, spending a lot of prep time in advance, calling the embassy and making arrangements. When I was in Sarajevo, I was told "Other artists came, saying they were coming for peace, but there was no peace. They did not bring peace.

They came saying they came to help us; but you were different. You came and said 'I need your help. I am holding auditions; I am looking for dancers, I will pay the dancers.'

I had already found a composer, who was well known in Sarajevo, but had emigrated to Israel. It broke my heart because ninety dancers came to audition, aged as we asked, between seven and seventy. There were young women and older women, but I only had money to pay for six. There was eighty percent unemployment in Sarajevo when I went there, so I wished I could pay everybody a little bit of the money instead of paying six people quite a bit of money; but that is what we had said we would do and that is what we did.

OK, so on to Abbotsford now: If I had come here and if the laundry had been open and was going to be our focus, then we would have done a lot more talking in the beginning about our intentions. Maybe I would have asked people to go into the laundry and come up with movements that they feel are healing for themselves. Then we would put something together.

The thing about people who are dead, though, or not present, they can't tell you about their feelings, or give you their feedback, unless you have a medium or something. We just have to be careful about offering a dance for people; they might feel patronised, for example.

J.G: I thought what we did was perfect, and perfect for the group. About half the group were not dance therapists and might have felt uncomfortable with something like a healing dance. At the same time, I did think it was a beautiful idea.

M.H. Yes: We would have worked very differently if we had done that.

E.M. Coincidentally, in recent years, just a short distance from here, both Maria and I have danced and worked with some women who worked in the laundry at Abbotsford, and one who grew up in the orphanage.

I am thinking that the history of the laundry is important, but there are other things too, and in our dances, that theme could have come up, but it didn't on this occasion.

I really like the question you ask about healing, and the response in your work to being in the present moment, attending to our own experience and to the response of others when we offer help or healing. I am reminded of some words that I heard in an interview recently, noting the speaker as 'Nora':

"You can't change the past- you can only create a new future: a lot of care, help, dancing and movement."

M.H. When the laundry was unavailable, I thought, "We ain't doing that, this time!" Other sites and the dances, such as the coal cellar (an old building on the edge of the site, with atmospheric "Bois et Charbons" (signage from when it was used as part of a movie set) inspired movements and characters; a sense of being derelict. That was funny, because the building itself was derelict.

E.M. Was there a sense of mystery about what happened there?

M.H. I think it is a good question, and if we wanted to do healing, it makes me ask: What is healing? What is happening in the dancers' response to a site? And in the here-and-now response to this derelict building, asking how much of that is asking "What happened here?" - and we are not trying to heal it - just attending. On reflection, I thought it was great asking people to create their own individual design for each site and then combining them in the performance: I will do that again.

relationships between our dance studio and the other places.

I had some requirements for the sites: they had to be audience friendly. For instance, there is a wonderful narrow path that I wanted to use, but the problem was: where could the dance be viewed from? There is really no vantage point where more than two or three people could see the performance, so I did not choose that site. The audience is really my client: their needs must be thought of. The site is my boss. The site tells me what the dance should be.



"Bois et Charbons"

Very important was building into the structure the instructions to go and have time on your own, and write down your ideas, and then each person share with their small group what they came up with. We can get derailed from our own thoughts by hearing others first, so there was "solo time" just to allow your own thoughts to emerge. It was a winner!

JG: Could you expand on the sites you chose - did you have Space Harmony in mind when you chose them, or was it just a free rein for us to combine how we all personally responded to the site itself or from our knowledge of the history of Abbotsford?

MH: I walked around the whole Abbotsford campus three times, considering places for the dance sections which would offer different site-specific opportunities. It took a while to simply comprehend the

Many of you know the amazing oak tree right outside our Rosina studio, but its boughs had recently been chainsawed and was fenced off by orange do-not-cross tape. Believe me, it is very unpleasant to be in the middle of a performance and have an official come say you shouldn't be there. It's just not worth it.

However, very near the oak tree there was a fire hydrant and three large old building stones, many leafy bushes and a green lawn, interesting to me because it had a clear horizontal space with a small man-made vertical pipe, which had significance.

The derelict building had its own story to tell, and the choreography drew attention to the different functions: the school, the huge fans, and the old brick building, where the dancers pointed out, through their movements, the mystery of what's behind the door? This place had a clear vertical plane.



Fire hydrant site

The beautiful lawn with a square colonnade right outside the café offered a big central tree trunk. The Greek rotunda, enclosed and intimate, along with the tree trunk provided cylindrical shapes contrasting with the square.

Three boulders were set apart in a gravel-paved area near the front gate. Here I saw an opportunity to connect with the stones, in a strong earthy grounded site.



The Colonnade

It took me a while to figure out the order to put these sites in, but when I walked the sites the order became very clear: if we left the studio, where we had told the audience to gather, and went right out the door to the leaves

and hydrant, we could make a perfect circle, going counter clockwise from one site to the next, ending at 'the arches'. The colonnade of arches offered us a lot of sagittal movement coming forward and back from underneath the arches to us in the audience.

E.M: Your role as choreographer or designer was interesting. To my group, you suggested where something could be a little shorter; where something could be emphasised. It was useful to have your eyes.

M.H: I could also have done that with the 'arches' section, where different people directed sections. To make it a perfect choreography, I would have videoed and looked at the individual details of each of the four groups' movements and eliminated themes that were repeated. I would have changed the order and shortened some parts.

J.G: I associate you, Marylee, with being the founder of the Global Water Dances. This dance was not about water. Has your history always been with water dances, or have the dances developed differently for different sites?

M.H: What we did here was not part of Global Water Dances. Long before Global Water Dances, I had established my own organisation called "Global Site Performance" and on my website, there are many performances with photographs or little videos. My very first



Boulders in the gravel paved area

outdoor performance was the one on the Mississippi with those concrete drum "stages".

I always try to do time-specific dances. I have done dances at a farmers' market site with cherry-picker machines. That was one year when the full moon fell on the Equinox, which only happens every twenty-nine and a half years. The first Mississippi date was performed on the day of the summer solstice. However, a lot of the dances have been on the water: perhaps fifty percent of them.

J.G: I clearly remember as a student, dancing here on such a night – full moon and clear sky, after one of Melbourne's very hot days. At that time Abbotsford was quite eerie at night, decaying, quiet and still. It was such a beautiful dance in response to the environment. Not a word was spoken, or sound could be heard, but a large group of us stealthily wound down the Rosina building staircase connected by long scarves, in and out of the windows and onto and around the lawns. It was quite beautiful and so spontaneous.

M.H: Jane, it was lovely to watch your dance today. You have such a lovely lightness and precision in your dance. It was quite lyrical.

J.G: That's nice to know!!

E.M: Mary, is there something that you would like to add?

M.H: I would like to speak about how I like to use Laban's Space Harmony as a framework.

I have found recently that when I am working with smaller groups of dancers, I like them to come up with their own movements.

If I assign two or three points out of a Space Crystal (which, like our kinesphere, surrounds the body) and ask them to create transitions between those points, it is challenging to them, and they come up with new movements. If I ask them to let the river speak to them, yes, they come up with new movements; but if I ask them to do both, to use two or three points in the space around them, and then see if they can find a way to have the river speak through that, it brings new vocabulary.

In addition, because the Space Harmony is so clear, it really can support unison and a sense of connectedness.

Sometimes I use some movement choir exercises, such as the rising and sinking together as a clump, as a quick way to create a sense of connection in the group.



Movement Choir at Abbotsford

J.G: Do you use other aspects of Laban's work, such as focussing on the body or on the efforts?

M.H: For me, in performance, it is about "Let's learn the river bed first, and then put the water in." I like finding the spatial paths, and then adding in the dynamics. That's how I like to work. The qualities, or Efforts, the water dynamics, can be boiling or sluggish and so on. I like to work from the site to the space and go on from there.

I also love teaching Irmgard's 'bony landmarks', her Bartenieff Fundamentals, and the affinities between Laban's Efforts and the spatial pulls. I love that Irmgard Bartenieff was my teacher. I was very lucky; I returned to New York after a couple of years in the U.K. and Scotland and studied more about movement choirs with her. I also learned so much from Penny Lewis in her graduate program.

E.M: I sometimes notice dance movement that looks 'drifty' because there seems not to be clarity about aspects of space, or to be centred in the bodies of the dancers.

M.H: '*Let's put the dance back in dance therapy*' was the theme of a recent dance therapy conference: Irmgard used to bemoan groups turning into "shape flow" piles of bodies rolling around on the floor together forever. "Take the actions out into space!" she would say. Regarding the movement not being centred: you can be centred in your body and not be centred in the spatial pulls that your body is following. For instance, the diagonals that go through the Cube go right through the body, but working from another space crystal, the Icosahedron (Bartenieff and Lewis, p.33, 1980), none of the spatial pulls go through the body centre.

I love feeling centred in my body and love watching dancers who are centred: the 'space crystals' can help put us in our bodies – is that counterintuitive?

J.G: I am thinking about how I usually work with a group using a movement choir: finding the issues; bringing out the movements and finding ways to bring it all together. I am wondering about other ways to put together a movement choir?

M.H: Working with a movement choir, the less time you have to put it together, the more structured and prepared it has to be. For example: "Okay we will have four groups, and the groups will be fire, earth, air, water. Each group quickly come up with some movement themes; come forward, go back, put it together." I think if you ask a group what are the issues, it takes a lot of time.

In another approach, when you have more time, you can really allow more structure to emerge from the group. I remember in 1974 at the dance therapy conference in New York City, Irmgard created a movement choir for the whole group. (It took place on Saturday night – this was before we had the Saturday night banquet and dance at ADTA conferences!) Irmgard called the work she created with us "Night Sea Journey." She had chosen the music already. We had two hours in which to create the story in movement. First, we were on a boat; it was a journey; then there was a parting of the sea where we divided as Irmgard came up through us.

You can create a story about the land, the place where you are. I do this, and Irmgard did it too,

where the end is a cohesive group. You are creating a cohesive dance where the different parts of the group come together. That is a satisfying way to work.

J.G: Are there developments in your work beyond Irmgard's work?

M.H: I think that it is in the use of space and spatial paths in choreography; I am using the spatial paths to tell the story, especially in large-scale outdoor performances; asking: 'So you are starting where? And you are going where?' It certainly is not a new conceptual development, but it is different from choreographing from a dynamics/Effort premise.



Spatial pathways in and out of the arches

E.M: So using space and spatial paths can be a way to work towards cohesion?

M.H: I think you can use space to create structural cohesion. You can have rhythmic synchrony and there can also be spatial synchrony: everyone might end right side high, no matter how they got there. They might all be moving rhythmically together: that's really together; or everybody does the same diagonal.

E.M: Was it satisfying that at the end of today people were wanting you to work more with us?

M.H: Yes, it was very satisfying. I absolutely adored teaching this group at Abbotsford, and it made me realise how much I actually do love teaching!

Reference: Bartenieff, I., & Lewis, (1980). *Body Movement: Coping with the environment*. New York. Gordon & Breach Science Publishers

Photo: P.26. Courtesy James O. Phelps



Dancing between sites

Elizabeth Mackenzie, Dip. DMT (IDTIA) is a professional member of the Dance therapy Association of Australia (DTAA). She is currently Vice President of DTAA.

As coordinator of the Activities and Wellbeing program at St Vincent's Prague House in Melbourne Elizabeth enjoys bringing an arts and strengths-based emphasis to recreation and wellbeing activities. In 2013 Elizabeth's music and CD program received a national Better Practice award. The program addresses social isolation in Prague House residents, many of whom have experiences of chronic mental illness and homelessness.

Elizabeth is also a graduate in the Hakomi method of mindfulness-based psychotherapy and is currently studying IFS- Internal Family Systems model of psychotherapy. Elizabeth founded 'Moving Together', a Melbourne community-based dance therapy program for mothers and babies, focussing on the mother-baby relationship. Elizabeth writes a series of interviews with Melbourne and visiting dance therapists for the DTAA journal.

