

BAC Story by Jesse Zaritt  
Helen Simoneau

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During a recent rehearsal at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, Helen Simoneau worked quietly with a few dancers on the development of a complex duet. She watched the performers execute a passage of movement: one dancer leaned back, falling plank-like toward the floor only to have his momentum unexpectedly diverted by his partner. Suddenly the two bodies were intertwined, reclining gently into each other on the ground.



Deep lunging steps, improbable twisting lifts, elegant extensions emerging out of bodies tipped off their centers - these movements followed, weaving a partnership between two articulate, sensitive bodies. Helen offered suggestions and corrections - guiding the movement toward ease and consistency but also encouraging the dancers to see the space around them, to be attentive not just to their own bodies and to their partner, but also to their environment. I watched as the dancers' bodies softened into a fluid and easy performance of this difficult movement, rich in connection to self, partner and space. Around the room, two other small groups of dancers worked on their own. Another duet rehearsed a delicate lift where one dancer appeared to glide effortlessly over the back of her partner, while in the center of the room a group of women danced through a unison phrase of arcing, spiraling movements. The tone of the room was serious, focused, quiet - almost like a library; each study group moving with gentle determination to become both more expert at and sensitive to the given task.

*Perception matters: how we create meaning out of a constant stream of sensory stimulus determines the scope and depth of our experience of being alive. Over time, we come to rely on perceptual habits to help us quickly identify what it is we are confronting. These habits enable us to predict what will please or harm us and help our bodies prepare accordingly. But, our ready-made perceptual habits can also limit our engagement with the world. We need to be reminded to expand our interpretations of the feelings, objects and events around us. In order to continue to evolve, we need to learn how to see and feel more and differently than what our habits allow.*

*Dance - both as a practice and as an art form meant to be experienced (felt/viewed) - has the power to render the human body and its expressive, communicative movement continuously unfamiliar. Dance can remind us to seek new ways of being in the world, guiding us to un-frame our previous*

*assumptions about what it means to be a moving body.*

Helen Simoneau's work lives decidedly in the realm of dance that seeks to open new spaces of possibility as to how bodies might move through the world. Helen brings viewers and performers toward an un-framing of rigid, habitual physicality by first creating spaces of quietude and calmness within both the dancers' bodies and the performance space. It is from this gentle attentiveness that a wealth of movement emerges - movement that quietly, but firmly insists on being seen and felt as inventive and unexpected. Helen's choreography reveals that our choices to create action in this world multiply when we treat our bodies and the spaces they inhabit with expansive, un-anxious, and generous curiosity. In a world full of hyperbolic extroversion, Helen's calm determination to look more deeply at the possibilities of human movement is a refreshing and necessary addition. So many choreographers and performers in today's over-saturated culture feel the need to loudly and forcefully make a claim for the body's capacity to be and do more in this world, forgetting that possibility comes not just from explosive force but also from quiet permission.

Helen's work is firm but unforced, energetically vital but never frantic. Helen's invitation to her dancers to locate a physical tone of calmness and hyper-awareness (to every edge of the body) allows for a rich mining of possibility from within available joints and muscles. Helen takes pleasure in working with excellently trained dancers: artists who understand how to expressively shape movement in service of an always-fresh communicative gesture, not as the reiteration of a list of pre-determined movement objects.

Watching Helen's newest works, I find my whole body calming down; the anxious noise of my mind abates and my focus is guided toward the action unfolding before me. Articulate, generous, precise, virtuosic movement meets my gaze. The performance space contracts and expands as movement pours, glides and pauses throughout the open terrain. I am drawn, not to narrative relationships, but toward relationships between time, space, and effort. I sense how it is possible to quiet the demanding push of time - to give one's body the time it needs to feel itself in action. I see how space can be opened, not dominated, by movement. The dancers move through and with space, treating it as a living surface and environment to engage with as a collaborative partner.

Helen's work leaves generous and expansive "room for interpretation" - truly revitalizing the meaning of this phrase. To experience Helen Simoneau's work is to feel the body, time and space yield and reveal new opportunities for seeing, feeling, moving - being.

[Visit Helen's Residency Page](#)

*Jesse Zaritt has performed his solo work in Russia, Korea, Germany, New York, Japan, Mexico and Israel. He was a 2012-2013 resident artist in the Studio Series Program at New York Lives Arts, working on a duet created in collaborative partnership with choreographer/performer Jumatatu Poe. Jesse's solo 'Binding' is the recipient of three 2010 New York Innovative Theater Awards: Outstanding Choreography, Outstanding Solo Performance, and Outstanding Performance Art Production. He has recently taught at the University of the Arts, Bard College, the American Dance Festival, Hollins University, and Pomona College, as well as at festivals in Japan, Korea, and Russia. Jesse was a member of the Shen Wei Dance Arts Company (2001-2006), and the Inbal Pinto Dance Company (2008). From 2009-2013 he performed in the work of Faye Driscoll and Netta Yerushalmy.*