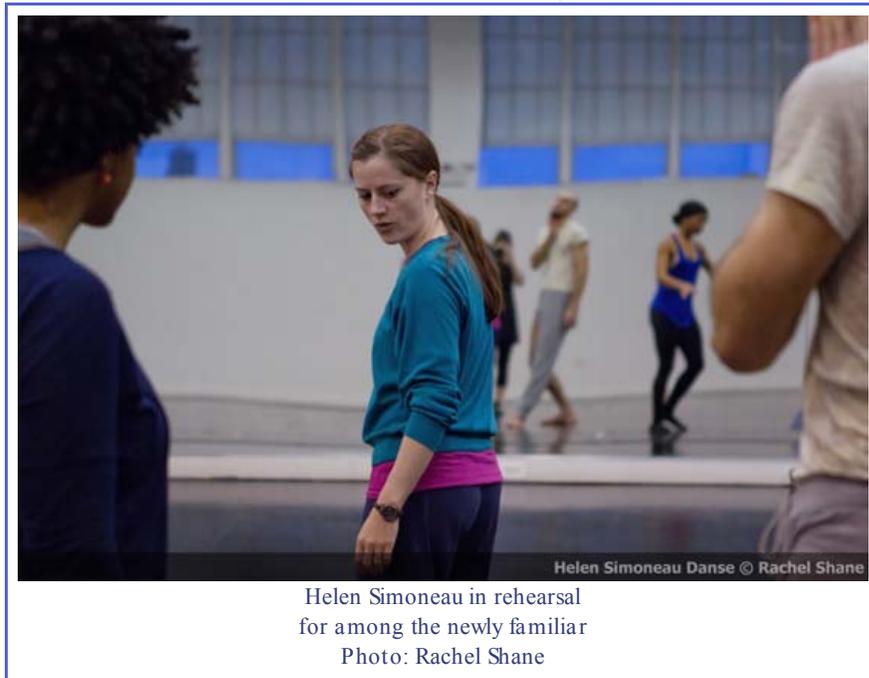


Friday, December 6, 2013

## Helen Simoneau: Movement Across Borders



Helen Simoneau in rehearsal  
for among the newly familiar  
Photo: Rachel Shane

### Helen Simoneau: Movement Across Borders

by Melanie Greene

Leaves rustle and gently connect with the scratchy pavement. The air whisks a cool crisp breeze underneath the lining of my jacket, while I mentally negotiate the best combination of layers to complement the changing season. The sun's rays warm the molecules of cool air around us....

One modest October afternoon, a pleasant chat with artist, performer, and entrepreneur Helen Simoneau became a welcomed addition to an otherwise normal day. We discussed dance, art-making and her December residency at Baryshnikov Arts Center (BAC). Simoneau was in New York for business meetings and performances, and I caught up with her during a brief intermission between engagements. Somewhere between a showing, a meeting, and a quickly-approaching plane ride, we managed to steal time to relax outside a small café in Williamsburg. We sat on a wooden bench that stretched the length of the café window, while the afternoon sun fought with vigor to penetrate my Canal Street sunglasses.

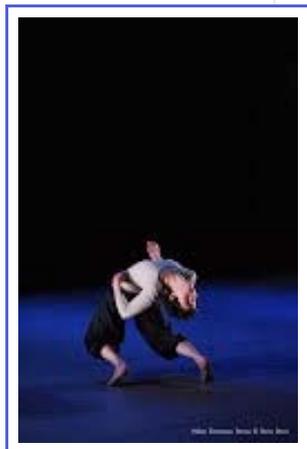
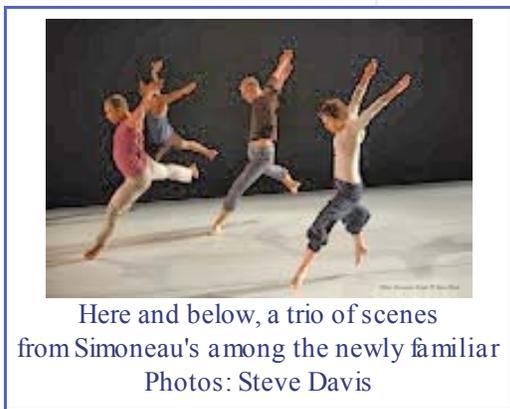
Before we began our conversation, a quick shuffle of our movement cleverly hinted at our lives as dancers. To prevent the relentless sun from blinding Simoneau, we gathered our belongings and switched places. Stepping through the strap from a bookbag here, avoiding the spill of a drink there, we settled on opposite ends of the bench while my shades served as a brown barrier between the sun's rays and my retinas.

After an exchange of greetings and light conversation, I began by asking Simoneau how she felt, to which she replied, "I'm feeling good because I just performed last night. I feel in my body and grateful that I'm able to reconnect with my dance community here in New York."

This sentiment illustrates one piece of an interesting puzzle that roots Simoneau's work and practice in both New York and North Carolina, where Simoneau currently resides.

I was first exposed to Simoneau's work in North Carolina where I grew up and attended graduate school. During a North Carolina Dance Festival, she presented a solo, the gentleness was in her hands. Surrounded by three golden anchors of light, Simoneau moved as a lone figure within a triangle of light, completely mesmerizing. She moved in angular, awkwardly isolating ways complemented by soft, delicate extensions and undulations. Her head and torso would snake through space supported by long lines that journeyed from her hips into her feet. She was enchanting and, ever since, I've been excited to see and hear about her work.

Having moved to New York, I am fascinated by how other artists navigate across interstate lines. Simoneau's dual state, as well as her international presence, situates her work and company--Helen Simoneau Danse--in an interesting state of mindfulness that radiates throughout her work as an artist, performer, and choreographer.



Residencies

Process

Work/Time Separation

Precious

Movers

Thinkers

Community/Core

Boundaries

Borders

Limitless limits

Simoneau's three-week residency at BAC landed on her radar because she was familiar with artists affiliated with the organization and, from them, heard about the supportive nature of its residencies. This opportunity offers Simoneau a platform to invest in what her work needs without the pressure to produce a polished final product.

"BAC is meeting me where I am with my process," Simoneau said. "Sometimes performance expectations hinder the creative process because you simply try to get to the end too quickly at the expense of exploration."

For three weeks, she, along with several New York-based artists, will call BAC home as they work on two dances in different stages of development and process.

### Process

For many artists, the process is a very important component of choreographic practice. Simoneau realizes that her works often reflect something that is currently going on in her life. Certain themes and ideas just develop subconsciously. "It is not usually my intention, but I noticed that I tend to work out things in my life through my work."

Interestingly, these findings reveal themselves over time when one has a chance to step back from the work, which explains Simoneau's advocacy for work/time separation. Establishing some distance from the work allows you to reexamine your choices as a choreographer. The work becomes not so precious and lends itself to a quizzical, choreographic eye.



### Work/Time Separation

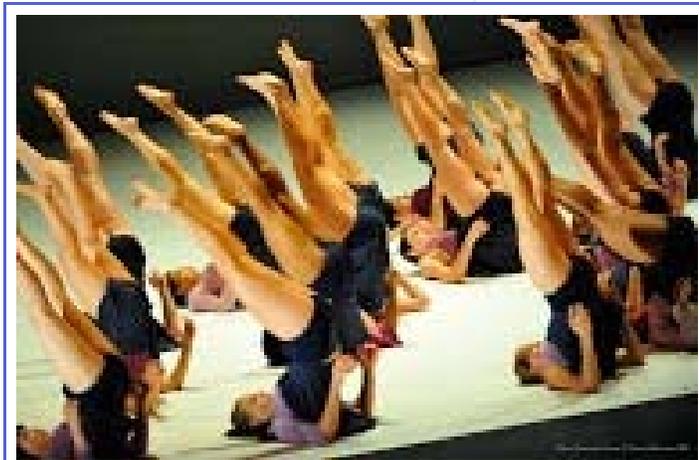
Time also helps you see the potential and possible evolution of a work. It can offer clarity and

create an opportunity to witness the fact that a work doesn't stay fixed. It is an ongoing process informed by decisions made in the past and present. "I am there and present [in the work]," Simoneau added.

Once time has past, this clarity and participation makes it possible to seek avenues back into a work. With the luxury of time, she believes, "you begin to see patterns and unconscious choices." You can also make space to entertain the divestment of labor involved in a work that can make it easier to edit away unnecessary material.

Delving more into the process of creating work, Simoneau spoke of her gratitude for the women and men with whom she works and performs. "I work with dancers who understand me and my process. They are invested in the work, therefore are invested in the process." Among many things, this process involves seeing and being with dance works over time. Dancers also contribute in the creation of material. "I'm excited about the dancers I work with," Simoneau said. "I am inspired by them and confident that I can let go of material and trust that they will continue to inspire me as movers and thinkers."

For the BAC residency, Simoneau will work with a group of dancers who she hasn't seen in nearly nine months. "It is a pleasure to work with this particular group of dancers and, when we don't meet, I miss it. We are a community, a core."



from Paper Wings,  
developed at American Dance Festival  
(photo: Grant Halverson)

### A Company With Many Homes

I've seen Simoneau's work in several North Carolina venues, and I'm fascinated to witness how her work translates and transforms within New York spaces. When asked about creating and presenting work in both locations, Simoneau admitted "Every year, I'm more clear...I realized [years ago] that there were several resources in North Carolina that I was not utilizing."

Booking studio space in New York can be expensive. In North Carolina, there is a community that really values the arts. Resources and rehearsal space that may be more difficult to obtain in New York are more accessible in North Carolina.

She knows that reaching out to people for support is key. "Ask for what you need," Simoneau

suggested. "Be willing to bring your ideas to the table and prepared to offer suggestions about how to get there." Instead of imitating the journey of others, Simoneau found it more advantageous to figure out what she needed and devise her own plan to get there, stepping outside the box to see past traditional models.

For instance, Simoneau's residency at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts (UNCSA) brought dancers in for three weeks and gave them access to free studio space and classes. One big "Yes" later, Simoneau is in her fourth year working with UNCSA.

"I think [UNCSA] said yes because there is value for them in having professionals take class and interact with their students. We usually end up having students peek into rehearsal, sometimes understudying. We also end up having an informal talk with the students about life after graduation. They always have tons of questions."

Traveling, especially overseas, and sharing work are important components of her aesthetic. "It's scary to be in a vacuum," she notes, "because there is nothing to push up against."

Presenting and experiencing work widely seems vital to growth as a performer and artist. You might ask the same questions, but get different feedback. "Work is relative to the context in which it exists," she says. "It will be different in every place, but it should still find relevance in different contexts as well."

After my conversation with Simoneau, I realize that as artists we often see and create opportunities out of necessity—a way to reconcile living and breathing the work we want to create and nurturing the individuals we want to be in this space, in our communities. Our intersecting paths are diverse and intricate from end to end, but it is possible to live what you love, love what you live, and, along the way, meet inspiring people who help to make your journey more clear.

BIO

Helen Simoneau is a native of Québec, Canada. Her company, Helen Simoneau Danse, is based in both North Carolina and New York City. She had the honor of winning The A.W.A.R.D. Show! 2010: NYC with her solo the gentleness was in her hands. This work was also awarded 1st Place for Choreography at the 13th Internationales Solo-Tanz-Theatre Festival in Stuttgart, Germany. She returned to Germany as one of three finalists for the Kurt Jooss Prize 2010 in Essen for her quintet Flight Distance I.

Simoneau has been selected to choreograph for the Swiss International Coaching Project (SiWiC) in Zurich, the Bessie Schönberg Residency at The Yard, Bates Dance Festival's Emerging Choreographer Program, and the American Dance Festival's Footprints series. Her choreography has been presented in Austria, Brazil, Canada, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and has toured throughout Germany and the United States. Her work Flight Distance III: Chain Suite was recently presented in a nine-performance tour of Montréal, Tokyo, and Busan, South Korea, marking the company's debut in Asia. Simoneau is a Bogliasco Fellow, a North Carolina Arts Council Choreographic Fellow, and a Fall 2013 resident artist at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York City.

For more information about Helen Simoneau and Helen Simoneau Danse, visit [helensimoneau.com](http://helensimoneau.com). Also, see Simoneau's choreography reel on YouTube.

Upcoming: DraftWork at Danspace  
Saturday, Dec 14, 3pm (FREE)  
[Click here for information and tickets.](#)