

MAGAZINE DANCE

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LIZ LERMAN'S BIG CHANGE

Deciding to break away from the house she built

Liz Lerman is all about asking questions. Back in 1975, when her mother was dying and she spent time in a seniors residence, she asked, Why can't old people dance too? A year later, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange was born. In her work, she asked, Why can't a dance performance combine art and information?

When she asked, How can we be more constructive when we criticize choreography?, her Critical Response Process was born. It is now used in venues across the country to stimulate dialogue.

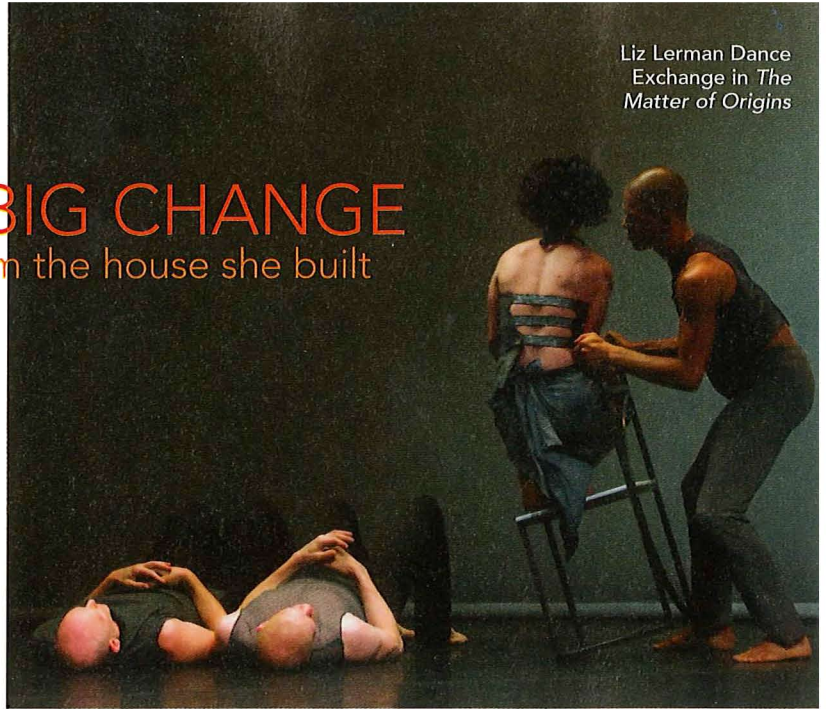
More questions: Can a dance company be run as a collective? What, actually, is leadership? How can an institution be a fluid organism that adapts to change?

And then there was this: How can dance engage the big social and scientific questions? From that question flowed several multi-year projects. In the *Shipyards Project* the Dance Exchange engaged a whole community of working people in New England. In *Hallelujah*, the LLDE went in search of things they could praise, based on Lerman's work with congregations and communities.

For her pioneering approach, she received a MacArthur "genius" Fellowship in 2002. She then created *Ferocious Beauty: Genome*, a masterful mix of science and art, dance and video.

And now Lerman asks, How can I extricate from that which I have built? She plans to leave the Exchange in July. "I've been able to make it like an amoeba that keeps changing and stretching depending on my own interests." But now, she says, she needs to stretch even further.

Her new book, *Hiking the Horizontal*, to be released this spring, helped open the gates for her to forge new paths. "Writing



Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in *The Matter of Origins*



Liz Lerman, at right, with Cassie Meador, future artistic director of LLDE

that book helped me see how I'd fulfilled my own thinking with a dance company. I'll still be involved in dance, but I've started to look for other platforms."

Lerman is in demand at universities as a thinker and catalyst who stimulates creativity. She's been involved in a project at Wesleyan with faculty members in astronomy, physics, and religion. "They provide content and I'm providing research methods." This fall, she'll be gathering people in different fields at Harvard in what she calls "creativity surges."

Lerman has the utmost faith in the other members of the Exchange to run it themselves, with Cassie Meador as artistic director (see "Why I Dance," June 2010). "It's an incredible group, and they are profoundly ready. They've absorbed the way I think about art, but they also can see things freshly and have new concerns. For instance, Cassie's not sure touring is a good model if you're interested in the environment."

Lerman, 63, may also be working with theater groups, and—who knows—maybe even the occasional project with the Dance Exchange. After all, it's been her artistic base for 35 years. "It's been a home for me. I had so much support here."

But she won't be leaving home just yet. Her latest work, *The Matter of Origins*, comes to Peak Performances @ Montclair in New Jersey this month. Collaborating with physicists and mining sources from the Book of Genesis to the Manhattan Project to the Hubble telescope (plus plenty of contributions from her dancers), she poses questions about how life began. With the second act spent as a teatime discussion, the piece engages audiences on several levels. *Washington Post* critic Sarah Kaufman called the piece "a work of expansive range, emotional depth and singular beauty," and dubbed it one of 2010's best dance events. —Wendy Perron