



Stanford Makishi

Fall for Dance? The Asian Cultural Council? The former Trisha Brown dancer builds a career off the stage. By **Gia Kourlas**

In recent years, Stanford Makishi has made a behind-the-scenes name for himself: The former Trisha Brown Dance Company member was the executive director of the Baryshnikov Arts Center before stepping aside in February. His first job as a freelance administrator was a massive one: artistic advisor for the City Center's 2011 installment of Fall for Dance. Next, the Asian Cultural Council called him with an idea that he might be the right guy for a newly created position: director of programs. (Yes, he was.) Makishi, 46, has his eye on supporting contemporary artists at various stages in their artistic life. He recently spoke about his ever-flourishing career.

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to Mikhail Baryshnikov. Why did you want to leave?

I don't remember that line. My strong interest right now is to do more programming and artistic work, and obviously being executive director of an organization with an extremely important artistic director, the focus of that position is not going to be artistic. There were other opportunities out there—or things I thought that maybe I would want to do. I don't think Misha is ready or has any desire to stop working as hard as he's working. And it's the center that he founded. I think he should be the artistic leader of the organization for as long as he wants to. He's a man of such integrity.

Could you have programmed Fall for Dance while being the executive director of BAC?

Probably not. I don't think that with the

demands of that job I could ever have done a good job as artistic advisor for Fall for Dance. One interesting thing about my ACC appointment is that my continuing with Fall for Dance is of strong interest to them. I'm doing it with their *blessing*, and that's another reason why I think ACC is the perfect place for me to go. They see it as part of my job to remain extremely relevant in the world of working with artists directly.

What are you looking forward to about your job?

The work that they do is so extraordinary. This idea of not just giving money, but giving money *and* the fulfilling experience around the cash award is so expansive. That also means that it's not the same experience or by boilerplate that each artist is treated, so one artist may benefit from the grant, plus introductions to peers or mentors from another culture. They talk about tailor-made programming. While it's still important to give travel money simply to bring an Asian artist to the United States, just coming to the U.S. isn't quite what it used to be because there is so much more access to information. Travel will always be valuable, but now that people have more information, our role could acknowledge that development.

By expanding something, but you're not sure what?

Yeah. That's one of the things that we're going to work on. And I think the first place to go is the artists. I don't think that we should be telling them what they need, I think we should ask them.

The grantees aren't necessarily Asian, right?

Yes. It's very broad and it really is about sending people and ideas across oceans and continents.

You see so many performances where the stage almost looks like a souvenir shop.

I know. I know! Where a country's national show is always shiny and sometimes there's fire in it? [Laughs] That's not what we would encourage.

That's an extreme version, but there are subtler versions too. You want to encourage rigorous thinking and that's difficult.

Yes. And I have to remind myself: If the world were full of truly great artists, then our jobs wouldn't be that hard. [Laughs] Honestly, we have our work cut out for us: to find those who think deeply and expansively. And what's harder still is to find those people who can't articulate their ideas so well.

Does this job mean you have to support Shen Wei?

That's funny. [Laughs] It doesn't mean we have to, no.





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Did you really not have another position in mind when you left BAC in February?

I didn't have another position in mind, but I was curious about living the life of a freelance administrator. I had been invited at that point over to Fall for Dance by Arlene Shuler to be its artistic advisor for 2011. It actually didn't really matter so much that I didn't have other things lined up because that work was so substantial. I suppose I would have wanted to do it a little bit longer, but then this tremendous opportunity came up at ACC. They approached me. That's another thing that made it feel really right. For them to invite me to submit my candidacy is a very different thing from my going to them. [At BAC] it was the right time for me and for the organization as well. The theater had just opened. It had been partially programmed. The residency program was rock solid. I'm so, so grateful for my time there, and it's not just a line. It opened many, many doors. I will never ever undervalue what that job did for me.

What's an example of a door?

Access to people. I almost always got to speak to the person I was calling and that's kind of a big deal. [Laughs] It was a tremendous experience to learn some pretty big things on the job. I had never signed up for purchasing a theater and renovating it. That's just not the world I come from, but it was such a cooperative and supportive environment. And this is another example of a door opening: People wanted to be part of that project, even though it wasn't so big in terms of its overall budget compared to so many other things. Lincoln Center, for example. I really ended up loving it, even though, obviously, no construction project is without its problems. I somehow got lost in the best way. I was really able to focus on it. There are very few things in my life that will do that for me. Dancing was one of them, but oddly the building project was another. [Laughs] Obviously, there were very critical steps in the process when Misha and others were brought in

so that we could make decisions together. Our team was unusual in that we had a lot of artists and a lot of production/technical people and very seasoned audience members—all part of this inner circle. Obviously Misha has been on many stages around the world. He's also sat in many houses.

But what about those bench-style chairs?

Those chairs. They're a little...tight. [Laughs] We could not have known that it would be so tight. There were economics behind that too. We were already losing a fair number of seats from the original configuration. If you'll recall, it was sort of unfortunate looking, but it had 299 seats and we went down to 238, so we were losing a huge number of seats. We basically did what code would allow us to do. We had to adhere very strictly to that.

Does a bench make more seats?

[Nods head regretfully] I know. It's cozy.

It's like a bus ride.

[Laughs] Thank God you and I are little people. We fit. Our larger friends don't so easily.

A New York Times article stated that you were hired as an "artistic partner and potential successor" to Mikhail Baryshnikov. Why did you want to leave?

I don't remember that line. My strong interest right now is to do more programming and artistic work, and obviously being executive director of an organization with an *extremely* important artistic director, the focus of that position is not going to be artistic. That was really not my job. There were other opportunities out there—or things I thought that maybe I would want to do. I don't think Misha is ready or has any desire to stop working as hard as he's working. And it's the center that he founded. I think he should be the artistic leader of the organization for as long as he wants to. He has the best instincts in the world and he'll know when it's time for him to stop. He's a man of such integrity. And his judgment is, I think, amazing.

Did you have any artistic input?

Absolutely. And it was encouraged that I participate. But he is the artistic director. Ultimately it was his call. Of course, as it should be.

We talked about the building. What else, artistic or otherwise, are you proud of accomplishing?

I'm very proud of the input I had with the residency program. That's probably what I was most strongly connected to. What's interesting and appropriate for an institution like that is that the resident artists reflect the points of view of the leadership there. So it wasn't about democracy. It

wasn't about giving space to everyone who asked for it at all, and I think you can see that in the roster of artists from year to year. It's such a beautiful space. Those studios are just gorgeous and I think anyone who was ever offered a residency always remarked on what an inspirational place it was. There was something very neutral about it, because it's unadorned really. Big windows, beautiful floors and proportions. There's such a sense of harmony.

Were the residencies in action when you arrived?

Some residencies had been in place and there was a program that involved mentors. So absolutely. But what it became, as a service to the field, was something that we did after I got there.

Could you have programmed Fall for Dance while being the executive director of BAC?

Probably not. I don't think that with the demands of that job I could ever have done a good job as artistic advisor for Fall for Dance. One interesting thing about my ACC appointment is that my continuing with Fall for Dance is of strong interest to them. I'm doing it with their *blessing*, and that's another reason why I think ACC is the perfect place for me to go. They see it as part of my job to remain extremely relevant in the world of working with artists directly.

What are you looking forward to about your job?

The work that they do is so extraordinary and the language that was used very early on—even before it was called the Asian Cultural Council—was so very forward thinking. I'm just struck by how contemporary it all sounds. This idea of not just giving money, but giving money *and* the fulfilling experience around the cash award is so expansive. That also means that it's not the same experience or by boilerplate that each artist is treated, so one artist may benefit from the grant, plus introductions to peers or mentors from another culture. For another artist, it might be one-on-one-collaborative work with a specific artist within his or her field or from another field in

the name of exchange and understanding. They talk about tailor-made programming. While it's still important to give travel money simply to bring an Asian artist to the United States, just coming to the U.S. isn't quite what it used to be because there is so much more access to information. Travel will always be valuable, but now that people have more information, our role at ACC could acknowledge that development.

By expanding something, but you're not sure what?

Yeah. That's one of the things that we're going to work on. And I think the first place to go is the artists. I don't think that we should be telling them what they need, I think we should ask them.

And the ACC serves artists here and there?

Yes. I think the balance has been more toward bringing people from Asia to the U.S. And the wish has been articulated that we expand the program so it would bring American artists and scholars to different parts of Asia. And also to increase interchange among the Asian countries. Culturally they really are...

Different worlds?

They are. With different traditions, sensibilities and levels of understanding. One Asian country can seem as foreign to another Asian country as the U.S.

So what is your priority?

The work that they do is great. It certainly doesn't need to be revolutionized at all. I think steps could be taken to probably introduce efficiencies into the process, to acknowledge that we are now in a digital age. I think all of these things—it really is a matter of working with a team to refine the programming. Perhaps to make the process of applying for a grant simpler, so it's

simpler for applicants and staff.

What was the ACC looking for?

They wanted to deepen the experience for the grantees. They were looking for someone who was informed within the artistic community who might possibly make different kinds of connections for the artists. They talked about enhancing the alumni network so that grantees could talk to other grantees in a somewhat streamlined way. Because this is a new position, I think we're going to figure out together what the needs are and what I can best offer. I have a very peculiar résumé. [Laughs] They might discover that my work elsewhere might be beneficial in an unexpected way. Who knows? It's a very rare opportunity to have a job that's somewhat undefined—it's not completely nebulous. It's not like a blob. That would be awful. There are goals, but how to achieve those goals is what we're going to try to figure out together.

The grantees aren't necessarily Asian, right? It's for artists interested in Asia?

Yes. It's very broad and it really is about sending people and ideas across oceans and continents. That's really what it's about.

You see so many performances where the stage almost looks like a souvenir shop.

I know. I know! Where a country's national show is always shiny and sometimes there's fire in it? [Laughs] That's not what we would encourage.

That's an extreme version, but there are subtler versions, too. You want to encourage rigorous thinking, and that's difficult.

Yes. And I have to remind myself: If the world were full of truly great artists, then our jobs wouldn't be that hard. [Laughs] Honestly, we have our work cut out for us: to find those who think expansively. And what's harder still is to find those people who can't articulate their ideas so well. That's the challenge and the exciting part.

Who are you interested in?

I have ideas about ways in which we might connect artists from Asia to American audiences. I really shouldn't say yet. I will bring a broader knowledge of dance to the table than any other discipline and so I'm very interested in helping to make connections. I think for what I can bring more immediately is that I have a greater experience and knowledge in Western forms and it will be trying to incorporate that in a way that makes sense for the organization. But then also, preservation is part of the work that they do. [I want] to make sure that classical forms are maintained with integrity. I don't think that should ever go away. And then giving a grant to a master I think is also valid. And they may not have the money. They might need a grant to do such a thing.

Does this job mean you have to support Shen Wei?

That's funny. [*Laughs*] It doesn't mean we have to, no.

Let's talk about Fall for Dance: The complete schedule still hasn't been announced, right?

It was just a partial list. We haven't announced specific repertoire, and there are still some gaps that we're close to filling. This is the hard part—trying to find things that make the most programmatic sense. There has to be balance. We have to think about the arc of an evening, and I think the pieces that we're programming this year are somewhat longer. There are subtle shifts that have happened.

It's gotten to be stale for me. I'm not saying it's stale for audiences—I understand its purpose.

Everyone can't love the way it's been programmed or the way it will be programmed going into the future, because the spirit of the festival itself is about inclusiveness. What an interesting process—to program an international festival with a variety of idioms. [We want to] do it sensitively and to try to make it make sense for us.

It's about choosing good works, too. Like anyone needs to see New York City Ballet dance *Red Angels* one more time? I'll see what you do.

You'll see! I was not hired to change Fall for Dance. I would not say that it's formula-based. I will say that. We agreed at the very beginning that we would look at pieces individually and put them where we thought they made sense next to other pieces so that they didn't compete with each other. So you didn't get that artistic whiplash: going from one thing to something else. That just felt like such a non sequitur. We were very careful about that, but we're still moving things around. As things solidify and as we confirm the companies one by one, we have to make sure that it all makes sense for the audience.

There are four pieces on each program?

Yes. It's a lot, and when you have the odd piece that's really not like any of the others, where to put it is a challenge. But it's a good one.

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