



**Age of  
Artists**

Interview

**Jason Beechey**

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The interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy on November 14th, 2014 at the Palucca University of Dance Dresden.

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## Interview

Age of Artists: How did you become an artist?

Jason Beechey: Well, I don't really know if you become an artist. I think it's sort of two things for me: the word artist makes me scared, because I find it's a word that people can very often misuse or they use it as an excuse for things. I think it is also a very sacred word whereas somebody says "I am an artist", it makes me feel like "Wow!". It is a word I tend to avoid as I find it can give people airs: "I am artist therefore I can do whatever I want or I don't have to justify my actions". I find it is a word that can be misinterpreted. From my point of view, I mean especially in dance, people tend to use too much the word "artist", almost to the sense of saying: if you say you are a "dancer" it is not valued but if you say you are an artist it gives you a higher level. I tend to think I want to give more value to the meaning "being a dancer" because I think it is a fine line. When I think of myself: "My name is Jason, I was born and my passion was exploring the body in movement with music, the possibilities and to help other people discover their possibilities". Is it artistic? Possibly, but I think it is more for me about the discovery, the journey, the process. It is probably more scientific

than artistic. Maybe what comes out is artistic but then somebody can say “I like it”, “I don’t like it”, it is objective. Is it artistic? Is it a sport? I think you can look at it from so many aspects. I tend to avoid claiming to be “an artist”. Terms that I find myself using more are like a catalyzer, a facilitator, researching, looking, exploring. For me to say “Art” it is on such a high level, I don’t know if we can reach it!

Age of Artists: How did you decide to become a dancer?

Jason Beechey: That’s the thing, I didn’t. I always did it. I don’t know where it came from. As a kid my parents were just like “where does this come from?” I was just always dancing. And it wasn’t dancing to show other people, it wasn’t dancing because I saw it on the television and I wanted to do it, It wasn’t about being a role or telling a story, I was just always in movement and when I was 7 years old my parents saw an ad in a newspaper “free ballet lessons for boys”. My parents told me “well let’s go!” and I went and I just did it! It was just like a fish in the water. It is like breathing. You don’t think about breathing when you are sleeping, you just do it. So for me I never chose to dance, or it wasn’t like I was forced to do it and one day I realized “Oh! I like it”. For me, it’s in me and that’s what I’ve always done and what I am doing now. The thing in dance is about exploring possibilities. It is about helping other people explore their possibilities, because as a dancer you can only dance with your own body and everybody has its limits, its strengths, and its weak points. From the beginning I was really curious while dancing: “Ok I can do this, but She can do that, but he can’t do that but maybe he can do something more that he doesn’t know or may be if he tries this...”. It is artistic. So for me I see it much more as a research or as a discovery. I mean it is never, and that’s what might be different with other art form, it is never finished.

Age of Artists: What is your working process - from beginning to performance?

Jason Beechey: I think for me personally, because I am not a choreographer, my process is life-long. I think I am on a journey, on a process where I started as a trained dancer and then I had moments where I was on stage and then I have moments where I teach, and now moments here in Palucca. What really inspires me is being able to put all the pieces of the puzzle together, that everybody else can find their journey. So for me, of course, there are steps along the way, but it is a full circle.

Age of Artists: When you remember back, when you were more dancing than today, what was the process then? What were the steps as you prepared for a performance?

Jason Beechey: As a concrete example, I danced for 15 years in Belgium with Frédéric Flamand and every time we would start a specific creative process. We were making a piece, which has a premiere, and there were fixed moments along the journey. We would always sit down with Frédéric and there would be dancers, there would be architects, there would be musicians, and we were all treated as equal, and we would often have between six to nine months to make an evening length work. So we would sit down and Frédéric would have a very clear concept, and then the musicians would have a clear idea about which music, and they would turn to us and say “now you’ve got to bring this to life”. In the beginning it was scary for me, because I had a pure classical ballet education where there is a very clear hierarchy: the choreographers sit to the front of the room, you have to be in a line, you have to do the steps, you do as you are told whereas Frédéric would tell us what steps bring this concept into action. So for me the process was a dialogue between the art-forms, which was very slow, very drawn out but I found it to be very inspiring and they would always say to me: “Jason use your classical technique, use your background”. They would give us ideas from architecture. We worked with architects from Diller Scofidio, they are the architects that made the High line Park in New York. Their idea of architecture is the

space between two people, they don't see the architecture as the walls, and they see it as the space between the people. Therefore they always design space, thinking about how would people move through the space. Does that bring them in contact? Does that separate them...? Then they would say "how could you translate this into dance?" So in a work, with Frédéric, we would have a concept and I would have for myself a clear structure, but I would leave myself a great deal of freedom, where every time we have a performance I would know "when I hear this music I enter, when this person crosses this space, I have to finish". I would have points along the path but every show is different. So for me the actual active performing wasn't performing, I was actually exploring a concept and a process...

Age of Artists: ...While People were watching?

Jason Beechey: Yes, and that is the kind of approach I found missing in the way people were teaching classical ballet, because they would teach the exact opposite. They would say, "here is a position, it has to be this way, that way", and that is feeling of "you'll never be perfect". Then why would we try? So the way I find interesting to teach actually now is to try to see by applying that kind of an approach or process to something like classical ballet, which can very easily be stiff and boring, and be a series of fixed positions, to actually "can you actually bring it alive?" by doing it as something that is living and something that can be different and every time you do it, it can give it a totally different color, flavor, which I think in dance makes probably dance the most fragile art form, because it only lives in the moment that it is actually being done. When you watch dance on a DVD, you're watching something that was recorded whereas when you see dance live, you never know what is going to happen!

Age of Artists: Dance is the art form which has the closest connection to the body.

Jason Beechey: Musicians have instruments, in dance your body is your instrument, so it is completely different. Dance goes way back, even animals dance or have dance-like rituals. Aboriginal dances... they are dancing... it is so rich, it is so fast, and it is so varied. I only explored one little part of that!

Age of Artists: You teach dance to help your students to find their position, their own expressions. How did you find your position?

Jason Beechey: I was very lucky in that I was given the chance to go to some very elite schools. I never had a bad experience like teachers yelling and screaming or abusing you. I was very lucky and I had a broad view. The school I went through in Canada was very different. I had the chance to spend six months at the Vaganova Ballet Academy in Russia and then go straight from there to the school of American Ballet in New York. So it was completely different atmospheres and those atmospheres still influence me today, because they are representative of different mentalities, different epochs, different times, and different cultures. So I think it was really interesting for me to see that. Even today you see dancers, and just looking at their body you know they were trained in this school or that one. Often you can see that they trained in a way that they lose their individuality where they try to fit a mould. If that is a mould that you love and you are inspired by, great! But what I am trying to do here at Palucca is actually what Palucca says "everybody can dance" and everybody has their own dance you just have to let them develop it. I believe, people have their own rhythm, their own heartbeat, their own brain, their own ideas, but I find if you are able to let people explore that while you are doing ballet and contemporary dance it can actually make those other techniques have a whole new relevance.

Age of Artists: So, people need to know how to dance, they need to have a formal education, which is required. They need to have physical abilities that are required. But then on top it is about this individuality, curiosity, experimentation. How do you teach this or

is it just something that people have to display already when they come here?

Jason Beechey: Well, I think the most curious and the most open people are children and they lose it through the education system, because they become scared, they become afraid of making mistakes. When you're permanently told "you're wrong", you lose it. We have a talent scout, so she goes all over Saxony and looks for kids in their sport classes, because our profile is based on ballet, improvisation and contemporary dance, and if you want to give somebody this intense training in those subjects you need a physical suitability, otherwise you get injured. To go on pointe, for the girls, you need a certain amount of flexibility in the foot, in your ankle; otherwise you won't get on pointe. So there are physical abilities that you look at otherwise you would be leading somebody down to a false path, which would be unfair. But then we spend a lot of time with them when they are very young seeing how curious they are. You cannot teach someone to be creative or to be curious but you have to allow them the space to explore on their own. You can give them ideas "Hey, you have got an amazing musician, and when they play, how do you react? How do you bring that into movement?" All over our studios are windows creating transparency and when there is a winter storm or if it's bright sunshine outside it affects their movement qualities. You can influence, but I think it's about sparking people to discover the ideas they have.

Age of Artists: So it is an environment that you create, it is not really teaching creativity or curiosity.

Jason Beechey: No, it is to have an environment also, a controlled and safe environment where people feel and know they are safe enough to take risks. We have small classes. If you would have more people in the room you would hate each other. You have to give an environment where they feel safe to test the balance, the limits, take risks but you know it is not something stupid where

they would hurt themselves. It is a fine balance. We encourage, we are trying to enhance improvisation. In the past and especially in dance, improvisation was like free: “just do whatever you want, everything is wonderful and beautiful”. No. There are techniques for improvisation: Forsythe improvisation technologies. There are many techniques for improvisation, which are developed, and also a lot of dance techniques like classical ballet. It can become so over-controlled that there is no room to be creative. So I think it’s about finding the balance. It’s about how you explore. Some people they audition for us and they’ve got amazing physical abilities and they are not creative, it is not the right place for them. Other people are super creative, but unfortunately the body does not offer them the possibilities that we need to do classical ballet to a professional level. There are 10 professional dance-training institutions in Germany with 10 completely different profiles. It is necessary, because one institution is not better than the other. It is different.

Age of Artists: We talked to other people, also in dance and there is sometimes this notion of impoliteness within a dance company as you train for a performance. Is it true that there is a certain impoliteness when offering critique within a dance company or how would you describe the way of improving through critique?

Jason Beechey: I think you have to give a constructive feedback.

Age of Artists: How does that work in your discipline?

Jason Beechey: Every company is different, every company has a different atmosphere, different directors, they are very different and very subjective. As a dancer, I don’t believe that when people work under fear you will get the best results out of them. I believe you have to enable people to become aware of who they are. I believe you have to give people chances to take responsibility, to assume for themselves, to be autonomous, because I think you see that in fear. The performances that inspire me is when I see

dancers on stage who are thinking, they're aware, they're on top of it, they are proactive. When you see performances where they are all desperately trying to stay in line and they are like little children or they are immature, I don't find this inspiring. Aaron Watkin, who thinks the same, really enforced it at the Semperoper Ballet. If you treat people like adults they act like adults. If you give them responsibilities, you will see who is ready to take it because you have to be mature. I think in the history of dance, and especially in Ballet, it was such a strict hierarchy: like the principal dancers would not speak to the corps de ballet, the corps de ballet should not stand in front of the principals in class and the choreographer sits in front and tells you what to do. Nowadays what I find really interesting is that dancers are able to improvise to build something together. As an example, I would take the nutcracker we made together with Aaron at the Semperoper. We came in and when we started, actually everybody had read the Hoffmann and the Dumas. The kids had studied and they improvised around all of the themes of the music. At the end we built something together where there is freedom so every time you perform it, it is different. Other versions of nutcracker are written in stone, and you always then compare "Oh! Last year was better... She was stronger, he was..." So it depends, I mean, there are many dance companies and school out there but that is sort of the atmosphere that I find the most inspiring.

Age of Artists: Certainly if you lead a dance company or now you lead this institution, there is an aspect of leadership. How would you describe your leadership style?

Jason Beechey: If I describe myself as a leader, I am somebody who is very patient, I have got a lot of diplomacy, I have clear ideas but I like to surround myself with a team of really competent people who also share my ideas, goals and vision. Nevertheless, I want to have people who are willing to accept responsibilities, who are willing to stick their neck out, and make suggestions. My leadership scares some people because for some people it is much

easier to have a dictator who tells you “shut up, do this, do that”. But I don’t find that brings an inspiring atmosphere, so I have an open door policy. As a leader I try to be as accessible as possible. I try to treat every single person with as much respect as I can. I believe, it was always my dream to lead a school. I never wanted to run a dance company. That was always my dream but it wasn’t a leadership position to have the power, it was because I always felt that I had the capacity to organize. In my whole life I only had 3 jobs and like with Frédéric in Belgium, we all felt like we were our own bosses in a way: we had a lot of freedom and we also had a lot of responsibilities.

Age of Artists: And still be part of a team. It was both at the same time.

Jason Beechey: Exactly.

Age of Artists: What is your attitude as a dancer?

Jason Beechey: If I think about my time as a dancer, like the people from my time as a dancer who have the most influence on my mentality and philosophy now, it is very easy. It is Francia Russell, who was the founding artistic director with her husband Kent Stowell of Pacific Northwest Ballet School in Seattle, Washington. They built from nothing into one of the leading dance companies in America and I saw in her - I had much more contact with her than with Kent - somebody who was always extremely elegant, well thought, well mannered, respectful but worked like a dog to build something. She wasn’t afraid by any aspect of the job itself but not because she wanted to, but because she had to build something! My teacher in New York at the school of American Ballet, Stanley Williams, had a special philosophy by composing huge groups of boys in his class and he gave almost no individual corrections. He would just come into class and say “OK boys, do this, do this, do this” and he would say “No, no, no, no just try”. And I think after working with him for years every day, it was maybe 10 or 15 years

later that, I would realize “Oh! Now I get what he was trying to get in the studio!”, but in his class you felt just like he would say “I don’t need to say anything. All the corrections are in the material I am giving you and if you can figure out, you have learned to think for yourself”. So he wouldn’t sit on top of you and shout at you “NO, it’s wrong, do it again!”, he would just say “try again, try again. Why? Think about it!” and you were like “I don’t get it” but years later it would click and things fall into place!

Age of Artists: How was that experience at that time? I mean if you get the benefits 10 years later, I assume you must have had some doubts throughout the process.

Jason Beechey: I didn’t doubt it. You knew you were experiencing something that was so incredible and so unique that it would stay with you for the rest of your life.

Age of Artists: So it wasn’t specific at that time, but still highly relevant?

Jason Beechey: Yes, you didn’t understand it but you knew you have to be there. He would just walk into the room and you could hear a pin drop. You knew you were in his presence and experiencing something that was just so valuable, you just wanted to understand it. So that had a big influence, because he would teach in a way that gives you the room and the freedom so that you had to figure it out. And then I worked with Steven Petronio, a choreographer from New York when I was in Belgium. I had never done contemporary dance and as a dancer I was somebody very tiny. I am very small but I was extremely flexible like a rubber band but I had trouble jumping because I was so like spaghetti, it was hard for me to jump. Steven came in to work with a theme and said “Jason, you are going to do the big jumping solo” and I looked at him and I said “I think you picked the wrong person” and he said to me “No, you’ve got an amazing jump, you just don’t know it yet”. And so we worked on all of these release techniques that one day all

clicked into place and I could jump like a gazelle and then I realized this is what all of my other teachers had been trying to get me to learn but it never had clicked for me yet. And doing these techniques in contemporary dance my ballet techniques improved by like a hundred times. That's what happened for me and then all the concepts from Stanley Williams in New York made sense. And then Frédéric Flamand, where I worked for 15 years in Belgium, was very respectful. We were all equal partners and there was no hierarchy. Those are the people who had and who have the biggest influence on the way I lead and develop.

Age of Artists: There is a word, which we often come across: resilience. If you look now at your life journey so far, was there a lot of resilience required?

Jason Beechey: Well, I have to say I am incredibly lucky. I came from a family, who supported my desire to dance. We were always able to make ends meet. I have been extremely lucky. But at the same time, when you think back, what other professions do you get up every morning and have to start with one hour and a half of training? It is a lot of hard work, it is a lot of pushing and pushing, and trying, and challenging and re-questioning, but when you are living your passion it is not work, you're living your passion, so I am really lucky.

Age of Artists: So in this sense, life and work is just one, there is not distinction in between the two?

Jason Beechey: I have never felt like I've worked! I am just doing my passion, like I couldn't imagine living without dance!

Age of Artists: You talked about the fact that for creativity there is curiosity required, and that you experiment and improvise and so on, but is there a special level of empathy that you think dancers have that goes beyond what other people in other disciplines, like in business or science have?

Jason Beechey: Well, it is hard to say because I have never worked in another profession. So all of my closest friends and colleagues are all as passionate as I am about dance. So my inner circle is very much on the same wavelength as I am. I think that an emotional connection is something you can't force. You can't make it happen. Emotions can be extremely negative, extremely helpful, extremely upsetting, they can make people nervous. I think everybody has emotions and you never know what is inside somebody else's mind. The person who you might think is the most stable person can be completely unstable or people who have a facade of being under control but inside they are not. I think you can't really tell. You can make emotions or you can tell when emotions are fake, but you can't read what a person's thoughts are. I mean, of course, when I danced, I did not dance for the public. For me it never felt different like when I was in the studio. In the studio you're exploring something and when I was on stage you are exploring something. Sometimes of course, because there was a public there, it would give you new impulses but you still had to remain present in the moment, you could not just freak out and say "I am on stage, they are watching me, HELP!", no, you had to stay involved in the present.

Age of Artists: In one interview you said best ideas come to you when you are asleep. What importance do you give to the subconscious?

Jason Beechey: A lot. I mean I think for me, my best ideas came to me when I was asleep. You wake up in the morning and you are like "That's it! We need to do this, now!" You are having a shower and a light goes on. If ideas usually come to me, in those unconscious moments, and if I have to spend hours and hours and hours thinking about planning it, it is not going to be one of my best ideas.

Age of Artists: Which means that your students if they work on something, they should have a night to sleep over it and start again?

Jason Beechey: Yes, because I think that process is different for everybody. As a child in school I was always criticized, because I was always very fast. I would give an answer every time like “- What do you think? - Here, boom” and then they would say “slow down, think about it”. That would lead to all these endless group discussions and at the end they come right back very often to the idea I said in the beginning. And I was like “Hello?”. I was often criticized because they felt I was too fast. Some of the best ideas just came spontaneously and unexpectedly. Sometimes when you plan everything and then it is so boring or it is a flop. I think you have to make room that things can actually take flight on their own. That was something that always inspired me. It was actually the challenge of building something from scratch. I love that, developing something new, something else... And then sometimes you would look back and say “Oh! I didn’t realize how much work it would have been if I would not have done it” and then I think to myself “well thank god I did not know how much work it would have been” cause then...

Age of Artists: ...thank god that you did not plan in detail...?

Jason Beechey: ...Exactly! You have to have your “fil conducteur” (French expression referring to “central thread”), you have to know where you want to go but if you plan every step of the way it is boring!

Age of Artists: What do you think business as science could learn from dance?

Jason Beechey: Well I think it is interesting because I consider dance as a field way behind is so many ways. Choreographers today are really inspired, Wayne McGregor for instance, by all the

work been done in neuroscience, how all the connections function in the brain and things like this. I think dance is just in a moment now where we are beginning to realize that you can learn a lot more from science. For instance to know when your body is more fit, when you are in better shape, so that you have a better understanding and you can actually be more creative. But I would hope that businesses could learn from dance. Somebody told me, maybe it's not true, that they reached a point now in computer technology that there were things that computers can't process and learn because they can't dance. You can program computers to move but they actually can't dance. I think there is probably a lot more information in live bodies. I just hope that dance as an art form can be valued and recognized as a serious body of knowledge. It is not just dancing because it makes you feel good.

Age of Artists: There is an interesting article I read recently, which was about a scientific conference and there was a party with music. People started to dance and the author noted nobody knew how to move because they all think that the body is only there to carry the brain. This is the kind of connection between mind and body which many people just discard because they just think it is not required.

Jason Beechey: And I think usually in those kinds of situations, it's after they have actually let their hair down and danced that the best ideas come out.