



Liz Lerman
brings her
creative process
to Scripps

By Holly Myers

Photo courtesy of Teresa Wood/Arena Stage



Wicked Bodies



Photo: Julie Wiatt

The choreographer Liz Lerman told a story when she spoke at Scripps College in February of this year. In fact, she told a lot of stories—she tends to speak in stories, just as she tends to work and to create and, probably, to think in stories. This particular story concerned a former naval commander called John, whom she'd met while teaching dance at the Roosevelt Hotel for Senior Citizens in Washington, D.C.

She'd approached the Roosevelt in 1975, when she was in her mid-20s, in the hope of recruiting seniors to perform in a piece she had begun to develop with her new dance company that dealt with the recent death of her mother, and she stayed for 10 years, well beyond the production of that piece, leading classes for \$5 a week. She formed another company with a group of her students there—Dancers of the Third Age, they called themselves—that toured other senior centers and schools, performing dances based on the lives of its members. One of these, drawn from the life of a lumberman, involved a row of dancers, including John, falling like trees when the lumberman called, "Timber!" The school kids loved it—they couldn't get enough of the old people falling.

“After we were performing this for about a month,” Lerman said, “this guy, John, the naval commander, comes up to me after the show and he says, ‘Liz, I want you to know I took a bath.’” Perched on a stool on stage, now a spry 70 herself in a black blazer, blue jeans, and high-heeled boots, she raised her hands at this and shrugged. “I said, ‘Good.’ But he repeated himself—and I have to say, I was beginning to learn that if I just listened long enough, all kinds of things would come up that I didn’t know, so I waited him out. And then he said, ‘OK, I just want you to know that for the last few years I’ve only been able to shower. But since I’ve been falling like that tree, I can get in and out of the tub now.’”

She paused here with an expression of sudden solemnity. “Pretty interesting, huh? This is a guy who would *never* go to therapy—forget it. Would rather stand in a shower all his life than go to therapy and learn how to get up and down off the ground. But being a tree in his friend’s story reenacts some deep, deep communal thing that allows his body to completely change. This is when I’m starting to realize that actually, all these skills that we’ve been amassing in technique classes and all these skills we’ve been amassing in our art classes—we’re only sharing one teeny tiny bit of that when we’re doing our performances and we’re missing, like, all the rest of it. How crazy is that?”

Lerman came to Scripps for several days as part of a residency that will extend through the fall, designed to support the development of a work in progress called *Wicked Bodies*. In addition to the lecture, she’d spent a day with the students from dance professor Suchi Branfman’s *Choreographing Women’s Lives* class and met with faculty members from a variety of disciplines, individually as well as in a day-long workshop exploring themes related to the current project. In October, she’ll return with several collaborators for a week-long visit that will include a public event in downtown Los Angeles and a presentation on campus of the work in progress.

This is not the first time she’s told John’s story, though it has a burnished rather than a tired feel in her telling, as though she’s considered its import again and again, brought it out in any number of contexts to hold it up to a new light. Lerman’s experience

with the seniors at the Roosevelt would have a profound effect on the course of her career, informing her longstanding commitment to narrative and laying the foundation for a radically inclusive approach to her craft. Though perhaps best known for her inclusion of elderly dancers—or, more broadly, for her blurring of generational boundaries on stage—Lerman has gone on to collaborate with a wide range of individuals and groups, including scientists, foresters, ship builders, construction workers, city planners, human rights lawyers, actors, and artists, among others.

The story points to something else as well, beyond the power of bridging social divides—something fundamental to Lerman’s understanding of art: a recognition of the multidimensionality of the creative process. The value of art doesn’t exist solely on a stage for the sake of an audience; it’s there in some form every step of the way, from the first conception of a piece to the final curtain and beyond. Artists know this, of course: it’s their daily reality. And indeed, if there’s anything that’s shaped the art of all fields over the last 100 years—dance, music, visual art, literature—it is a fascination, sometimes an obsession, with process. Nor is this value solely aesthetic. Art is full of practical knowledge—how to get up and down off the floor, for instance—as well as tools of an organizational, social, or emotional nature.

Much of the brilliance of Lerman’s work stems from her habit of tipping these sorts of traditional hierarchies—product/process, artist/audience, aesthetic/practical—onto the horizontal plane, as she puts it. Growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, her father was a labor organizer, her mother a lover of art in the modernist mode who extolled the virtues of isolation and sacrifice in the name of creativity, and Lerman, in many ways, split the difference, insisting in her own work on both social engagement and artistic merit, the Roosevelt Hotel and the concert hall, though she’s spent much of her career defending the one against the other.

As she demanded in her lecture: “Why would I want to choose? What an impoverished way of thinking that my society would expect me to choose between those two worlds. It seemed completely stupid to me, since they both were so important, so powerful, so challenging, and they fed each other every

day.” From there, it is easy to see how the other dichotomies might fall like dominoes. Why choose between process and product? Between the private, profound experience of artmaking and the public joys of a completed work? Why choose between artistic knowledge and worldly knowledge? Between the trained dancer and the naval commander?

“I have been extremely impressed by the way Lerman has been able to connect people with dance across age, across occupation, across areas of interest,” says Ronnie Brosterman, chair of the dance department at Scripps. “She has the ability to unite people in the process of understanding a topic through movement by making everybody feel comfortable and acknowledging that everyone has something to contribute to a deeper understanding of whatever the topic is. That’s why I wanted to get her out here, because as a liberal arts college we are looking at ways of bridging disciplines and trying to value a range of perspectives. She is someone who has shown that she can do that.”

Corrina Lesser, Scripps’ director of public events and community programs, the department responsible for bringing Lerman, echoes this sentiment. While the College strives to bring visiting scholars and activists whose work speaks to the urgency of the moment, Lesser says, such as Black Lives Matter cofounder Opal Tometi, who spoke at Scripps in March, she adds: “It also feels important to bring people who have made this their life’s work. I see Liz’s visit as part of the ongoing conversation that we’re hoping to help facilitate here around women’s leadership and social justice and activism and what that looks like as a lifelong pursuit.”

In 1976, the year after completing the dance about her mother, Lerman founded the Dance Exchange, a company now known for innovative works that bridge concert dance and community activism, often combining professional and nonprofessional dancers and employing nontraditional venues. (Dancers of the Third Age merged with the Dance Exchange in 1993.) Lerman ran the



Photo courtesy of Teresa Wood/Arena Stage

Dance Exchange for more than 30 years, creating and performing dances on a remarkably wide-ranging assortment of topics—baseball, bonsai, nuclear war, Russian history, defense budget documents, prayer, immigration, the Underground Railroad, Charles Darwin, the genome, and the origins of the universe, to name just a few—in venues all around the world.

In the 1990s, frustrated by what she saw as an abrasive and often counterproductive tradition of critique in the dance world, she developed what she calls the Critical Response Process, a system for the orchestration of creative feedback now widely utilized not only in dance but in theater, performance, writing groups, and arts education. The system assigns participants one of three roles—artist, responder, and facilitator—and leads them through a four-step process intended to help elucidate the effects of a given piece while avoiding both empty praise and defense-inducing negativity. Though geared to a specific aspect of creative production—

feedback—and intended to be used as a concrete tool, the system is nonetheless emblematic of Lerman's general philosophy, rooted as it is in the constructive exchange of knowledge and experience.

Lerman handed the reins of the Dance Exchange over to a longtime member of the company, Cassie Meador, in 2011. Since then, she has gone on to pursue a no-less-ambitious range of projects independently. From 2011 to 2013, she collaborated with fellow choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar on a sprawling project about racism and economic inequality that encompassed prayer breakfasts, workshops, teacher trainings, panels, and cabarets in addition to stage performances. The following year, she worked with veterans—including one amputee who went on to perform with the dancers—to produce *Healing Wars*, a meditation on wartime trauma. She's received countless honors for this work over the years, including a MacArthur Grant in 2002, a United States Artists Fellowship in 2011, and an American Dance Guild Lifetime



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Achievement Award in 2015. In 2016, she became the first institute professor at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University, where she is now based.

The topic Lerman has been exploring lately is witches. *Wicked Bodies*, her current project, considers the figure of the witch in all its many facets and ramifications across cultures. The seeds of the project were planted in 2013, when Lerman encountered the exhibition *Witches and Wicked Bodies*, a survey of images of European witchcraft from the 15th century to the present day, at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. The works depict women in all manner of fearsome, monstrous, potent, and tormented incarnations. “I was shocked,” Lerman says now of her visit to the show. “I couldn’t get over it. I mean, room after room. The pictures are pornographic, symbolic, grotesque. And not just old women, although I’d say a preponderance of the women were old—but voluptuous young women too, breasts out to here.” She left asking herself: “What is the persistence of this imagery?” Later she met with the curator, Deanna Petherbridge, whose extensive personal collection of material—including works deemed too “horrific” to even be included in the show—only deepened Lerman’s fascination. “She met me at the door,” Lerman recounts of Petherbridge, “and she said, ‘Now Liz, it’s really not five hundred years of witches. It’s five hundred years of misogyny.’ But the museums wouldn’t let her use the word!”

To speak with Lerman about the project today is to step into a whirlwind of ideas, all freely shared. She’s thinking about fairy tales and healing and the natural world, about trauma and fear and the role of the state in the sanctioned torture and execution of women. She’s thinking about voodoo, gender, the church, and botany. She’s thinking about the fairies who blessed (and cursed) the birth of *Sleeping Beauty*, the water that terrified the *Wicked Witch of the West*, and the animals—called imps—that were presumed to associate with witches, whose appearance in the presence of a suspected witch could be enough in itself to condemn her. (She names them off: “A cat, a dog, a flea, a toad, a frog, a mouse, a crow, a raven—it’s just a list of every living thing

Page 22–23:
Tamara Hurwitz Pullman and ensemble in *Healing Wars*, 2014

Page 24:
Liz Lerman and Thelma Tulane in *RSVP*, 1979

Page 26–27:
Keith Thompson and Navy veteran Paul Hurley in *Healing Wars*, 2014

Page 28:
Liz Lerman (bottom left, with arms extended) leads Scripps faculty, staff, and students in a daylong symposium for *Wicked Bodies*, 2018

Page 31:
Sarah Levitt and Ben Wegman in *The Matter of Origins*, 2010

As in all her work, she's thinking about power and representation, about who has the right to tell whose story. And she's drawing on the knowledge of others, from scholars and musicians to biologists and natural historians. She's looking beyond the academic sphere as well. "I'm very interested in who becomes witches," she says. "In most of the fairy tales across cultures, they're widows, they're stepmothers, they're troubled girls. So I'm hoping to work in those communities, have a widows and stepmothers and troubled girls group, and see what we can make together."

The workshop with faculty members held at Scripps in February was typical of Lerman's approach to information gathering. Fresh from a visit to the Denison Library's Witches and Healing archive, Lerman sat with participants in a circle of chairs on a stage while faculty from across disciplines presented material on a range of issues she saw as related to the project, including the subversive self (subject of a Core II course taught at Scripps by Assistant Professor of English Michelle Decker and Assistant Professor of Africana Studies Maryan Soliman), women and criminalization, and disability in prison. She didn't lead the discussion, for the most part, but sat at the same level as everyone else in the circle, listening more often than talking and quietly taking notes.

"Her presence is distinct and clear and open," says Kevin Williamson, assistant professor of dance at Scripps, who participated in the event. "She really invites people into a space to contribute their thoughts, talents, and ideas. It was a thoughtful and easeful day, though we were approaching some big and difficult subject matter. She's very fluid and open to improvisation and moving ideas critically, not just intellectually but in the body."

Lerman's mode of working is not easy. It's labor intensive and logistically complicated, demanding people skills and patience as well as vision. It takes both broad-mindedness and discrimination, receptivity and assertion. Its goals are open ended and its success not always easy to measure. One person who's observed Lerman's methods at close range, collaborating on various aspects of the *Wicked Bodies* project, is Martha Gonzalez, assistant professor of Chicana/o

Latina/o studies at Scripps as well as a singer/songwriter and percussionist for the Grammy-winning band Quetzal. Gonzalez met Lerman while on a residency of her own at ASU.

"If we look at this work as generating a value that is process-based, or evaluate it via process, then it never fails," Gonzalez says. It's always producing. But such an evaluation is not always possible. "All these systems, from grant makers to institutions—they want results, they want numbers, they want all these different outcomes. The ways that we're accustomed to measuring success. To keep moving forward you have to at some point present something"—as in, a finished piece—"but honestly it's almost a misrepresentation of the lifelong work it takes to keep these things going."

Ultimately, Lerman's work demands broad-mindedness in its reception as well as its creation, insofar as it asks us to consider art as a multidimensional force: not solely a means to an end—nor solely a means—but both. *Wicked Bodies* will find its way to the stage over the next few years, and the performance will very likely be stunning. But the performance is not wholly the point.

"I don't think we have a system in place in the Western paradigm to really address the kinds of work that people like Liz Lerman have set in motion," Gonzalez says. "We don't have the tools to really know what that means in the long term. Of course she's been awarded, she's had things presented in all of these amazing places, and her work is being spoken about. But I think the real value lies in the legacy of what it's instilled in all these different people who were affected, not just by the performance, as audience members, but the people who took part, the people who were stimulated by the conversations, the kinds of things it might have sparked in them. That kind of stuff isn't always quantifiable." ❁



Photo courtesy of Dance Exchange

