

A moving career

By Carrie Seidman, Herald-Tribune
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From left, Ladd, DeNaya Wilkerson, Jahrel Thompson and Toniann Rizzo create a "living still life" based on copies of works by Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso that are part of an exhibition at the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg. Herald-Tribune staff photo by Thomas Bender)

Noises filter out of the rehearsal hall — moans, chirps, screeches, murmurs.

Inside, scattered objects lie on the floor — a metal ladle, an artificial apple, an aluminum bucket, a blue plastic funnel.

Eliza Ladd prompts the dancers of Fuzión Dance Artists in language simple and down to earth: Choose an object. Move your object so it makes a sound. Follow the action with your eyes. Vocalize the journey. Row. Rock. Drag. Circle. Flock. Freeze.

"Dali was into synesthesia," says Ladd, referring to Surrealist painter and the neurological phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to an automatic, involuntary experience in a second. "We can actually get to the underbelly of the unconscious just by letting ourselves go there."

Ladd, a movement coach at the Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training, is leading a rehearsal for a one-time performance at the Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg Jan. 24 she is co-directing with Fuzión Director Leymis Bolaños-Wilmott. The performance is meant to be a response to the museum's landmark exhibit, "Picasso/Dalí, Dalí Picasso," featuring work from the two renowned artists brought together for the first time.



Eliza Ladd, a movement coach at the Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training, leads the dancers of Fuzión Dance Artists in an improvisational exercise in preparing for an upcoming performance at the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg. HT photo by Thomas Bender

Synesthesia may be the desired result, but the methods Ladd uses to extract the dancers' responses are of her own making. She calls the process "Live Sound Action," a form she says is rooted in sculpture and percussion, in which theater arises out of deep sense of play involving a performer, object, space and time.

On her website (elizaladd.com), Ladd calls herself, variously, a singer, a dancer, an actor and a creator of original theater; in person, she simply says she is a "theater maker."

"I work in the realms of movement, sound, words and the visual in a live arena," she explains. "And yes, sometimes I wish I were a table maker — it would be easier to explain. But I'm no longer plagued by doubts of what I'm doing. It's clear to me now, and now I can spend the rest of my life making it clear to everyone else."

From athlete to artist

Ladd grew up in New York City, the youngest of three in a privileged family, her father, a lawyer, her mother a linguist and public school educator. As a child she dabbled in theater, but as a natural athlete, she gravitated toward basketball and soccer. She also played the guitar and piano, and fiddled around with a drum kit.

At Harvard, she studied sculpture and took a year off to travel on a 'round-the-world flight pass, feeding her exploratory spirit and bolstering her sense of independence. But she graduated in 1989 with a degree in comparative religion, which she chose not as a means to an end but a way to study "how humans behave based on what we believe in."

"I never went to college with the mindset of 'I'll get my degree and then I'll do this,'" she says.

Consequently, after graduation, she drifted. She worked for a brief time at a foundation, taught at a school for kids who didn't fit into a regular school system, studied the Brazilian martial art Capoeira, and learned to play the African drum.

Eventually she fell into the downtown NYC post-modern dance scene, studied a technique known as Body Dynamics which is focused on releasing inhibitions, and began to create her own "devised theater" work, a form where the script originates not from a writer, but from collaborative, usually improvisatory, work by a group of people.

At Naropa University, a school founded by a Buddhist, she studied with a discipline of Merce Cunningham and earned a master's degree in theatre and contemporary performance. There she created "Elephants and Gold," a piece about the poaching of elephants and the end of a species, which won the Audience Encore Award at the Boulder International Fringe Festival in 2007.

Vincent DeGeorge, who is a performer and professor of theater at the University of Cincinnati, worked on a later iteration of "Elephants" with Ladd. He is an admirer of the independence of her voice and her commitment to collaboration.

"What I love about her is that she's immersive," says DeGeorge. "She's an amazing guide and leader and she creates space to work in that is physical, musical and textural and relies heavily on the ensemble to help create the piece."

DeGeorge also appreciates that Ladd is "crazy daring."

"Without being shocking or graphic, she just does courageous work," he says. "She's not making things up, she's actually getting to things that are elemental — to that 'of course' moment we can all connect to, even though we've lost the connection. But she does it in a really concrete way. Her work is really grounded."

Moving to Sarasota

Ladd, who is 48 and never-married — she's turned down two proposals, one from a man, the other a woman — came to Sarasota for what was to be a one year residency at the Asolo in April 2014. Last fall, she was offered a permanent position as an instructor of Movement for the Actor and Dance and decided to remain here "for the foreseeable future," leasing out her residence in New York City.

As a teacher, she has the ability to push students beyond their comfort zones, but in a way that is concrete and comprehensible, says Fuzión's Bolaños-Wilmott.

"It's very accessible," she says. "She gives them direction, but she's also stretching them."

Isabelle Bigelow, a classmate of Ladd's at Harvard, says it is Ladd's "special connection with the deepest part of being human" that makes her effective not only as a performer, but as an instructor.

"The things that seem to be opposite, are together in her," says Bigelow, a New York painter. "She's really powerful, but you feel her vulnerability at the same time — the humor and the despair, the primal, but also the very of the moment. So many people block off sections of the things that scare us or we're not confident about. Her ability to hold all those angles at the same time just radiates and it's why she's so magnetic."

Ladd's teaching goals are two-fold: to "free the instrument" (i.e., the body, voice and mind) and to allow the development of fluent creative expression. The first, she says, is a clearing-away process that allows the body an openness to listen and receive; the second cultivates an ability to respond in a range of expressive forms.

For example, "Live Sound Action" includes a progression of exercises that engage a performer in ordinary actions with ordinary objects — like dragging, washing, or digging with buckets, stones or sticks. Impulse, instinct and emotion, as well as the shape, sound and touch, all influence the unfolding story telling.

Bolaños-Wilmott, who approached Ladd last year to collaborate on the Dalí/Picasso project, says the experience of working with her has been exactly what she was seeking for her company dancers.

"What I want for my dancers is to be able to train the whole instrument, physicalizing everything," says Fuzión's director. "Not just bodies moving, but exercising the voice, the theatrical aspect, even the surreal aspect of it. Even though she's also movement-oriented, she's coming in with a different approach."

Over the course of a series of rehearsals, Ladd and Bolaños-Wilmott — with color copies of Dalí and Picasso paintings laid out nearby — have led the dancers through improvisations prompted by suggestions or deconstructions of the visual art works.

At one point, with guidance from Ladd, the dancers create impromptu "still lives" meant to capture the artists' Zeitgeist. In order to remember them for subsequent rehearsals, Ladd gives them names based on the shapes and sounds, revealing a sharp wit and sense of humor: "Soup Murder." "Birdsong." "Rose Toreador."

The improvisations will feed into a performance that will have structure, but also an opportunity for the individual artists to interpret in the moment.

Bolaños-Wilmott, who generally directs alone, has welcomed the opportunity to share the responsibility and decision-making.

"For me, it's been really organic with Eliza," Bolaños-Wilmott says. "It's play and, as artists, we sometimes forget to do that. It's allowing for us to explore and create and make that the focus, rather than the end result. We're allowing it to evolve and we're both at peace with that."

A return to the performance arena

Ladd is also developing a solo work she will present at the inaugural SaraSolo2015 Festival in February, her first public performance since coming to Florida last year. "Oh Let Me Just Be the Greek Whore That I Am — A Comedy About Death," is the evolution of a previous one-woman show she did at the United Solo Festival in New York and the Berkshire Fringe Festival in Massachusetts in 2013 called "on ést déshabillé — a comedy about death."

"I'm rooted in sort of an animal thing, but the edge I'm on now is integrating the primal and the intellectual," says Ladd, who is also an avid student of Shakespeare. "Because as much as I love the body, I also love the intellect and wit and thought."

Ladd's creative process, which she calls "Live Sound Action," involves "working aural, visual and physical images with objects that might spark a larger image or response." / HT photo by Thomas Bender

In the end, her work and her performances are motivated not by ego or a need for self-expression but a desire to explore the human capacity for relation from a multitude of directions, she says.

"There's such a need for movement-based embodied theater with each other, because we need it even though it terrifies us," she says. "It's such a needed way of communicating and being with each other."