

Distanced

With theaters dark due to COVID-19, choreographer Ann Carlson's focus on the art of social sculpture connects the community and brings back live performance safely.

BY **TONIA LYNN BARBER**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TATIANA WILLS**

Dancing

SHERMAN OAKS IS NOT THE FIRST place that comes to mind when looking for cutting-edge postmodern dance, yet parked at the end of a suburban cul-de-sac on a hot evening in early September, interdisciplinary artist and acclaimed choreographer Ann Carlson is filling up the back of her silver Toyota Tacoma pickup with dried leaves, prepping for the performance to come. Homeowner, host and visual artist Suzanne Erickson sets up seating in the street facing the back of the truck, which is framed by California redwoods and a freestanding neighborhood basketball hoop. Audience members mingle, physically distanced with masks, while Carlson assists soloist Ros Warby with tying her costume, a simple one-armed red wing.

Reinventing dance in unexpected and unusual spaces is at the core of Carlson's new work, "Truck Dances." Having developed her choreographic voice on the shoulders of the Judson Dance Theater—a 1960s postmodern dance collective in New York that included the likes of painter Robert Rauschenberg, conceptual artists Robert Morris and Andy Warhol and choreographers Merce Cunningham, Simone Forti and Anna Halprin—Carlson believes dance is all conscious movement. "For me, this is an ever-expanding frame for what dance is and who gets to participate," she says. Carlson was exposed to this idea early on, when she was about 12 and attended a lecture by American modern dance pioneer Murray Louis. "He started to





Soloist Ros Warby performs a Truck Dance
choreographed by Ann Carlson.



very simply break down the elements of dance—space, time, quality of motion—and then said, ‘Once you know these things, you can dance doing anything, even washing the dishes,’” recalls Carlson. “A little light bulb went off in my head. My chore at home was doing the dishes at the time, so the next day I put his ideas into action and did my own ‘dishwashing dance.’” It was a crystallizing moment for the choreographer. “I think it shifted the practice and experience of dance for me from being externally referenced to internally referenced.” Carlson has also been influenced by German painter, sculptor and performance artist Joseph Beuys’s 1974 piece “I Like America and America Likes Me” and the idea that social sculpture, an artwork in which anyone can be involved, has an impact on community. “So bringing the performance to the people democratizes dance, making it available to all,” she says.

Carlson, a recipient of the Doris Duke Artist Award, the Creative Capital Award and the CalArts’s Herb Alpert Award, has built a career out of bringing her dances to the people. She has created dance portraits of animals, toddlers, nuns, gardeners, basketball players and even lawyers. “I started making work for people that I would encounter, people who were of the same profession or community or a shared passion,” she says. “Twenty-five years later, those same lawyers who performed the dance we created will be performing it at the wedding of one of their daughters this year.” Carlson points to this example when referring to social sculpture. “It is consciously interweaving the landscape between art and life, so meaningful impact can inspire generations to come,” she explains.

It was this approach that attracted Warby to Carlson’s “Truck Dances.” Of her own dance practice, Warby says, “Since my twenties, I’ve been involved in a sort of improvisational practice, like a spontaneous composition within the construct of a clearly defined structure.” Having performed in big productions in Australia before making her home in Los Angeles nine years ago, Warby decided to strip away the elements of music, film and production and create performance only in silence. “I noticed that my attention on the dance actually came last, and I wanted to give focus to the intelligence of the body,” she says.

Warby first met Carlson five years ago through Warby’s life partner, UCLA’s Center for the Art of Performance Executive and Artistic Director Kristy Edmunds, who at the time was presenting Carlson’s work “The Symphonic Body,” a large-scale

piece performed by 100 diverse campus employees. Carlson and Warby developed a friendship while teaching dance at UCLA but had never worked together until COVID-19 hit. “Early on during the virus, we decided that Ann would come have Sunday dinners with us,” says Warby. We are a family of four, and she is living alone, and it made sense to us. We would social distance and have dinner out in the backyard.” It was during one of those dinners that Carlson first asked Warby if she would consider collaborating on

one of the “Truck Dances.” “I hadn’t worked with another choreographer other than Deborah Hay for 25 years,” Warby explains, “but our friendship history got us through.” And while “getting through” is what most of us can understand about juggling the daily pandemic protocols, “getting through” for Carlson and Warby meant spending five hot weeks rehearsing in Warby’s driveway, with Warby wearing a mask and Carlson sitting in a chair, physically distanced, giving direction.

Carlson says at first she found herself at a loss and not sure of how to move forward when they started the piece. “All my commissions had been cancelled. I was thinking a lot about the pandemic death toll. Then I started thinking about how birds are the closest messengers to the other side, and once I get something in my mind, it haunts me until I make it happen,” she says. Thus the one-winged bird woman truck dance was conceived. It is now one of four “Truck Dances” that Carlson has created. She offers to any individuals who reach out to her via Instagram direct message the opportunity to host intimate performances of these dances in their own private yards. “The pieces are really meant for a smaller size audience,” Carlson says, gesturing towards the collection of nine white stools set up in the cul-de-sac for the evening’s performance. Unlike most choreographers, Carlson has a history of allowing her performance pieces to determine the size and curation of their audiences rather than always striving to increase the number of people who see her

work. “This wouldn’t even work in a theater really,” she explains.

As the sun sets in Sherman Oaks, in lieu of theatre lights, Carlson asks the audience members to take their seats and close their eyes for the preset. There is a collective moment of silence, almost an impromptu acknowledgment for those we have lost. Carlson tiptoes to the middle of the “stage” and quietly lowers the tailgate to reveal Warby lying on her side. The audience members open their eyes to see a bright red wing ascending.

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