

## *The Symphonic Body*

By Ann Carlson

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*The Symphonic Body* is a performance made entirely of gestures. It is a movement-based orchestral work performed by people gathered together by a common workplace, locale, or theme. Instead of instruments, individuals in this orchestra perform gestural portraits based on the motions they use every day.

To build this project, choreographer Ann Carlson becomes an “embedded artist” in each location. Through a process of observation and interview, Carlson works one-on-one with each participant to build a choreographed portrait from the movements they do everyday. (During this time of covid, it is possible to begin the one-on-one time with Carlson virtually.) The individual portraits ultimately knit together in real time as Carlson “conducts” rehearsals and the culminating performances live. The movement-based “music” that makes up *The Symphonic Body* results in a blend of unwitting everyday gestures transformed into a kind of dance. The building of the portraits becomes an experience of being witnessed and seen. The public performance of these portraits underscores the power and presence of the individual in relation to community. By engaging with this choreographic performance practice, participants (performers and audience members alike) come together in concert to expand, renew, and re-experience the artistry embedded in the everyday.

To date there have been six iterations of *The Symphonic Body*. At the Bing Concert Hall in Palo Alto, CA, 89 members from across Stanford University’s campus gathered to perform the premiere in June, 2013. Commissioned by the Stanford Institute of the Arts and the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, this *Symphonic Body* reflected individuals from all aspects of Stanford’s laboring populations: from the students to tree trimmers, the volleyball team to the Dean of the medical school. For many participants, it was the first time they had ever been inside a theater.

Royce Hall in Los Angeles CA was the site of the second iteration. *The Symphonic Body/UCLA* gathered 94 individuals from far flung corners of the immense campus to perform together in November, 2015. This staging was commissioned by UCLA’s Center for the Art of Performance.

In April 2017, Carlson worked with 50 individuals at Children’s Theater Company in Minneapolis. Set painters, fundraisers, lighting designers, composers, educators, ushers, the custodial staff, and the executive director came together to build this “in house” version of *The Symphonic Body*. Performed for friends and family at the end of the year for the all-staff meeting celebration, this iteration was funded by Carlson’s 2016 Creative Capital grant.

In January, 2018, *The Symphonic Body/APAP* was performed by the board of directors and staff of the Association of Performing Arts Professionals. This performance occurred as part of the APAP annual conference and was seen by conference attendees in the Grand Ballroom of the Marriott Hotel at Times Square, NYC. Creative Capital funded this APAP performance as well.

The fourth iteration marked a different organizing principle. *The Symphonic Body/Water* centered around the issue of water in one of the fastest growing areas of the US: southwestern Montana. The invitation to build a *Symphonic Body* around a central issue of contemporary life came from the presenting organization, Mountain Time Arts, in Bozeman, Montana. Carlson spent 10 weeks meeting and working with individuals that live in the Gallatin Valley involved in water policy, conservation, recreation, activism, and mediation. This *Symphonic Body/Water* was comprised of 60 performers, among them: city officials, farmers, ranchers, and many members of the Northern Cheyenne and Crow tribes. Commissioned by Mountain Time Arts, all participated in an orchestral meditation on the power and meaning of water in our lives in four outdoor performances at two locations in July, 2018.

In April, 2019 *The Symphonic Body/Food* was performed at the Wexner Center in Columbus Ohio. This most recent version centered around the food system and gathered individuals from the greater Columbus area who identified as food activists, urban farmers, chefs, cooking teachers, eating disordered, a hunter, world class athletes, and breastfeeding mothers. All joined together to perform *The Symphonic Body/Food* on the Wexner Center's stage, while a meal was cooked live (also on stage) for the audience to enjoy together after the presentation. The Wexner Center for the Arts and InFACT (Food and Agricultural Transformation) at Ohio State University commissioned this engagement.

*The Symphonic Body* is a social sculpture, a dance, a jazz improvisation and a performance practice that conjures dances from the gestures of labor and invites everyday laborers to be dancers. In each of the iterations to-date, the engagement and its culminating performance has celebrates place and the cacophony of action, passion, and attention of each individual's unique contribution to the whole. The performances are mostly in silence, with participant/performers dressed in black and sitting as if they are in an orchestra. (However, spoken text is sometimes part of the experience). The end result invites a curious collision between seeing and hearing, between motion and stillness, between functional gesture and abstract motion. By utilizing the "look" of a formal orchestra, this project engages and upends multiple hierarchies: of class, access, and opportunity.

*The Symphonic Body* is a window into the breadth of human labor and activity that animates any given moment. It reveals the space between, the bridge that connects the individual and the collective. *The Symphonic Body* is an invitation to take up residence in our bodies more deliberately, to consider the power and promise that lies within each of

us, symbolized and enacted by the minute and grand gestures that makes up the dance of the everyday.