

# “A city's social history is also its dance history”

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## Peter Dickinson & Emma Metcalfe Hurst

- + For *Coming Out of Chaos: A Vancouver Dance Story*
  - + Interview Date: October 6, 2020
  - + Peter Dickinson, Performance Studies scholar, Professor at [Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts](#), Author of [My Vancouver Dance History: Story, Movement, Community \(2020\)](#)
  - + Emma Metcalfe Hurst, Karen Jamieson Dance Archivist
  - + This oral history interview has been edited for length, clarity, and accuracy
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**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** How did you get involved in contemporary dance in Vancouver? Could you please share your dance story, and also your entry into dance writing.

**Peter Dickinson:** I feel like it was kind of an organic process that evolved over many years. I moved to Vancouver in 1991 to do graduate work at UBC in literature and sort of began going to see dance in Vancouver. Not long thereafter, we started to go see performances of Ballet BC under John Alleyne. We weren't season subscribers or anything but just enjoyed going and seeing their stuff. That led to more independent companies and going to see their work. In that period, I also took my first adult ballet class at a community centre. I'd always enjoyed dance. I had a teacher in high school in Ontario who used to show old NFB documentaries: [Narcissus](#), and the famous one about the flamenco teachers at the National Ballet of Canada, [Flamenco at 5:15](#). So, I was quite inspired by what I'd seen in her class, but never took dance class until 1995. And that was all right [laughs]. I don't know if it was the right class for me but coincident with what I was seeing, I was also trying to move with the material in a way. So, I was seeing more and more contemporary dance in the early aughts, and then in 2008 I started my blog, [Performance, Place, and Politics](#). It was devoted to performance broadly defined, but I found myself increasingly focusing on dance. I don't know what really inspired it, but I guess I was wanting to figure out – in writing, which was my practice – what I was watching, and work through it. I didn't really have the language or vocabulary at first. I wasn't a professional critic, or anything like that, but through trial-and-error kind of found my way into, I guess you would say, a critical voice. I was quite inspired by what I was seeing, especially by a younger generation of artists, and also the unique context of Vancouver in terms of largely festival presentation, plus a few series through the Firehall Arts Centre, or The Cultch, and then The Dance Centre. It felt like it was a community that you could get to know.

As a result of that blog, people started contacting me, which on the one hand shows you a little bit, unfortunately, not just the kind of impoverishment of dance writing in Vancouver, but also

more generally, and that's due to shrinking print space and print media coverage. I think that's changed a little bit with online platforms but for a while I was one of the few people who was writing about these artists, and so they started inviting me into the studio, as an outside eye, sometimes doing some writing or research directly for them, and then finding my way, occasionally, into being a mover in some processes.

The lines started to cross explicitly with my colleague, Rob Kitsos, when I wrote a script for a piece of dance theatre that he choreographed. So all of that gave rise eventually to the book that I wrote [[My Vancouver Dance History: Story Movement Community](#)], which is largely a very idiosyncratic history – a very recent history – that focuses really on the artists with whom I've had more of a relationship with, either being part of a process with them, or being an outside eye. There are basically nine artists or companies in total that I talk about in depth, while also trying to give an aggregate picture of the scene in that decade between 2008 and 2018, largely. Now I'm just starved for not seeing work because of this crazy [Covid-19 pandemic] situation we're in.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah, I bet! Have you been watching anything online at all?

**Peter Dickinson:** A few things. I noticed [Dance House](#) just put out the announcement about their season. They've got a couple of films. It's not the same. Ziyian Kwan is doing a pop-up thing at her space called [Morrow \[by Dumb Instrument Dance\]](#). That starts next week so I'm looking forward to that.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Are they in-person events?

**Peter Dickinson:** Yeah. Very small, like two people per audience.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Oh, nice. I'm glad someone is taking initiative to find creative but safe ways to have in-person performances still. I have been reading your book and I'm really enjoying it. It's the most amazing timing for it to come out during this process for me, and I'm thinking about the way that you approach writing in relation to my own practice. It seems like writing is this very collaborative thing for you, but also what you've embodied, and how that plays into your own research. I was wondering if you could talk more about that embodiment?

**Peter Dickinson:** For sure. It's definitely something that's changed. With this [book] project, it struck me that the usual critical discourse, the one that I had been trained in as an academic, didn't really fit. I would say this book is more of a performance ethnography. I knew that I was writing with, and for, the artists and communities that were the subject of my book, so I didn't want them to be disembodied in a way. That's why it was very important for me, in the book, that their voices are showcased. I wanted the interviews I did with them to flow from what I was talking about, but also sometimes to interrupt what I was saying, so that it becomes more of a dialogic process. I think that I've been really influenced by colleagues in anthropology at SFU, who are trained in ethnography, and also dance ethnographers whom I've read: Judith Hamera, SanSan Kwan. I quote them in the introduction; thinking about even the act of spectatorship as

being a kind of field work, so that you're there, witnessing a performance. Why leave that part out of it? That you're there, and that you try to capture the embodied experience of that. I think dance is unique in that sense of inviting this embodied, muscular, kinesthetic reaction to the work and so in the writing, [it's important] not to shy away from my presence, either in the room with the artists, or watching the work – to acknowledge this kind of co-composition, a kind of choreography, really. I don't see the dance ending after the dance. I see the writing as an extension of a dance, and so in that respect, honouring the makers of that work in my writing was very important.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** That flows nicely into my next question: what do you think is the main role of dance writing, in your opinion?

**Peter Dickinson:** When I teach dance aesthetics and history at the School for Contemporary Arts at SFU – which is very irregular because I'm not in the dance area. But I have sometimes, and even in my other classes, I say, for me, dance writing – and maybe dance artists won't like this [laughs] – is as important as the dance. A lot of people talk about dance as being the most ephemeral art form. It's there, and then it disappears, and I agree, to an extent. It's in time, in space, and notwithstanding documentation, and moving online, I resist saying that it disappears completely. I think one way it remains is through writing, and I think really good dance writing contextualizes the work formally, conceptually, historically, and then also, ideally, connects dance to other ideas, and events.

I'm really fond of quoting the dance historian, Sally Banes, who just died recently. She's American, and wrote a lot about the postmodern dance scene in New York. Judson Church, and all those folks. She talked about dance criticism, reviewing, description, interpretation, and evaluation, but she also talked about contextualizing the work, situating it within the larger social and cultural landscape that it emerges from. I think that's what a good dance historian – which I don't claim to be actually, I'm certainly not trained in those methods – does, a good dance writer does – even a reviewer. So, just not bracketing off the work. Thinking about questions of labour, and equity, and who's presenting, and what else is going on, and who's in the work, and all that sort of stuff. I like the idea of that. Another critic, also American, Candace Feck. talks about "inverse contextual criticism," where you actually use a dance as a jumping off point to think about other ideas, which might be politics. I think dance has so much to teach us right now, when we're still in our homes, but also with all that's going on with Black Lives Matter, and protest movements – the choreography of bodies, and the urgency of that. There are ways in which dance can teach us how to think through those larger questions. I guess what I'm saying is that the dance historian and the dance writer is extending the life [of the dance] – again, to use that metaphor of the dance – by providing a record of its happening, but also situating that dance in a larger landscape, and showing how dance is culturally important and relevant.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** How would you say that your role and responsibility as a dance writer has changed over the years? Especially since the time you started your blog, for example?

**Peter Dickinson:** That's a good question. My blog has sort of been fallow for a while, and I'm posting irregularly now, just because it became this burden, really [laughs], with my day job. How has it changed? Well, thinking about those larger questions. Thinking about questions of equity, inclusion, diversity. Whose work is being shown? Who are the bodies we're seeing on stage? Asking those questions in the #metoo era. Thinking about those questions of harassment, and misogyny. We have to be frank. Our legacy has a very hierarchical, classical ballet tradition, where the power tends to be concentrated in the hands of a few men, and the labour done largely by women. Thinking about what happens just more generally, behind the scenes, as it were. I'm not saying that this wasn't always a focus of mine, but I think I'm always conscious of, in writing about a work of dance, it not being this moment suspended in time, right? Part of what I appreciate in all performance criticism is the context around the events: Who's in the lobby? [laughs] What conversations are being had? What happened on the way to the performance? What are you thinking about while you're watching this work? All that sort of stuff. All of those things are being brought in, to a certain extent, in interesting ways.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** I'm also curious about how those shifts in your role as a dance writer, and what you're thinking about now, might have changed your research practices and methodology as well? Would you say there is a correlation?

**Peter Dickinson:** Yeah, for sure. I mean certainly in the literary criticism that I've done, it has never concerned me to think about who the author is [laughs], or those sorts of questions. In moving toward this kind of "peer critique," it's this kind of dialogue that [starts] happening, so the work is offered as a gift almost, right? In exchange, meeting that work halfway, I think means being honest in how one's approaching it in terms of what kind of story you bring – just as a being in the world, and accounting for that. So, accounting for one's gender, and class, and a whole set of privileges.

In the book, I point out a lot of these gaps. I mean, I've been trained to see contemporary dance in a pretty white, Western, concert-dance frame that's excluded a whole bunch of stuff that I don't write about. That's been a huge learning curve – to think about how to decolonize my spectatorship, and my criticism, and I tried to do a little bit of that work in the Intervals [sections], especially the first one, where I talk about [The Dancers of Damelahamid](#) and Indigenous dance a little bit.

There's a quote I want to read by the dance ethnographer, Deidre Sklar; she says: "There's no other way to approach the felt dimensions of movement experienced than through the researcher's own body." One concrete way that I've tried to meet the material halfway is in the chapter on [Kokoro Dance](#). I actually did the Wreck Beach Butoh process three times because Barbara Bourget said to me that I'm not going to be able to write about it in any sort of authentic way – that's not quite the right word I want – without having *been* in the work. So, there's a very concrete example of experiencing the movement through my own body. I think that in terms of how my role as a dance writer has changed, it has to do with being more self-reflective in accounting for my presence, thinking about the writing as a form of collaboration, and even

when offering critique or criticism, being careful to account for where the artist might be coming from. All of those kinds of things.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah. Great. Thank you for that answer. As someone who has done so much writing around contemporary dance in Vancouver, I'm curious if you've noticed a shift arising in the relationship between writing and dancers? I'm thinking about how your book project got started with Justine Chambers and Alexa Mardon, and how they're people I know from the visual arts world. They're clearly working in a very interdisciplinary space, and use writing a lot in their own practices. Is that a recent shift that you've seen, or has that always been present?

**Peter Dickinson:** I think that we're paying attention and noticing it is a shift, but I think it's always been there in some ways. Vancouver dance artists have always been incredibly interdisciplinary, including as writers. One of the things that working on this book—and certainly working with Alexa [Mardon] and Justine [Chambers]—taught me, is this myth that dancers are inarticulate. The thinking is that articulation happens through their bodies, right? Don't ask them to open their mouths! [laughs] It's so silly because I found in my research that they [dancers] are among the most articulate artists about their practice. In the interviews we did for the [Our Present Dance Histories project](#), the recordings are amazing in terms of what the artists have to say about their own work, and about the scene in Vancouver. I think that what has shifted is that there are more forums where we're seeing that [written articulation], and that dance artists have taken the lead on that. So, for example, [The Talking, Thinking, Dancing Body project](#) that Lee Su-Feh started, that Justine Chambers then came on board with, then Sadira Rodrigues, and then Alexa [Mardon], and now Barak adé Soleil is leading it, I think. These places where dancers get to actually think about discourse, questions around gender, and labour, and equity, and collaboration. They have a lot to say about that. The documentation [of The Talking, Thinking, Dancing Body project] has ended up in a book that Alexa [Mardon] has just recently produced [see [The Talking Thinking Dancing Body](#) available at Morrow].

What I'm trying to say is that there's a generation of dance artists in Vancouver – and elsewhere, I would assume – that really haven't waited for dance historians. They started doing this [writing about dance] on their own, and I think that social media has contributed to that. There are all of these different ways, such as Facebook, that people are having conversations about dance. The public doesn't always see that, but I think it contributes to what I would call dance literacy in the city, because people are talking to each other, and sharing ideas, and I think it trickles out, and into the world in a way, and then finds its way into online writing. I think Vancouver's writing on Vancouver dance has changed along with the way in which dance has diversified in this city: more younger artists are coming out of programs like Arts Umbrella, or SFU, or Modus Operandi, who are choosing to stay here, rather than going away, and starting their own companies. I think that's also related to the success of Crystal Pite. All of a sudden international presenters are interested in Vancouver, and focused on us. That level of attention has influenced the way – and the confidence – in which dance artists are presenting themselves.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Very interesting. Moving into a slightly different direction now and going back to your research, how would you describe the contemporary dance scene in Vancouver during the '70s and '80s?

**Peter Dickinson:** I wasn't here first-hand to witness it [laughs], so my account is based on the research I did for the book, and from talking to various people, like Barbara Bourget and Jay Hirabayashi, who are part of that period. I resist doing this in the book, but in the introduction I do sort of say that one place to start a history of Vancouver contemporary dance would be that period [of the 70s and early 80s] because you've got a lot of stuff happening right at once. You've got Ballet Horizons morphing into Pacific Ballet Theatre, which becomes Ballet BC. As I understood it, there had been a conversation since the 1940s or before, about how Vancouver needed a ballet company. The Vancouver Ballet Society, as I understand it, dates back to there, but the actual first steps for what is now Ballet BC really happened much later, in the 70s. Then coincidentally with that, you've got Terminal City Dance, you've got PRISM Dance Theatre, you've got people like Anna Wyman Dance, Paula Ross, Helen Goodwin and TheCo, out of UBC, and working with Intermedia, and even Norbert Vesak's Western Dance Theatre, Mauryne Allan and Burnaby Mountain Dance. There's so many of them that come out of a dance theatre tradition, and having met at, SFU – like Karen Jamieson, Savannah Walling, and – who am I missing? Who's the third person?

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Terry Hunter.

**Peter Dickinson:** [laughs] Terry Hunter, right. But coming out of that really interdisciplinary environment, and wanting to experiment with Grotowski, and those sorts of things. I think there was a lot of crossover that is, I would say, still a hallmark of Vancouver dance; the extent to which dance and theatre artists work with each other, and the amount of text that we hear, and listen to in dance. I can't confirm any of this, but it's an intuition of mine that it dates back to those beginnings. I would say it was a hothouse of experimentation. *Let's use each other in each other's work* – that's kind of an interesting thing, right? You still see this phenomenon: people who have their own companies, who are making their own work, starting out as choreographers, but who also continue being in other people's work.

I guess the last thing I would say about that [time period] is formal experimentation. A kind of *anything goes* attitude almost comes from the lack of resources. So, the Grotowski, poor theatre kind of method of making, is important.

I would also say really strong women, like Paula Ross, and the triumvirate at Terminal City, and Helen Goodwin – although tragically, Helen committed suicide, partly, I think, because she wasn't recognized. Those women were thinking about questions of feminism, and the body, and the environment. Paula Ross, who I believe is of mixed-Indigenous heritage, did an early piece on the incarceration of Indigenous men [*Coming Together* (1975)]. Helen Goodwin did *Environmental Opera* (1971) on the beach, and then Karen Jamieson's work, moving a little bit later into the '80s, with [Rainforest](#) (1987), and then the early [Mudwoman](#) (1990) piece, that eventually becomes things like [The River](#) (1998), where it's more community-engaged. Being on

the West Coast, there was some attunement to site-specific, environmental work that was already starting then. It's come as almost a given now. [There was also an] early attunement to Indigenous issues, and then, Karen Jamieson being kind of the pioneer in thinking about how does one ethically collaborate with First Nations communities? I guess the one thing that I want to throw in there is to not erase the work of Indigenous dancers that was always always happening. Even before that period, even during the Potlatch ban, when, legally, they couldn't dance, but were still finding ways to circumscribe that. I think that's an important history that needs to be known.

That's really a mish-mash because it's really what I've had to learn from reading, and talking to people because I wasn't here to see, or experience that period [laughs].

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** I think that perspective is really valuable as well though. A lot of dancers who I've spoken to from that period, in some ways, were just so preoccupied with doing what they do, like making work, and were not always taking the time to think reflectively about everything else going on, why it was being done this way, etc. to see it from this more objective or high level point of view. Having that historical distance, which researchers have for example, allows one to see themes that come up that may not be obvious to creators of that time period.

**Peter Dickinson:** Yeah. I just remembered a story, for instance, about one of the first – might have been the first! – EDAM shows that they did called *EDAM MADE* (1985). They reversed the letters. They took over the Western Front, and it was poetry projected on the building, and spoken word stuff, and song, and dance. It was just incredibly interdisciplinary. Fundamentally, I guess I would say that that period really establishes interdisciplinarity in Vancouver: dance collaborations with visual artists, and theatre artists, and installation artists, that has really continued to be a hallmark of Vancouver contemporary dance.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah, for sure. I think that kind of answers my next question too, which is how would you describe the creative ethos of that time. You point out that interdisciplinarity continues to resonate through certain practices in contemporary dance that we see today.

**Peter Dickinson:** My understanding is that people were collaborating with each other, but there was competition. There was competition for funding, for human resources, all those sorts of things. And you know, I think there are still grudges [laughs] that are held on from that period.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah. But there's also respect.

**Peter Dickinson:** I think it's just because everybody was fighting for a little tiny slice of an already really small pie. Frankly, some really interesting work came out of it, and all of those people – with the exception of Paula Ross, and Gisa Cole, and a few others – they're still working. There's still Karen Jamieson, and Barbara Bourget and Jay Hirabayashi, Peter Bingham, and Jennifer Mascal. That's kind of amazing.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah. Lifetime commitments in the arts are not easy to sustain! And speaking of beginnings, my next question for you is whether or not you have any knowledge of *Coming Out of Chaos*? Have you heard of that work?

**Peter Dickinson:** I only really have through what I've read about it. It's funny, I actually went back to do some digital archival stuff, just to see what had been written about it. I'm not sure if you guys [at KJD] know if there are print reviews out there that have been digitized, but I could only find writing on the Solo from [Chaos] that Karen did later. The extent of my knowledge [about *Coming Out of Chaos*] is that it was Karen's first group piece, and evening length, and that basically, it had all of the EDAM people except Jay [Hirabayashi] in it [laughs], plus Savannah Walling, and Karen Jamieson, and that it was a bit fraught [laughs], and chaotic – so aptly titled. It became this kind of moment that makes sense, right? Because this is what made EDAM afterwards. So, [it was] kind of a cauldron of experimentation, but also where egos clashed because you had [Peter Bingham and Lola Ryan<sup>1</sup>] being contact people, and you had Barbara [Bourget who was] classically trained, and Lola [MacLaughlin] just out of SFU, and Jennifer [Mascall] also from [York's] university dance program, and Karen [Jamieson] had her time in New York. Everybody was coming from a different place in terms of training and lineage, so how do [they] meet? Based on the photos I've seen, I just wish I could have been in the room [laughs] with Barbara [Bourget] and Jay [Hirabayashi]. I'm pretty sure there was a lot of yelling [laughs].

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Oh yeah!

**Peter Dickinson:** I guess the end part of it is that it happened, and then what transpired [after]. So, obviously, many of those core collaborators said let's try to keep working together, [and formed] EDAM. And then – I'm assuming, this is just speculation – that it gave Karen [Jamieson] the confidence to move forward with her own voice, and [she] really established herself [one year] later with [Sisyphus \(1983\)](#), closing that circle by bringing Jay Hirabayashi into that process. That really landed her on the map. I guess that was also her calling card in terms of being invited to present her work elsewhere – including internationally, if I'm not mistaken. So, that's what I know!

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** You hit all the main points for it! The Karen Jamieson archives has digitized some reviews for *Coming Out of Chaos*. There are probably about fifteen or so. Some of them are just promotional advertisements with dates, and short performance descriptions. You're right that it was Karen [Jamieson]'s opportunity to direct and choreograph her own work, outside of Terminal City Dance Research, for the first time. Grant Strate was the one who found the funds for her to be able to do that work. He was pushing her to leave that collective to start going forward with her own company, to develop her own voice and interests. You touched on EDAM as well, and how most of the *Chaos* members formed the initial group, who, collectively and individually, go on to create the next era of contemporary dance in Vancouver. What do you think has changed most for the Vancouver contemporary dance community since *Coming Out of Chaos* was produced in the early '80s?

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<sup>1</sup> Transitioned from Peter Ryan.



**Peter Dickinson:** On a very basic level, it's just grown [laughs] and diversified. As I said before, there are more younger artists. I think there was this moment when people came back who might have been in Toronto, or Montréal, or elsewhere. I think that [people thought that] if you wanted to continue your training, [you'd have to] go elsewhere, to Winnipeg, or Toronto, and I think that's changed. I mean, Goh Ballet, Arts Umbrella, and Main Dance being a kind of forerunner, were important in getting people to think that they could stay here, train here, either start their own collectives, or companies, or be hired by Ballet BC, or somewhere else. There just became this sense that there is a community, specific to Vancouver, that's not transplanted, and that that community has become increasingly political, and invested – not just in contributing to the dance scene, but also the discourse on dance, asking us to think about what we believe dance is, and what counts as dance, or what counts as excellence in dance. The opening of The Dance Centre as a physical building was an important moment that gave a home, or a physical infrastructure, to the dance scene. Then, the presentation of international dance in Vancouver, through Dance House, or through the PuSh Festival. That began a little bit before I started my blog, but I think that's part of what was interesting to me. All of a sudden, I could see work here in Vancouver that I would have had to travel to see otherwise. I think that's had a strong influence on local performers and creators too. Vanessa Goodman told me that seeing Hofesh Shechter come through Vancouver was really influential to her. So, I guess I would say diversified, grown, and maybe globalized are the ways that it's changed.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Do you see any specific forces that are inhibiting dance production from happening in Vancouver?

**Peter Dickinson:** Well, space! [laughs] Real Estate, right? I mean, one of my Intervals is about that issue. It's just the cost of living, right? So, having said what I just said, I'm amazed and grateful that the dance artists who stayed here have done so, because they clearly have wanted to. It's not Montréal where you can get an [affordable] apartment. It's just so expensive to live here so those lifestyle impediments are huge. If anything comes out of COVID, and CERB, and things like that, it's a conversation around a basic guaranteed income. When you do those census reviews of artist salaries, dancers are consistently – always – at the bottom. If there's not another job, like teaching, or through a partner's income, or something like that, then it's almost below the poverty line. Our funding models in BC–BCAC [BC Arts Council], and Canada Council [for the Arts]: for better or worse, they operate on track record, recognition, reputation, so that many of the same people have consistently have been rewarded, and continue to be rewarded. I think there are good things happening for emerging artists. Made in BC is doing things, I think The Dance Centre is doing things, but those emerging artists, the new voices, and especially BIPOC artists, how to make space for those folks takes a lot of ingenuity. You need the right leaders, in the right places to do that. So, yeah, I would say the big impediments continue to be finances, and funding, and lack of opportunity.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah. Is there any over-arching body that lays out labour standards and fee schedules? Like [CARFAC](#)? I'm just thinking from the visual arts perspective again. Are there standards that have been established that change yearly, based on inflation? Is that something that exists?

**Peter Dickinson:** It would be CADA, the Canadian Association of Dance Artists, and [CADA West](#) for Alberta and B.C. in particular. There are those kinds of collective bodies that establish base minimums for a performer, or for a creator, who's being commissioned, but, you know, in the School for Contemporary Arts, we defer to CARFAC because CARFAC is much better [laughs]. But again, it's just sort of the way that it happens. CADA is the minimum, basically, but they're not as generous, it seems to me, as other disciplines, and especially for visual arts. Then there's rental space. Even a place like The Dance Centre, which is the home for Vancouver dance, their studio fees are not exorbitant – exorbitant may be strong – but they're not competitive, right? So, places like Left of Main, or Harbour Dance, or KW [Kokoro Woodward's Production Studios]: it's great that we have more of those spaces now because I think it's opened up things. Because a dance artist needs a studio. You can't get around that, although people make work in their kitchens, and living rooms – but those basics are huge, and I think more subvention could happen. And then, presentation. If you present at a Civic Theatre in Vancouver, you can apply for a grant to subsidize the rent for presenting there, but wouldn't it be more reasonable if there was a scale? [laughs] If you're presenting work at this level, where you are in terms of your income... I confess that I don't know enough about the ins-and-outs of how that works to know what creative solutions we could come up with.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah. It sounds like there's a lot more that needs to be re-done. So, lastly, why is preserving Vancouver's contemporary dance history important to you, and what more do you think needs to be done to do this?

**Peter Dickinson:** I wrote some notes on this because it struck me that I shouldn't screw this question up! [laughs] I want to say – and this is coming from reading a bunch of dance artists, but also, philosophers – that I've really come to believe that we know who we are, and our relationship to where we are – so to place – through movement. So, kinesthesia is this kind of unnamed, sixth sense, right? It's so important. So, the corollary to that is that a city's social history is also its dance history, or, dance history is part of a city's social history. If we look at movement – whether it's social dance, or whether it's choreographed, concert dance, at specific moments in time – I believe that those works go back to my idea of like, situating those works in time and place. They can tell us important things about history, and the bodies who are making these dances. For that reason alone, I think dance history, as a subset of social history, is really important.

And then, just why preserving Vancouver's contemporary dance history [is important], more specifically, is because there are so many important archives, company archives, artist archives, that are orphaned! [laughs] Or that are in somebody's basement, or that are in this precarious state of preservation. There's just the practical, material, infrastructure question of *this needs to find a home*. So, there's that financial question, and that resource question of if this isn't moved on soon, then there's the potential for it being lost. This is like a parallel to what Karen's doing with the [Body to Body project](#). If you don't have that repertoire passed on as some kind of legacy project, then it's other, ancillary bits of performance documentation – the ephemera, let's call it – that becomes an important way local dance history gets passed on to us. And by ephemera I mean everything from old grant applications, to programs, and costumes. All of that

still becomes an important part of that legacy and that genealogy. So, I think archiving and preserving dance history is important and I think that we're starting to do that with this generation of artists who are thinking about legacy. But then we have to take it all the way back to, you know, Indigenous dance history, and all these other moments that are there. We just have to know where to find them, I guess.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Do you think there would be a benefit to having a kind of centralized space where those archives could live? Do you think that's something the community would use?

**Peter Dickinson:** Yeah. I think it would be great if we had the equivalent of Dance Collection Danse here in Vancouver, or even an off-shoot of it. The fact that dance historians, like my colleague Allana Lindgren at the University of Victoria, for example, has to go to Toronto to do so much research that's related to here. I mean, it's great. I don't want to dismiss the work that Miriam and Lawrence Adams did to establish that. If we didn't have that, we'd be even further set back, but because of the regional dispersion of Canada, I mean, it's just necessary that that's concentrated a little bit more on Ontario and Québec. If we had something equivalent here, it would be wonderful. You know, buy the building next to The Dance Centre, make it an archive, or something like that. I just think there's so much rich stuff that could automatically fill a space like that. So, that's a legacy project that some rich donor should fund for sure [laughs].

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah. You pointed out DCD, but I'm also thinking about what you said before, of how dance is also tied to the social histories, and the social fabric of the place from which it comes from. Having those records, those archives, stored all the way across the country seems to break the link. That physical accessibility is really important, and that local accessibility is also really necessary.

**Peter Dickinson:** We're so lucky that somebody like Judith Marcuse, for example, gave her papers to SFU. I think it was mentioned at the KJD archives afternoon [[Archiving for the Arts event](#)] that one institution doesn't have to be the sole repository. People can collaborate, and there can be this network, and finding aids can be developed so that you can cross reference across institutional repositories. It'd be great if SFU and The Dance Centre, and maybe BC Archives, and the City of Vancouver Archives, and also individual company archives, could work together and then we'd have this amazing storehouse of dance documentation. I think, increasingly, we'll see people wanting to come do research here, on that legacy, so having it here, and having a kind of platform or network that's accessible would be really important.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah, definitely. It's interesting that The Dance Centre hasn't taken initiative to do any kind of archives project at this point, given their position and role within the city, and within dance in Vancouver. The idea of having an archives that is so closely situated in proximity to studio spaces seems like even more of an exciting prospect, so one can study movements, or study pieces, and then actually go into the studio and either recreate them, or jam off of those movements. It just seems like that embodied element of a dance archive would be really unique, and true to the nature of the art form as well.

**Peter Dickinson:** Right, yeah.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** My last question here goes back to your book. I was curious if you could talk about your research and writing process behind [My Vancouver Dance History: Story, Movement Community](#), and maybe identify some significant events that happened in contemporary dance in your opinion. I realize that's pretty broad, so feel free to take it wherever you'd like to go.

**Peter Dickinson:** I guess just to clarify, it's a really particular dance history, that's why it's called *My Vancouver Dance History*. It really came out of responding to what I was seeing, to writing about that in my blog starting around 2008, and then how the blog kind of fed into conversations with these nine dance artists and companies that I document in the book. So, the main chapters are around quite particular collaborations with folks like Tara Cheyenne Friedenberg, and Plastic Orchid Factory, and Vanessa Goodman, Ziyian Kwan, and Kokoro Dance, and others. It's the story of their stories, basically. In that sense, it's a composite of a few – and I need to stress that: *just a few* – contemporary Vancouver dance artists who are making work now. In some senses, it's really a history of the present. Then, in the Interval chapters, I have these kind of key words through which I constellate, kind of spectating moments, where I try to think through these kind of larger issues that are maybe more legacy issues: institutionality, questions of space, the whole idea that you could say that the contemporary Vancouver dance history is a history that's founded on festival presentation, and what's unique about that. So, one thing that's unique about that is that [Dancing On the Edge](#) is the longest, continuous dance festival in Canada now, which is kind of interesting. They've just done like thirty plus years now, and all the people who've come across that stage constitute a kind of a unique genealogy of contemporary dance, and we need to also consider the fact that it is where it [The Firehall Arts Centre] is, and the fact that the dancing happens as much on the outdoor back deck as on the indoor concert stage, and the conversations that happen around that. Again, part of this idea of dance and social history being intertwined, is really important there.

And then there's huge chunks of what happened before that I don't reference [laughs]. In terms of SFU, for instance, the founding of that program, Iris Garland, getting Grant Strate to come here, and be the Chair in the '80s. His really big, important role in establishing The Dance Centre, obviously his relationship with Wen Wei, and the internationalizing of Wen Wei's career. That happened through Grant [Strate]. Then there's David Y.H. Lui, establishing Ballet BC, but I guess you would also have to reference the implosion and resurrection of Ballet BC under Emily Molnar – and what an amazing job she's done, and now, moving to Nederlands Dans Theater.

I mean, that kind of shows you that, internationally, Vancouver is on the map for sure. I feel like there's all these micro, small moments that I don't know about, or that I don't reference that are as foundational to Vancouver dance as anything else. One thing I do want to mention in this context is the [Coastal First Nations Dance Festival](#), which [Dancers of Damelahamid](#) and Margaret Grenier have overseen under its current auspices – which are relatively recent, really. But through Margaret's parents, the Harrises [Kenneth and Margaret Harris], CFNDF has a legacy that goes back to the '60s, in the period after the potlatch ban was officially overturned in

1951. She [Margaret Harris] and her husband [Kenneth Harris] did so much work to re-teach dances to First Nations communities, and so I think that's important in the landscape of dance festivals in Vancouver. That's a really key one because it connects a contemporary dance scene to Indigenous dance history – and I want to stress that Indigenous dance is contemporary, because it's now, but also because it also has this lineage that goes back beyond any of the moments I've referenced [in the book].

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yes, that's a really important distinction to note: the resistance and the continuity of Indigenous dance. Could you speak a little bit more about leading up to writing the book, about your process with Alexa [Mardon] and Justine [Chambers]?

**Peter Dickinson:** That's a good question because I had all this material that I didn't really know what to do with, and I didn't know how to connect it, and the collaboration with Justine [Chambers] and Alexa [Mardon] on [Our Present Dance Histories project](#), which was presented at the 2017 Dance in Vancouver Biennale, gave me the way to do it. We had this where, what, when, why kind of framework for our interviews, like: Who did you train with? Where did you study? Where did you present? What are your dance spaces? What are seminal works in your mind? So, basically we just pressed a button and let people talk. That gave me the idea of centering the book around the conversation I was having with these artists, through their work, but also really wanting to centre their voices through the interviews. Then the other key part was to bring in other voices on their work, so people who were in it, or other writers who saw it, and commented on it. I guess it gave me the conversational method or model, which I hope is there in reading it, that you can hear those voices a little bit, rather than just me blathering on. That's what I would say that [Our Present Dance Histories project] gave me – just a kind of framework for how to structure the material.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** And does that material live on your blog? Where are those records and interviews situated?

**Peter Dickinson:** Yeah, so there's a bunch of stuff that is in the book that originated in the blog, if you want to call it "spectator field notes," right? These would be my initial responses to different works, which would sometimes be expanded upon. In the course of writing the book, some works that I would see and respond to on the blog I would develop further through conversation with the artists, or by doing more research, and digging into various things. I'll just use an example: in the chapter in which I talk about Vanessa Goodman's work, [Wells Hill](#) (2017) is the piece which centres a lot of that chapter. I knew that the work was inspired by her having lived in this particular house that used to be the house of Marshall McLuhan, and what I write about in the book started from her asking me to write something for the premiere [[Wells Hill at SFU Woodward's by Peter Dickinson](#)]. There was a lot of dialogue back and forth on that. [There's] another solo piece, *Container* (2016/2017), that I write about in that [chapter]. I'd seen it in two different versions, at the Firehall and the Shadbolt Centre, and wrote briefly about each version on my [blog](#). But when it came time to expand my reflections for the book I decided to situate [it] more fully in terms of a tradition of Jewish dancing that I only discovered in the process of talking with Vanessa [Goodman], who helped me understand that this was kind of a

key component of that work. So, that kind of becomes a part of how I expand the raw material that's on the blog.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** What was the final manifestation of that project?

**Peter Dickinson:** With Justine [Chambers] and Alexa [Mardon], or—?

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** Yeah, yeah. There are the interviews on your website, but then you also said there was a premiere at the Dance Biennale in 2017?

**Peter Dickinson:** It became this kind of [laughs] multifaceted thing. Kind of a web. Natalie Purschwitz did this amazing installation that was in the lobby, going down the stairs to the Faris Studio [at The Dance Centre], for almost a year I believe, where she [used] all the names of everybody we interviewed, plus all the names they mentioned in the interviews, and all the spaces – well, we didn't really get to the spaces part, but they were on playing cards – and she connected them with thread so that it became this kind of rhizomatic map of who was connected to whom, which was kind of the most amazing piece. And then all of the videos we did: Justine [Chambers] spliced them together in this kind of looping video that played in the lobby, and also as a sound installation downstairs, and in the washrooms. And then for the last part of it, there were two parts: we produced t-shirts for all of our fifty-three interviewees, and we took their name, we gave them a number based on the order in which we interviewed them, and also a phrase from their interview – almost like a baseball team set of t-shirts. Then we distributed them to other members of the dance community – whoever wanted one could have one, and they would learn the gesture that went with that particular [interviewee]. So, from the videos, we would take somebody leaning on their chin with their hand, and we would teach that gesture to the person with the corresponding t-shirt, and they were meant to go – kind of anonymously, really – throughout the Biennale, and repeat this gesture, so to pass on that kind of body-to-body repertoire surreptitiously [laughs].

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** That's such a brilliant and fun way to activate those histories! I'm super amazed by how much that project continues to resonate in all of these different forms that you've mentioned and likely for everyone involved too. Congratulations on that project, that's amazing.

**Peter Dickinson:** Thanks.

**Emma Metcalfe Hurst:** So, I think we've covered all of the questions so I just want to say thank you so much for speaking with me. It was really, really great to have this opportunity to do so.