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Jean Kerr

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Jean Kerr & Dani Snyder-Young, Illinois Wesleyan University, interviewed by Laura Kennedy

WGLT Interview

Laura Kennedy: You are tuned to 89.1, 103.5 FM; I'm Laura Kennedy with this GLT Datebook. The Illinois Wesleyan School of Theater presents their faculty choreographed dance concert April 5th through the 10th at McPherson Theater in Bloomington. Director Jean Kerr and dramaturge Dani Snyder-Young designed the concert to deal with themes of homelessness. Kerr had spent time last year working with homeless people in St. Louis and was inspired to spotlight their stories.

Jean Kerr: Well, addiction is an over-arching theme, and not every homeless person or individual deals with addiction, but it is very prevalent in that community. And then there's finding a way to create shelter for yourself.

Dani Snyder-Young: Some of the themes also aren't so negative.

Kerr: —Right.

Young: So there was a theme of self-reliance and resilience and making something out of nothing. The set to the stands piece is made completely of recycled and re-purposed materials. And Jean said to me a couple of weeks ago that our society, it doesn't just dispose of material objects, it disposes people. And the homeless have been disposed by our society. And, they find resourceful ways to re-purpose their lives.

Kerr: Right.

Kennedy: Tell me about the physicality. What's—did you land on one particular style of dance in order to express this story?

Kerr: That's a very good question. I have five choreographers, including myself that I've worked with. And I asked each choreographer to pick one theme and then to do with it as they would. One of our choreographers is a ballet master, and so it's very beautiful pas de deux for two couples. We had a guest artist from Chicago come down and hers is very organic and abstract. In my work, I wanted to walk that very thin line between dance choreography and devised theater. And so, what I did is I had the dancers write stories, and then I put those stories into movement—with text. It seemed not truthful to have us portraying a condition that we only know about and have not experienced ourselves. And so for that reason, Dani and I went through all of my research materials that I came back with and we have some text from the homeless people that I was privileged to meet, and two of the gentlemen allowed me to interview them and there'll be snippets of their interviews projected as we go through. So we have real life commentary with artistic commentary happening overlapping-ly on stage.

Kennedy: So you have multi-media going—

Kerr: We have multi-media going, yes.

Kennedy: Dani, did you find it difficult to incorporate this in a graceful manner with the dance or did it naturally fit?

Kerr: A little of both...[laughs].

Snyder-Young: A little of both. It naturally fit together, I think in part because the themes for the dances were being pulled out of these interviews and out of this source material. It enabled us to expand upon ideas that were already there. So we weren't trying to make disparate pieces fit together, we were trying to figure out how to arrange pieces that were already of the same whole.

Kennedy: Now that you've become involved in a project like this, do you see yourselves doing more socially conscious, theatrical works in the future with your students?

Snyder-Young: I specialize in applied theater. So, using theater and the arts to engage in social change and education is at the center of what I do in my classroom and in my professional practice.

Kerr: And the students have also engaged in a level that warms my heart. We're having canned food goods and monetary donations accepted at the door of the theater, which will go to Home Sweet Home Mission. So they're finding a way to have the theater reach out into the community beyond just 'hey, there's this thing going on and you can buy a ticket.'

Kennedy: That's Jean Kerr and Dani Snyder-Young. The dance concert runs April 5th through the 10th at McPherson Theater in Bloomington. For more information go to the Datebook page of WGLT.org. I'm Laura Kennedy.