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## THE Arts

### New Ways to Dance, Found in the Eyes of Others

By GIA KOURLAS

As experimental choreographers and dancers working in New York in the 1990s, Wally Cardona and Jennifer Lacey knew each other without truly knowing each other. But they did share one heady dance experience: before Ms. Lacey moved to Paris in 2000, they took part in an improvisation in the East Village. “My memory of it was like: ‘Ah! She’ll cut me!’” Mr. Cardona said. “That was my image of Jennifer. She was so sharp. She was like a knife.”

While Mr. Cardona, a Bessie-award-winning choreographer, has made a name for himself with large-scale works that incorporate a multitude of objects, Ms. Lacey is a visionary whose works are infrequently seen in New York and are much missed.

Certain dancers fade into the background, while others, desperate to please, pour it on too thick. Then there are those rare few, like Mr. Cardona and Ms. Lacey, with another kind of virtuosity, in which physical precision and charisma mingle like 21st-century fairy dust. In “Tool Is Loot,” which will be presented at the Kitchen starting Thursday, they show that quality for all its worth. And it’s worth a lot.

For their first-ever collaboration they have acquired the tools for their unusual production by spending a year working apart (Mr. Cardona in the United States and Ms. Lacey in France). Each choreographed an “empty solo,” performed for an expert in a field other than dance, including an architect, an astrophysicist, a medical supply salesman, a sommelier and a film editor.

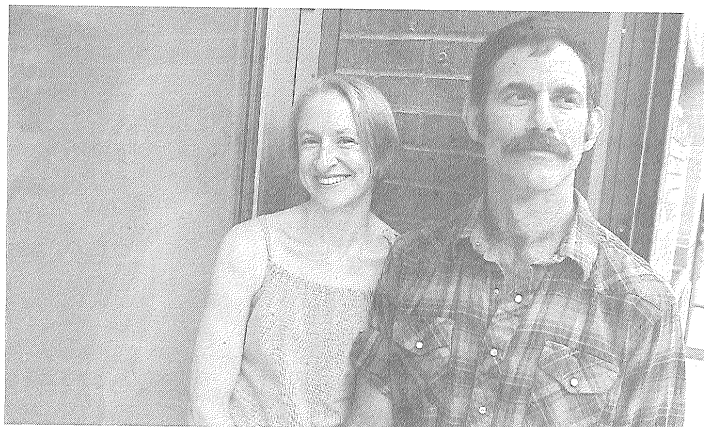
Those outsiders, chosen with the help of presenters, had to be strangers to Mr. Cardona and Ms. Lacey. “They also had to describe themselves as somebody who says, ‘I don’t really know anything about dance,’” Ms. Lacey said.

Weeklong encounters ended with performances, in which the solo was embellished with new material initiated by these advisers. As they’ve discovered, “Tool Is Loot,” which includes original music by Jonathan Bepler, is a lot of things, but it’s mainly an exploration of aesthetics, of trust and, ultimately, of freedom. For Mr. Cardona and Ms. Lacey, who first started working together in March, the purpose of the outside experiences was to unravel their notions about dance and to meet in an undone state.

“I think some people imagine this as some sort of weird social outreach,” Ms. Lacey said. “It has that effect, but it is certainly not the project. If you’re going to do it properly, you have to be willing to say yes to everything.”

It may seem a strange notion that choreographers would seek the opinions of non-experts, but as Ms. Lacey said, she has had enough from people who know a lot about dance. “This came at a time in my life where

“Tool Is Loot” will be performed Thursday through Saturday and Sept. 29 through Oct. 1 at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, Ext. 11; [thekitchen.org](http://thekitchen.org).



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jennifer Lacey and Wally Cardona, the choreographers of “Tool Is Loot.”

I had also decided not to work in the same way,” she said. “The kind of willpower of amassing a gross sum of money and certain kinds of venues — I was like, I’m going to take a break from that. I don’t want to do it.”

They also weren’t interested in building material to mold once in the studio together; rather, the process was a way, as the title suggests, to assemble information for an entirely new piece. “They were tools that we had to develop in order to respond to opinions and desires,” Ms. Lacey said.

It wasn’t easy. One adviser asked Ms. Lacey to perform a dance with a chair as a character. “I thought my head was going to explode,” she said. She gave it a shot, even

“You have to be willing to say yes to everything.”

though it was, to her, a modern-dance cliché. “By the end of that week I actually did have something, but it was quite horrifying,” she said. “I really wanted to undo my morality around certain kinds of esthetics.”

Mr. Cardona found that when an adviser requested something objectionable — like that chair dance, say — it was often the most thrilling moment of the process. “My responsibility was to do it,” he said, “and suddenly all those things that you had somehow judged as idiotic and stupid and lesser than, you had to deal with in a different way.”

One of Mr. Cardona’s nondancing experts was Heidi Jo Newberg, an astrophysicist and professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, who was not initially forthcoming. In an interview she described the experience as among her stranger encounters. For one, she found Mr. Cardona’s ques-

tions disconcerting. “He would want to know what I thought and what it made me think about and what associations I had — and I’m a physicist, right?” she said, laughing. “We don’t talk about our feelings, and we don’t say things that are difficult to say to each other.”

On their first day in the studio Mr. Cardona began his solo by walking around the room and taping the floor. “He’s rearranging chairs and turning lights on and off, and he gets up on a chair and kind of falls off the chair — he’s dying on the chair or melting or something — and he ran in place for 10 minutes,” Dr. Newberg said. “I was like: Oh my God, this isn’t dance.”

Gradually, after Mr. Cardona pulled her into the process, incorporating material from their conversations about concepts of space for the final showing, she realized that she had never considered the idea of art research before. “My research is in astronomy,” Dr. Newberg said. “We’re not curing cancer, we’re not building a faster computer, we’re not making anybody money. It’s pure research for the sake of doing research, so in some sense I feel like he does that same thing.”

While “Tool Is Loot” is informed by the aesthetic propositions of the strangers — there is more than one chair dance — it is the artists’ work. “We are making decisions,” Mr. Cardona said.

And as the piece is coming together, Mr. Cardona said he often turns to the more memorable phrases of his advisers. “I find it very helpful,” he explained, “to go back to what these people valued rather than going into: What do I value?”

Those phrases, Ms. Lacey added, “have been sufficiently reduced to ‘Star Wars’ — Obi-Wan Kenobi quotes: ‘The dance is there to show the space.’ Or ‘Nothing you can do can ever please me.’”

Mr. Cardona said with a laugh: “That one is still liberating. I love it.”