

Site-specific dance choreographer Noémie Lafrance finds rhythm in the concrete

Text Tanya Selvaratnam | Portrait Photography Poppy de Villeneuve

When Noémie Lafrance let us into the offices of Sens Production, her dance company located in Brooklyn, we were taken back to see that she was five and a half months pregnant. No-one had mentioned it during the preparations for the interview, and we immediately saw why: Lafrance wears pregnancy effortlessly, and is even going to perform one of her personal projects, *Home* (2008)—a work centered on her body as the actual site of her dance—during her third trimester.

French-Canadian Lafrance has a special relationship with architecture, choreographing pieces on sites, such as the *Rapture* series (2008) on Frank Gehry buildings across the world; *Agora* and *Agora II* in Brooklyn's McCarren Park; *Descent* (2001) on a staircase; and *Melt* (2003) in which dancers are strapped to a wall. She is best known for her music video choreography with musician Feist for "1,2,3,4" (so catchy that Apple chose it to star in their iPod Nano advertisements) and "My Moon, My Man," and is currently touring with iconic musician David Byrne, choreographing his shows. Her private work is ambitious, affecting and—perhaps the most difficult aspect of modern dance—accessible.

Tanya Selvaratnam: Culture is less and less site-specific. Students in Austria or Sri Lanka can instantly exchange ideas with students in America, and their culture is becoming less and less specific to their own place. What do you see as the negatives and positives of that?

Noémie Lafrance: People associate their idea of culture with history, or the development of a social group, or cultural group, or ethnicity, or a place, but it's a phenomenon of globalization. Things aren't that way anymore. People fear that something is lost. But I think it's good to see that something is gained by all these different encounters and accessibilities. It makes culture more acceptable. I am less preoccupied with what we are losing, and how we are going to preserve it.

What does it mean for you to be a site-specific artist, working in this global culture?

Place has meaning. Whether this is because of history, or a role it plays, or its aesthetic, or its form, or its form seen as a past subject. It can be something that's anchored in time

and memory. We tend to think of places only as objects, but actually they're also subjects. They start to have a personality and a novelty, like a character. I used to think a lot about all the people who have been to a certain place. All those people in that space create a specific energy. It depends if you're talking about a court, where there are trials; or if you're talking about a market, or a garden where you grow things. That's very different, it's about nourishment; a trial is about law. It's a combination of that, the shapes of the building, and how they affect the body. A tunnel is different from a big open plaza, or a park. A tunnel will make you travel through the tunnel—so it implies you are moving at some point, right? The garden is somewhere where you can wander about. I'm interested in that for my project that will be a labyrinth, a spiritual labyrinth.

What do you mean, a spiritual labyrinth?

It's used for spiritual rituals. I realized, by reading about it, that there are labyrinths and there are mazes. The labyrinth is usually in the form of a circle. It doesn't have walls because you travel through the labyrinth with the goal to get to the center, and there's only one path. It's not like a maze where you get lost and you have choices. It has a completely different purpose. You walk through a labyrinth and it's more like a commitment and a surrender. You are just going to follow that path until you get to the center, and when you do get there, you really have an experience of having reached the core, the nirvana.

Has being pregnant affected the way you feel in this regard as well?

Um, well... yes! Being pregnant for me is a big physical experience, of feeling another human inside my body. Feeling a connection with that other growing being. But, in terms of my life as an individual, I'm feeling like I have to share now—my time, my energy, all of that. I'm a very driven person, so it makes me see how much I can step over my limits and just keep plowing through. Still allowing for that is difficult. It's a challenge for me.

You work so much with architecture, and that relationship is very clear. Do you tend to come with a concept first, or with the architecture first?

It depends. It's a combination, it happens both ways. In *Descent*, for example, I saw the architecture first, and then it triggered into something emotional and narrative. Then I found out that it was once the location of a domestic violence court. Then I made the connection of why I was having all these women in the stairs, inhabiting this sort of domestic realm.

But you didn't know it was a domestic court when you picked the building?

No.

That's amazing!

And even when I started making the piece... Did you know the history of the person who designed the building?

I found out about it, yeah, it was—Stanford White.

Yeah.

And you know how he died, right?

Yeah, I read a book about him! And I know he was fascinated with women.

He was a famous pervert! How did your relationship to architecture evolve?

When I was in high school, I did a very interesting dance program in Ottawa. I discovered dance there, and I was able to create my own pieces, things that were really outside of the box, at a very young age. One of the teachers had us do what he called an "environmental piece." We would go around the whole school and use the stairs, the elevator, the cafeteria,

even the other students. I also realized how much modern dance was something people did not get. The other students in the school were like, "Dance people are weird... they are throwing themselves on the walls and on the floor." I was really in love with the experience I was having, and I was like, "Ah, this is so wonderful, why are people so alienated by it?" I really wanted to initiate people to dance, make them feel like they could get it. So I did the "end of year" shows that everybody attends and people started to like my work. Technicians would come and see me and say, "You know, I really get your piece, I really like it!" That made me happy. I still don't understand exactly why dance is so difficult to access. Sometimes I feel a little bit lonely in that quest.

In making dance accessible?

Yeah. I feel like a big section of the dance community is not so concerned by that. Or, does not desire to appeal to a larger public, or they're more interested in the evolution of the form, and expressing themselves through movement, and those kinds of things. All of which are obviously very valid.

You think on a very grand scale. You're not just making it accessible, you're also taking on huge tasks.

If we're going to be talking about making it accessible—we're going to have a large audience, we're going to have a large impact—it's not just about quantity. You have to be careful that it's not just quantity versus quality, but it is about quantity, too. I feel like some of those works that happen, it seems to me—and some people hate me for saying that—but it seems to me that some of these works that were so significant in the '70s and '60s that everybody talks about...

Like what?

Well, just open any book about performance history. The memory of these events is now in books, and the books create validity and importance. In the case of a lot of visual arts, what is written about it, what is said about it, really is what it is in the end, more than the object itself. Dance doesn't have as much of that. [Many of] the pieces weren't seen by many people. [Their reputation was] propagated through [written and spoken reviews], they became important, and they became part of history because they were challenging certain things about art at that time. It's a process of evolution, but I'm interested in the present. Even if it's ephemeral. And I feel it: it is ephemeral. Some of the works that I've done are very ephemeral. The undertaking of the character and form, how it unfolded, was a huge thing in the moment, and then it just sort of fades away.

Except that it's on YouTube and millions of people can access it still.

[Laughs] Yes, yes, there's all that, and that's also part of it.

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a philosophical level, because part of subject/object also emerges [as] character, and I'm me in that piece. But I'm also a character, and I'm also different facets of me. That's interesting for me to play with: character and not character. Being myself and interacting with people, as myself and as themselves. But we're still—we're a play, together.

Well, talking about *Home* now and thinking about *Descent*—how you started that piece exploring the domestic world of women, not knowing that you were doing so in a court of domestic violence—I think it's interesting that now you're doing *Home* using your body as a site, and you've become pregnant while you're developing this piece. It's incredible!

[Laughs] Yeah, it is!

What are the chances?

And also, this piece is becoming about economics, which is a whole other strange thing.

Well, I want to talk about economics, too. How is it about economics?

Well, it's complicated, but I'm interested in game theory, and some ideas related to the collective versus the individual, and how people are for themselves, or for the greater good; how probably unaware sometimes they are of these dynamics; and how much we actually do operate as a group and [how] we need that for our survival. And how much we also need to protect ourselves and take it all for ourselves, and our ego. Cooperation versus competition. I'm going to do a performance using a bank. It happens in a boardroom, so it's a meeting place; it's the meeting place where we are gathering around ideas about other people. Where a small group of people make decisions for a large group of people who are not there, and whose [bodies are] at play. [As an example], war is almost better because you can say, so here we are, negotiating people's bodies, without really being aware of how fragile the body is.

Well you've orchestrated large groups of people in an abandoned pool in Brooklyn, you've gotten dancers to fly off of buildings, you've worked with iconic musicians like David Byrne—is there something you've dreamt of doing, that you haven't been able to do?

Well, I have a lot of projects that I'm dreaming of doing, that I want to do, that are going to push some of these ideas to the next level, but that are grand, a bit more grand than I've done before. And I know they will come in the right time. It's like when I was working at McCarren Park Pool. I'd seen the pool in 1997, or so. And I wanted to show there, but I wasn't ready. And then the time came in 2005, and the time was right. It was right at that time where people did not believe that I could actually bring an audience to Greenpoint. And next thing you knew, thousands of people were coming to McCarren Park Pool!

Is there a spot that you're eyeing now, when you walk around?

No. When I see a place that I like, I'm like, "Oh, that's nice." But it doesn't really exist until I've created something there. It's like taking a photograph of a rainbow. You can't take a photograph of a rainbow. I think a rainbow is so nice and you see it—who needs to photograph that? For me the art of photography is not to photograph a rainbow. It's to take something that's not beautiful like a rainbow and change its nature with your photography. It's the same thing with the sites! Sometimes I don't want to use a site that's so beautiful. You know, the McCarren Park Pool was not beautiful in the eyes of many. And we brought to it a beauty that people can understand and relate to.

Your work with the more ephemeral and experiential has resulted in commissions for music videos, such as Feist with "1,2,3,4." How do you see that in the context of your overall philosophy?

The idea of dance worked really well in the Feist video. I've been very happy with that. Not only did they get dance, they got the message, and it affected them in a very subconscious way, like, "Ah, it makes me happy! That video makes me happy!" That for me is an indication that the message has gotten through, which to me was the inspiration for how I understood the song, which was about adolescence and this kind of love you can only find when you're an adolescent: adoration, love, camaraderie, and your friends are everything.

It was also taking a private experience and making it a group celebration.

Absolutely. And in an imaginary way, it's almost like, yes: she's entering the space like she's alone, and then she's not alone. That's nice, and goes beyond the trick of people coming from behind her. It was very enjoyable [experience] because my work is also very visual and contextual, so it lends itself very well to filming. It's fun to work with [video director] that the message has gotten through, which to me was the inspiration for how I understood the song, which was about adolescence and this kind of love you can only find when you're an adolescent: adoration, love, camaraderie, and your friends are everything.

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You thought of *Home* before you were pregnant.

Yes.

I'm curious about that piece because it's very different from the other pieces; it is very intimate. *Home* is a solo show, correct? And it's you—your body is the site.

I was interested in how far we could go into the smaller aspects of life. And I was thinking [about how] I'm always drawn to sites; it's almost like I get all my information from the site, like I was dependent on the site. I grew that way, my process now is I have to sit there, in the site, and really think and think, and I can't work if I'm not on the site—I have no idea what to do. So, I decided to use my body as the site of the performance. I thought it would be a challenge. The body is a place. As I was saying earlier, that place is both object and subject. It's actually a place where one can go. And it doesn't have to be literally like, "OK, you're sitting on me, so there you are on my body." But I am using some metaphors where I'm going to be building a landscape on my body, with animals, crawling around on my body hair.

You're performing in April, when you'll be very pregnant. How do you feel about performing this piece? How is it going to change?

I like to stay really flexible. I think it's okay for things to change. I don't want it to be just about the pregnancy, and it's not. But, it is on