

## Kayne Griffin Corcoran

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#### Sculpting With Bodies at American Ballet Theater

The choreographer Jessica Lang, who is as interested in imagining shapes and compositions onstage as in inventing steps, makes her second work for the company.



On wooden wings of dance: From left, Hee Seo, Herman Cornejo, Katherine Williams, Misty Copeland, James Whiteside and Stella Abrera rehearsing Jessica Lang's "Garden Blue" with designs by Sarah Crowner.

The choreographer Jessica Lang was directing traffic from the front of a studio at American Ballet Theater a few days ago. It was late in the afternoon, and seven tired dancers turned their slightly haggard faces toward her. One by one she arranged them around one of two wooden, winglike structures, turned on its side so that it created an ovoid wall.

She worked like a sculptor, molding the group until it pleased her eye. Until finally, there it was: a wave-shaped figure shaped out of interlocking bodies, flowing from low to high.

"Oh, that's nice," Ms. Lang said. An image, combining bodies, music and an architectural element, had coalesced. Then she began to figure out how the dancers would move out of this sculptural group and into the next phrase of Dvorak's lyrical "Dumky" trio, the music for her latest dance, "Garden Blue," which is to receive its premiere at Ballet Theater on Friday.

Ms. Lang is a more visually driven choreographer than most — as interested in imagining shapes and compositions onstage as in inventing steps. "I like to sit back and sculpt," she said after rehearsal, "I think in images and momentum and structure."



The artist Sarah Crowner, left, with Ms. Lang. "I immediately found that we were very like-minded," Ms. Lang said, "practical and yet inventive within the parameters of how far we can push boundaries."  
Credit: Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

At 43, Ms. Lang has been making dances for 20 years for an increasingly lengthy list of ballet companies, not to mention opera companies and her own ensemble, Jessica Lang Dance, which she formed in 2011. After studying at Juilliard and performing with Twyla Tharp's company for two years in the late '90s, she struck out on her own as a choreographer, a bold move for one so young. "I always thought I wanted to be a dancer, and then I got the job and I hated it," she said. "I missed creation."

She's one of the hardest working ballet choreographers on the scene, and yet it has taken her years to reach its upper echelons. "Garden Blue" is her 102nd dance and her second commission for American Ballet Theater, after six for Ballet Theater's studio company and school.

As with her previous work for Ballet Theater, "Her Notes," the visual element is crucial. Ms. Lang likes to collaborate closely with visual artists — their vision stimulates her imagination. This new work is a kind of a nature study, she said, inspired by the paintings of her collaborator, Sarah Crowner, a visual artist who lives in Brooklyn. The two were introduced by Kara Medoff Barnett, Ballet Theater's executive director.

Ms. Lang visited Ms. Crowner's studio and immediately felt a connection. "It was visceral," Ms. Lang said. "I immediately found that we were very like-minded: practical and yet inventive within the parameters of how far we can push boundaries."

Ms. Crowner, 44, is known for collagelike paintings in which large, vibrant shapes lie in seas of contrasting color. "I'm really interested in pure, saturated, unfiltered color, and in color relationships," she said in a recent phone conversation. Her paintings have a clean, optimistic feel, like David Hockney's swimming pools, or Matisse's cutouts.

For Ms. Lang's ballet, Ms. Crowner has created a 46 x 40 foot backdrop in which a large field of blue — like a midsummer sky on a Greek island — is intersected, in one corner, by a swathe of vivid emerald green. It started out as a small paper collage, which was amplified and painted onto muslin at a workshop in upstate New York. (Ms. Crowner usually works with large canvas cutouts, which she sews together, but this technique proved impractical because of the scale.)



From left, Mr. Cornejo, Ms. Seo and Mr. Whiteside rehearsing "Garden Blue." Credit Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

The costumes are in brilliant shades of red, mango and violet. "I immediately thought of sky and ground," Ms. Lang said of her reaction, "and the costumes as buds or blossoms, life popping out from the ground."

The final visual element is the trio of wing-shaped wooden structures — two resting on the ground and one hanging from the rigging above, like a fragment of a Calder mobile. As the dance progresses, the dancers manipulate the two stage-bound shapes; this, too becomes part of the choreography. They form passageways, ships' bows, platforms and walls, channeling the dancers' movement across the stage.

The cast of seven is divided into three couples and one free agent, a woman who sweeps across the scene like an energetic force. "She's the wind, a blade of grass, a seed," Ms. Lang said.

One of those dancers is the soloist Blaine Hoven, who is collaborating with Ms. Lang for the third time. (The first was in 2004, when he was still in the Studio Company.) "We've been playing around more this time," he said between rehearsals. "Her last piece, 'Her Notes'" — also being danced this season — "was very structured from the start. She knows us better now, so she asks us for our input." That familiarity is obvious in her calm, assured demeanor in the studio.

Ms. Lang's own ensemble, Jessica Lang Dance, tours worldwide and works 30 to 35 weeks a year (a lot for a small company). At Ballet Theater, her new work is being presented as part of the company's "Women's Movement," an initiative meant to begin the process of leveling the lopsided playing field of ballet.

When asked how she felt about being promoted as a female choreographer, she sighed. "It's hard to say that I've worked this hard and now I'm getting recognized because I'm a woman," she said, her voice rising slightly. "I don't want to be measured on a different ruler. I mean, I've been doing this a long time."

But she is eminently pragmatic, and whatever frustrations she might harbor are left at the studio door. "I don't spend a lot of time dwelling on these things," she said.

Harss, Marina. "Sculpting With Bodies at American Ballet Theater." New York Times. 16 October 2018. Print/Web.



Ms. Crowner, Katherine Williams, Ms. Lang and Tomoko Uneda-Dunbar working on a costume. Credit Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

After a good rehearsal the other day she looked relieved and happy. Things were coming together nicely. She went around the room giving small corrections — “let the energy project downward,” and “use your back” — and then paused and smiled: “That was so much better!”

—Marina Harss