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## The Dance Between Place and Memory



Dancer: Sonsherée Giles Photo by John Hefti

With the questions of migration and immigration urgently brought forth on both national and international stages, Nancy Karp's new piece *Memory/Place* is timely. But as she recently wrote in the [SPEAK column of In Dance](#), her work is not driven by specific political events: "I am not making this work as a political response to our present-day crisis, rather the purpose of my art making is to transcend the political in pursuit of universal gesture and feelings as a way to express the tumultuous nature of the human experience over time."

*Memory/Place*, an evening-length piece that [opens this week at ODC Theater](#), stems from a structural interest in the edges and corners of the performance space. "I think they are often neglected," Karp commented in a conversation over the phone. "So often we see dance in the center of the stage because that's typically the hotspot, and I wanted to try to find ways to charge up the corners that are frequently forgotten. And then I began to think about society and being on the edge of society: what it's like to leave one's home and go to a new place either by choice or necessity; feelings of loss and disorientation and the eventual reorientation and reconnection of

oneself to place. And that led me directly to thoughts about the present day immigration and migration crisis.”

Karp has had the recurrent opportunity to witness this crisis at hand. She has been traveling to Sicily for the past 2 decades, eventually establishing a second home there and spending 2 to 3 months each year on the Italian island these last 10 years. Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, and has recently become the new gateway to Europe for refugees fleeing economic and political devastation in their home countries. Last summer in particular saw a significant increase in the number of immigrants landing on the shores of the island. It is not infrequent for the local press to include daily recounts of people who made it and those who perished while trying to cross the sea.

Some of the Sicilian print media served as imagery for Karp and the dancers (Peter Cheng, Janet Collard, Sonsheree Giles, Sebastian Grubb, Katie Kruger, and Amy Lewis) along with illustrations of people who immigrated to the United States in the late 1880s through Ellis Island. “I have a friend who has been working with Arabic speakers and translating ancient Sicilian poetry written at the time of the Crusades when the Arabs and Jews were forced to flee Southern Italy,” Karp added. “This collection of Arabic poetry -a kind of love poetry- has a deep feeling for the land these masses of people had to leave. I have thought a lot about the many cultures through history that have emigrated to other parts of Europe through Sicily and what they’ve left behind in terms of art and architecture, literature, their customs, and their tears when forced to leave.”

The making of *Memory/Place*, began 2 years ago, with the choice for Karp to work with four individual dancers, a format that she is usually not accustomed to. “I began by creating a series of solos—a challenge, as I primarily do not make solo work unless it’s in the context of a larger piece. A movement vocabulary was developed with each dancer that then evolved into this larger work. In thinking of memory and place choreographically: An example of this is the setting of movement material in one specific place on the stage at the beginning of the piece, later to be reorganized and reiterated in a new place in the space, thus allowing the mind through memory to recognize the connection.”

*Memory/Place* unfolds in three parts, each one accompanied by a different musical score. For the first two movements, Karp has commissioned composers Kui Dong and Robert Honstein, who have taken her initial concepts in different directions. “Robert Honstein created a piece of music for solo violin and electronics in which he pushes to the edge the range of the violin,” Karp explained. Karp had used a piece of music by Dong for *Time and the Weather* and recalled the composer appreciating how Karp allowed her music to ‘breathe.’ “I do like the music to have its own place. There’s a dialogue between the choreography and the music. It’s not that we illustrate the music or that the composer animates the choreography,” added the choreographer. Both composers will join Karp in a post-performance conversation moderated by writer Rita Felciano on opening night.

Karp also engaged in a dialogue and collaboration with visual artist Thekla Hammond, with whom she collaborated in 2013 with her piece *Continua in Light*. Hammond’s Painting #5 from her *A Full Life Story* series was mounted on a wall in the rehearsal studio for several months and its dynamic palette served as inspiration for the piece. “There is great motion and activity, stillness and turbulence in Thekla Hammond’s [painting.] The choreography works with this qualities of contrast and a layered texture,” Karp commented. Details of the painting will be projected as a film on the back scrim throughout the piece, and the Hammond’s work will be eventually revealed, marking the duration of the dance.

Karp’s history and personal landscape also find their way into the piece, notably through the use of Lou Harrison’s *Grand Duo For Violin and Piano*, the first three movements of which is the score of the third and last part of *Memory/Place*. Harrison, who lived in Aptos, near Santa Cruz, was a mentor for Karp when she was first making work in the seventies. She remembers him sitting in the audience when she was started presenting work at ODC’s old presenting venue, the Performance Gallery on Mississippi Street.

In this sense, the piece also speaks to Karp’s long history in the Bay Area. Last year, she celebrated the 35th anniversary of her company. Reflecting on the dance scene and the changes she has observed, she offered: “When I first moved here, there were a few spots to perform and a few dancers. Now San Francisco is a place to come to dance. It’s very exciting for me to see all the different generations, as well as new

ideas, new approaches, new dance styles, techniques, and the relationships dancers make with one another. When we were building our house in Sicily I stepped away from the community for a short period and when I returned, I found a blossoming that was quite exhilarating.”