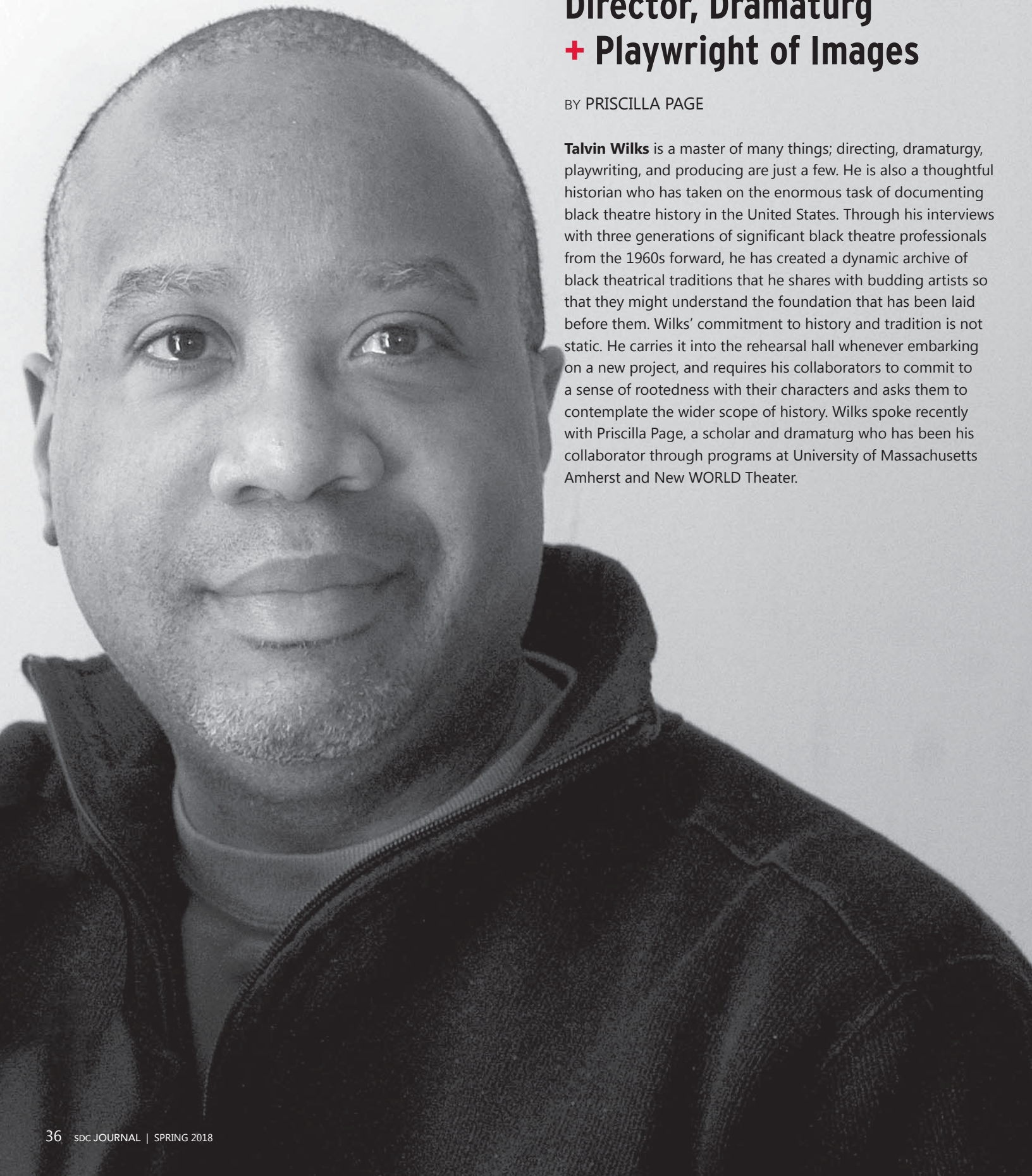


# TALVIN WILKS

Director, Dramaturg  
+ Playwright of Images

BY PRISCILLA PAGE

**Talvin Wilks** is a master of many things; directing, dramaturgy, playwriting, and producing are just a few. He is also a thoughtful historian who has taken on the enormous task of documenting black theatre history in the United States. Through his interviews with three generations of significant black theatre professionals from the 1960s forward, he has created a dynamic archive of black theatrical traditions that he shares with budding artists so that they might understand the foundation that has been laid before them. Wilks' commitment to history and tradition is not static. He carries it into the rehearsal hall whenever embarking on a new project, and requires his collaborators to commit to a sense of rootedness with their characters and asks them to contemplate the wider scope of history. Wilks spoke recently with Priscilla Page, a scholar and dramaturg who has been his collaborator through programs at University of Massachusetts Amherst and New WORLD Theater.





Talvin Wilks + Ping Chong  
PHOTO Adam Nadel

**PRISCILLA** | Talvin, you regularly work as a playwright, director, and dramaturg. Do you see those labels as all being part of one artistic identity? Or do you separate out the different functions?

**TALVIN** | I see them as one identity. I live within the landscape of all three disciplines, whether I'm designated with a specific contractual function in the room or not. I always call upon my directorial skills, theatre history knowledge, my position as the outside eye, and my approach as a structuralist (meaning one who creates structural components) to serve me in a particular collaboration. All of the elements at any given time are at play—depending on the demand in the moment.

**PRISCILLA** | How did this hyphenated artistic identity evolve? Which discipline were you drawn to first?

**TALVIN** | We could also say it's a hybrid identity. It's interdisciplinary. I think that I've always lived in that place.

I was greatly influenced by members of the Talking Band, who had been members of the Open Theater, during my undergraduate training at Princeton. My directing instructor, Steve Gomer, was an assistant and collaborative director with **Joseph Chaikin**. My playwriting instructor was Jean-Claude van Itallie, who was a major writer for the Open Theater. My acting instructor was Tina Shepherd. Paul Zimet was also there. Over the course of four years, whenever I engaged with theatre practice, I was mostly working from that history of the Open Theater and the Talking Band. My final thesis project—in which I wrote and directed an ensemble piece—would be considered a devised piece today. My mentor for that was Jean-Claude.

Joe Chaikin used the term “playmaking.” It is a collaborative process that uses improvisation

as a base. It is where I first really discovered my movement-based exploration in practice. The idea is founded in that practice and exposure.

So, I've always had this hybrid vision. I've always moved through the process of playwriting, playmaking, and directing. My earlier works—outside of my own playwriting—were collaborative ones with poets such as Ntozake Shange and Carl Hancock Rux, who both work within a poetic, embodied, choreopoetic approach to performance.

**PRISCILLA** | I want to know more about your exploration of the black theatre history in America. Would you talk about the black artists and traditions that inspired you when you began your journey?

**TALVIN** | The connection inside of it all is thinking of the spiritual. I often go to ritual. It goes back to even the earliest works that I created, coming out of undergrad, which were *Incubus: An American Dream Play*, which was very much a ritual addressing racism and sexism in America, leading into *Tod, the boy, Tod*, which was also a ritual expurgation of racism and assimilation at a particular time.

Or look at the next work, *The Trial of Uncle S & M*, which I developed with my collaborative Spin Lab. Again: ritual that's trying to expose and explore issues of race, cultural assimilation, and identity.

This then led me to work on *The Love Space Demands* with Ntozake Shange, which in many ways utilizes aspects of a choreopoem but is also ritual again. Movement and music are also always there inside of these early explorations. That's my foundation. The artists I'm inspired by in that tradition are Adrienne Kennedy, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange. Their forms and thinking about myth-based, ritualized explorations of identity, oftentimes in the vanguard of protest, were the things

that excited me very early on and informed the work that I was doing at the time. From that early cauldron comes my understanding and my ongoing investigations as well as my ability to work with playwrights, musicians, choreographers, and dancers.

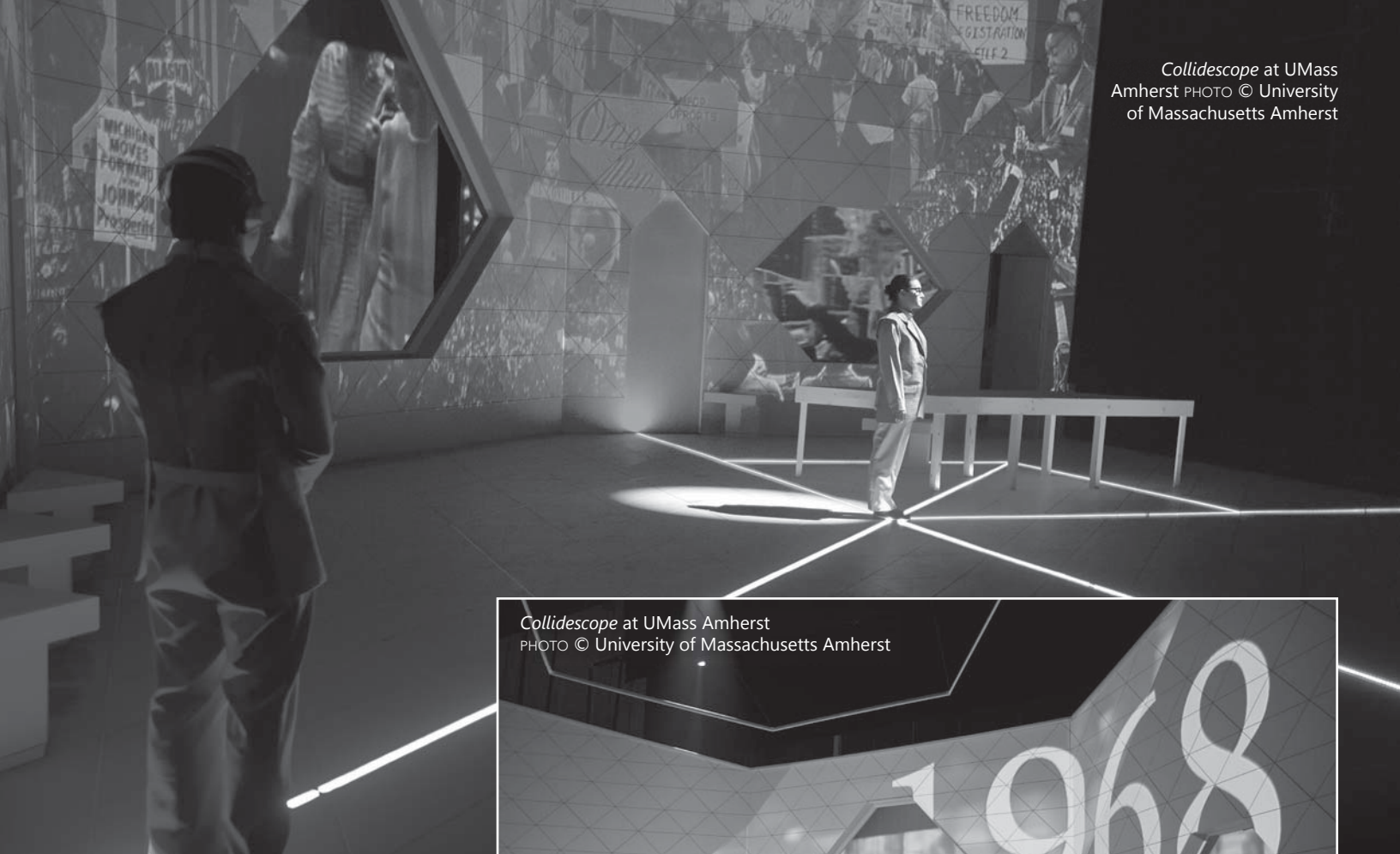
I spent my formative years out of college at Crossroads Theatre. When I arrived there, they premiered *The Colored Museum* with **George C. Wolfe**. I was present when [South African playwright and director] Mbongeni Ngema was there with *Sheila's Day*. **Vernel Bagneris** was there with *Further Mo'*. I got this amazing tutelage by watching directors L. Kenneth Richardson, **Ricardo Khan**, **Woodie King Jr.**, and Bette Howard, and playwrights Aisha Rahman and Leslie Lee. There was a wonderful array of artists at that time.

There was a new vanguard of writers then. Anna Deavere Smith, Robbie McCauley, Laurie Carlos. All of these wonderful artists traveled through that building, and I was able to watch the development of their works firsthand. Ultimately, my professional playwriting debut was there, and my professional directorial debut was there, thanks to Sydne Mahone, the Director of Play Development. It became a wonderful five-year investment in artistic craft.

**PRISCILLA** | You have described your dramaturgy process as “collaborative dramaturgy.” Sometimes people have trouble understanding what a dramaturg does in a rehearsal room. Can you describe your process or just give us a definition of collaborative dramaturgy?

**TALVIN** | I don't want to give a definition. I'm really sick of people saying they don't know what dramaturgy is in the room. They *do* know what dramaturgy is. Everyone engages in it. Everyone has a particular practice, and dramaturgs bring that all in-house.





Collidescope at UMass Amherst  
PHOTO © University of Massachusetts Amherst



My roles are multifaceted. I'm a structuralist. Not in a pedagogical sense but as someone who builds image and theme and process. You could say that when I'm working with choreographers, I create a type of script. Maybe I'm the playwright of images.

I build an ongoing system and identify structure that is connected to movement vocabulary. It is connected to thematic ideas. It helps to build the fundamental structural blocks for the way we see the piece.

I collaborate with the choreographer and the dancers to build vocabulary but also language that holds that movement vocabulary. That gives the choreographer, the dancers, and the dramaturg a way of talking about the components that they are making together. To me, *that* is what engaged collaborative dramaturgy is all about.

When I'm working as a dramaturg on a new play, I do a text analysis, but what I am really doing is identifying the thematic building blocks of the piece. I look at how that piece is actually structured. I look at how the playwright or director understands those blocks and how they're working inside of the piece.

As a director, when I'm talking to designers, I always do what I call a dramaturgical production overview in which I write down all of the components of the piece. I talk about

the thematic ideas, structural ideas, images, interpretations of major anchoring points inside of a particular play. I share that as a document for members of the design team to have a foundation to begin their work.

Dramaturgy is how I lead, no matter what. As a director, my first role is dramaturgical. As a playwright, I'm dealing with the dramaturgy of my own work. As a collaborative dramaturg engaged with choreographers, I am helping to build the work; I'm in the room from the very beginning. That's what I like: to be there from concept to the actual realization on stage. So, for me, that's why the term "collaborative" is essential to the way I engage as a dramaturg.

**PRISCILLA** | Your collaborators read like a who's who of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary avant-garde artists: **Ping Chong**, Laurie Carlos, Bebe Miller, **Camille A. Brown**, **Carmen de Lavallade**, and Sekou Sundiata, to name a few.

You have worked with Ping Chong on a number of co-created pieces. How do you each approach playwriting, directing, and dramaturgy with, say, the work of *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre- and Post-Racial America*? How is that similar and different from—in many ways very different from—*Undesirable Elements*? You have a longer history with *Undesirable Elements*; I think you've worked with him on 10 of those, and there have been three iterations of *Collidescope* to date. Can you talk a little bit about that co-creating relationship?

**TALVIN** | Ping is a virtuosic mover and shaper of bodies and space. That's a foundation. I think it connects with my movement-based approach to staging.

We first worked together in 1994 and then more consistently since 2000. That's a long-term relationship—well over 20 years—that continues to evolve and develop. We really see our present



**Talvin Wilks + Ping Chong** work with students on *Collidescope* at UMass Amherst  
 PHOTO © University of Massachusetts Amherst

work as co-conceivers, collaborators. We share the work. We share a very simpatico vocabulary and a process of exploration that we see and support in each other.

My history with Ping goes back to the very first production of *Undesirable Elements* that I worked on in Seattle. *Undesirable Elements* is a long-term oral history theatre piece, but it's really more of a choral-archival exploration of history. Many worlds meld and merge into what we do on-site with communities. Ping is a collaborative writer; he prefers working with a writing partner. My initial role was to think of myself as the dramaturg in that process, but it always involved co-writing and co-interviewing. It was a co-collecting, collaborative process.

Initially, the participants had to be bilingual and bicultural, which was a guarantee that they would have a family story from another place, different from the place that we were exploring, which heightened this exploration of *otherness*. That was the established foundation for many, many years until we started developing the next phase of the hybrid *Undesirable Elements*, which was about taking voices from previous productions and putting them together to see if there was a way to tell a broader history—an immigrant history, a history of place, a history of culture.

That became very exciting. That started to evolve into thinking about otherness and

differences within communities. I developed one of the early versions of that called *Women of the Hill*, which was an *Undesirable Elements* project we did in Pittsburgh as part of an August Wilson celebration for the inaugural season of the August Wilson Center for African American Culture. The piece we developed was a tribute to the voices of African American women from the Hill District over a period of time. It was intergenerational. It crossed class lines, explored color issues, and we explored socioeconomic conflicts within the community. Then you started to see this interesting exploration of difference and what that meant internally within specific communities.

Today, *Undesirable Elements* has evolved so that we explore many different issues: people's disabilities, transgender identities, and survival stories of sexual assault and sexual abuse. Ping has done—I don't even know what the count is anymore—over 50 productions nationally and internationally.

So, our long-term collaboration with *Undesirable Elements* shows an aesthetic evolution. It is an exploration into multimedia, specific cultural elements, and movement. Our work on *Undesirable Elements* led into the collaboration for *Collidescope*, which started as a commission from the University of Maryland and has now evolved into a long-term exploration of the history of racialized violence in the United States.

Inside of that, most of the stories and the re-creations are based on factual documents, historical documents that we stage in a type of futuristic "holodeck" because the piece is told through the gaze of an intergalactic alien traveler who is trying to understand this unique practice of racial abuse of the black body throughout American history.

That now has become this wonderful landscape for the way we move bodies through space on stage, the way we integrate multimedia, the way we use found text inside of our storytelling, and the way we've merged this type of stylized performance. So *Collidescope* has evolved out of that long-term, long-standing 20-year-plus exploration.

**PRISCILLA** | I watched you directing student actors at University of Massachusetts Amherst when the production was done here. You helped actors create intimate moments inside content that is very challenging, dehumanizing, even. I witnessed you move the actors through this challenging work in a caring way. I think you helped them immensely with their craft.

The staging of lynchings and other forms of racialized violence shows up not only in *Collidescope* but in other works too. Can you describe how, in terms of craft, you link the ideas of these historical, violent moments to acting? What do you give to the actors who



Rising Harmonies to A Level  
OF BLISSFUL STABILITY at end.  
keys together



have to confront this history and then create these images for the stage?

**TALVIN** | I think this connects to the idea of the movement-based practice. We're really talking about embodiment. It's an essential part of the storytelling. It's not necessarily just textual. It's how we are physically living inside of this particular history.

That's the real action between theatre and dance. Look at the work in Camille A. Brown's *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE* or at some movement-based process in *Walking with 'Trane* with Urban Bush Women. Then look at the movement-based exploration inside of telling those very violent stories inside *Collidescope*.

The exploration was often first and foremost ritualized. It was a way of connecting body and emotion and voice, and heightening or channeling the physicality of the story and the characterization itself. The process wasn't always around text; it was really thinking about the embodiment of the story itself. Having the actors step into a movement-based exploration or a movement-based expression of the story or a vocal interpretation of the story is a foundation of how I work. It connects to a process that I call "the rooted character."

Rootedness as an exploration is really thinking of the actor/performer as an embodied storyteller. You are ultimately trying to connect every performer to this type of internal truth so that everything they do, everything they



Mr. TOL E. RAnCE, choreographed by  
**Camille A. Brown**  
PHOTO Christopher Duggan

say, how they move on stage is true and generated from a rooted place of truth. I use it in performance practice. I use it in dance exploration. I use it inside of my own theatrical staging and approach to characterization. So rootedness is *the body as storyteller as a foundation*. In many ways, it's a practice. It's a principle. It's an understanding of a type of performative truth. And it's a technique.

**PRISCILLA** | It was a privilege to watch that process and see you bring this idea of rootedness to their craft. I think it was a real gift for college actors.

**TALVIN** | It's really about creating other options for them. They often feel like they're wrong, that they're wrong in their own bodies. So the goal is to make them feel right in their bodies.

**PRISCILLA** | This idea of the body as storyteller connects to your work in dance. Can you describe your preparation process for dance-based work?

**TALVIN** | Preparation is really in those very first conversations and how we're engaging and

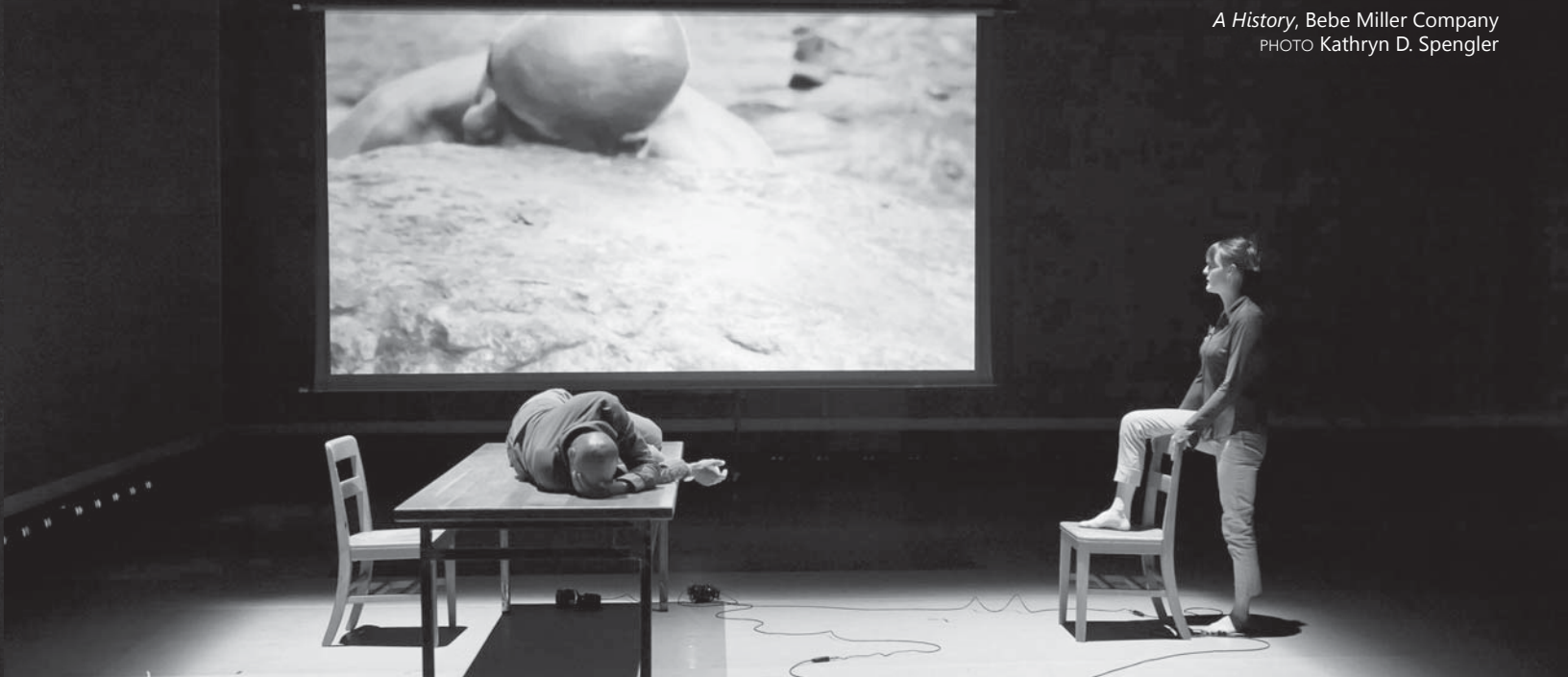
thinking. It also depends on when I'm actually entering into the process. Ideally, I enter right at the beginning, so I'm there. This helps to formulate the collaborative language, what the project is or can be. I consider myself to be on the first level of the actual thinking, if it is a collaboration—whether I'm working with Ping Chong or with Camille A. Brown, it starts in conversation. We start

by talking about thematics, ideas...conceptual ideas.

I begin the process of collecting imagery, vocabulary, and language. Normally, it is something that's coming from a piece of text or coming from an image or an idea. Then I go and research and build another type of construct and understanding, bringing that back into the conversation with the artist that I'm collaborating with. In fact, most of these ideas are generated before we have even entered into any type of rehearsal process or room. So that's why, to me, the important word is collaboration. It's really those first engagements, the building of those first conversations. That's the work that I love doing. I'm right there at the beginning of the initial idea.

**PRISCILLA** | In your most recent work with Bebe Miller, tell us how your role as the dramaturg led you to create a performance archive that she's now using to generate work. Can you describe that?

**TALVIN** | That comes from the long-term history of our process. We've been working



together for over 20 years. We started in 1998 in the development of a piece called *Going to the Wall*. It had already been in process, and I stepped in mid-way, mainly working with the ensemble to think about character, concept, and performing themselves inside of the work. With that piece, we navigated very challenging issues around race, identity, and gender in the room in which the dancers were asked not to check their identity at the door but to explore and bring it into the actual process.

Bebe was looking for a much more performative, theatrical way of exploring identities in the room, and there wasn't really a language for that kind of process. That created an immediate role for me. In conversations with [dramaturg] Katherine Profeta, there is this notion that, as a dramaturg, you recognize an understanding between yourself and the choreography, or yourself and the director. We call it the "simpatico" moment. There's an established language, vocabulary, and aesthetics that build the foundation for a successful relationship.

From there, Bebe commissioned me to be a writer and dramaturg for the next piece, *Verge*. The important thing about that work is that, through an Individual Artist grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, I was able to be in the room all the time. It supported my presence inside the collaborative room. I really like to be in the room in the same way that a dancer is in the room throughout the development of the process. That has really become the preferred

role that I play, especially in dealing with choreographers and dance.

We started to build a way of working and understanding vocabulary and collaboration—the arc of thought, the embodied history that lives inside of dancers that's not always identified—and we established that they are themselves these incredible living archives of information that choreographers rely on, especially choreographers like Bebe Miller.



Vanessa Butler + Aaron Pitre in *Jimmy and Lorraine* at HeartBeat Ensemble  
PHOTO Andy Hart

I was augmenting the process through my templating/documenting of the work, which was already building an archive of process. That documenting was mostly used inside of the development process itself when we were exploring the work called *A History*. It was later used for a website called *DanceFort* and made into an e-book. Basically, in *A History*, we were making a work about the way dancers make

dance and the resources that we call upon to make dance.

So, from that, we came to this notion of what I call the living archive, the performance archive. It's this idea that you can look *back* to generate *forward*. The archive is not something that's just locked away or historicized or put on a shelf. It is *actively there* to navigate, to think about process, to think about what is next. The *living archiving* is a type of recall, reclamation, and not even necessarily re-envisioning, but the *visioning anew*.

This is my my long-term collaborative history with many of the artists mentioned earlier. I've created six world premieres with the Bebe Miller Company. With Camille A. Brown, we're now on three. With Urban Bush Women, I just started working with them in 2015 and we've already worked on three projects, and I can see that continuing. With Ping Chong, we have worked on over 13 projects and counting.

I think in all of these works, the operative word is collaboration: where my role melds and merges as the guiding eye, shaping eye, directorial eye, choreographic eye, documenting eye...

**PRISCILLA** | That's so beautiful. That's exactly right.

I want to talk about a piece of yours, *Jimmy and Lorraine*, which was supported, developed, and produced at Heartbeat Ensemble [in



Hartford, CT] and has gone on to a few other presentations. The story is an exploration of two of America's most iconic writers, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry. Why do you think that the lives and the works of these two artists in particular still hold a primary place of interest for so many readers and for so many theatregoers? And why does it hold importance for you?

**TALVIN** | That's a big question.

The "why" is almost immediate. You have a visceral response to their language. The goal for me was to really showcase, in particular, Lorraine's radical voice that you don't necessarily connect to the plays if you don't know all of them. If you don't know *Les Blancs*, you don't really know some of the radical, political aspects of her writing. Even though, of course, *Raisin in the Sun* was very groundbreaking, political, and impactful. But she was also an incredible speaker and activist, called to the front lines mainly in the North—not in the South—to really tell the story of the civil rights movement.

So I wanted to put those two voices in conversation. They had a wonderful friendship. They were often called to the front lines together, and it isn't necessarily fully known, mainly because we lost her at the age of 34.

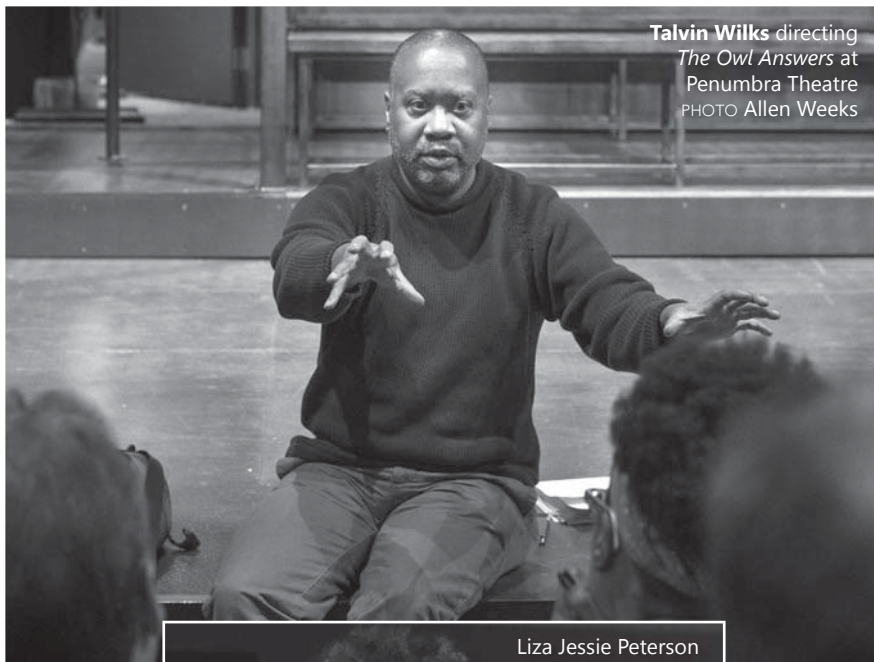
The interesting thing about the structure of the piece—which was directed brilliantly by Brian Jennings, a longtime collaborator of mine—is that it also could be seen as movement based, mainly because of the lyrical way I structure text on the page and how I think about it. Brian knows how I think about moving bodies and space and collaboration, and about text *and* movement *and* sound *and* music.

The piece is called *A Musing*. It's really "a musing," which is a meditation in thinking about their lives, their language, their voices. I wanted to capture the actions—a recitation of life the way I see it.

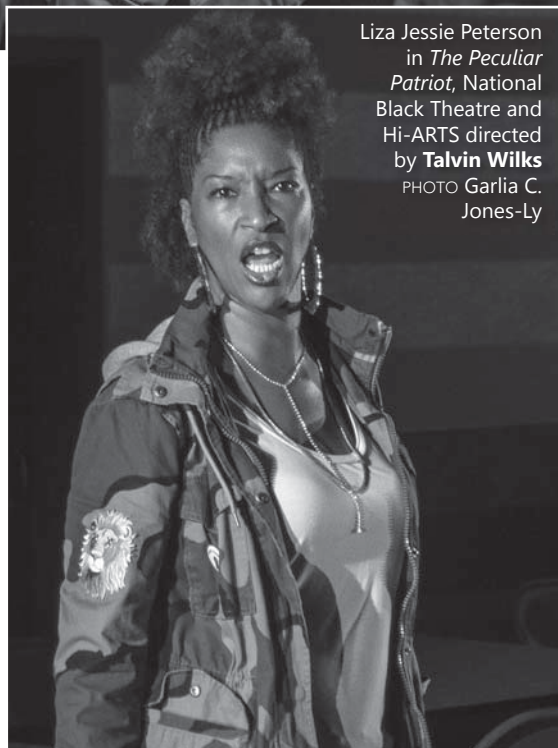
Baldwin and Hansberry were unique vessels because they were artists. They were in a particular vanguard. They were wrestling with issues of race, identity, sexuality, gender, politics, and art. I wanted to live inside their language. It's not a docudrama. It's not the

foundation of a bio-pic. It really is, as I say, a *musings*. It's a meditation of the embodiment of their life story and their own language.

I feel it was a ritual. It was a meditation to engage with the power of their voices from the early 1960s as we're looking at these "50th anniversary" explorations of that very significant time in our history. So that piece is



Talvin Wilks directing *The Owl Answers* at Penumbra Theatre  
PHOTO Allen Weeks



Liza Jessie Peterson in *The Peculiar Patriot*, National Black Theatre and Hi-ARTS directed by Talvin Wilks  
PHOTO Garlia C. Jones-Ly

the perfect example of how I think about the creation of a particular work. And it carries all of those elements. I think, in many ways, that's the work that I'm attracted to. That's the work I understand.

**PRISCILLA** | All of those things show up in different ways in your work. There are some delightful scenes in *Jimmy and Lorraine* where they do a sort-of vaudeville minstrel show as

they're talking about some of the toughest material in the piece. And yet they have a whole choreographed dance that's very jarring in terms of the content and what we're looking at. I think it is a good thing to jolt the audience.

**TALVIN** | If you look at my work, movement has always been a foundation. The collaboration with Sekou Sundiata and Marlies Yearby, for example: movement is there. If you really look through the arc of my work, the elements of movement, music, spoken word, and lyricism are always in there.

**PRISCILLA** | Another point in the arc of your work, and where we spent time together, was at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. You joined the faculty and came on as the interim Artistic Director of New WORLD Theater.

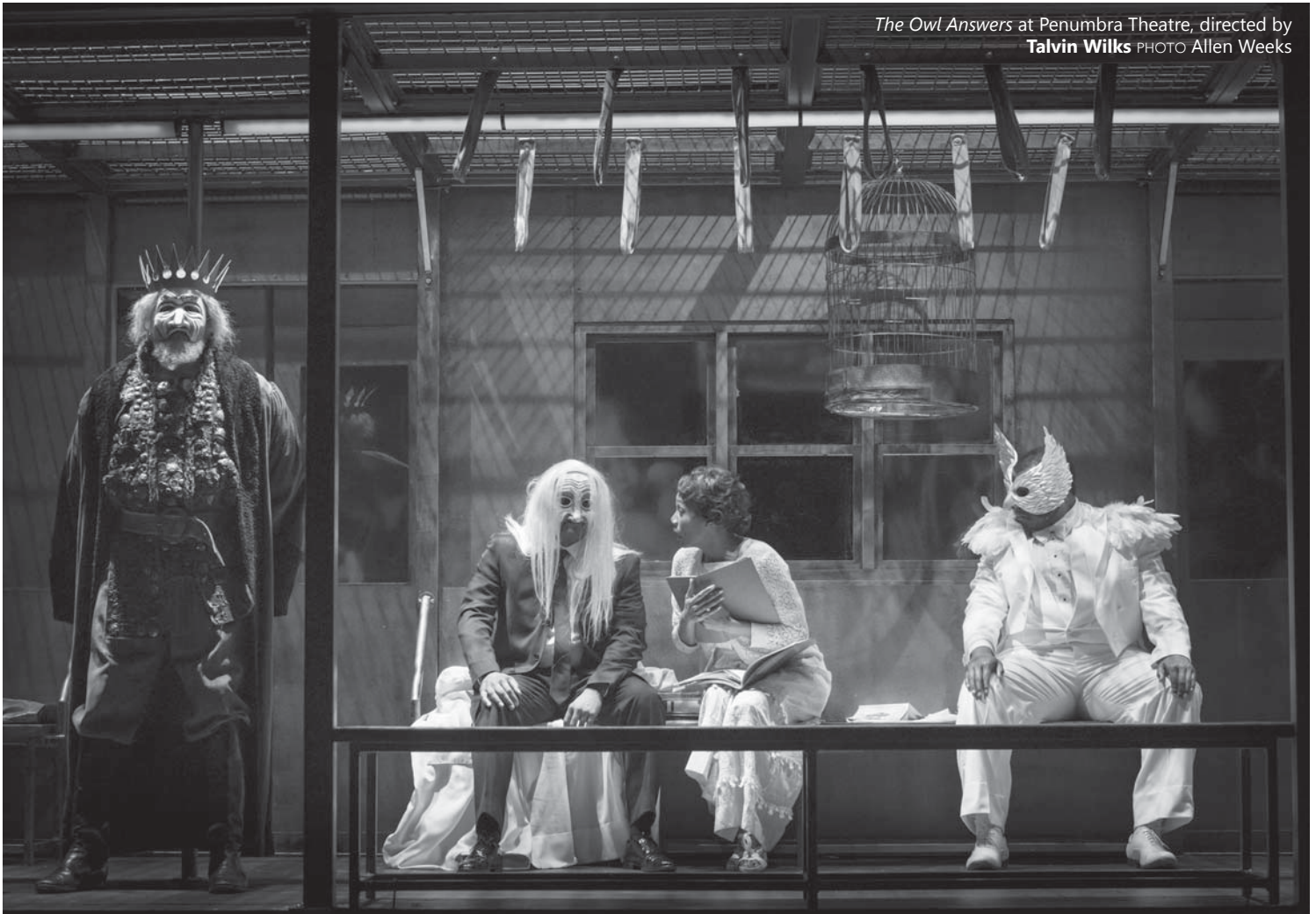
**TALVIN** | That was another artistic home. Even before I joined New WORLD Theater, I was already a part of New WORLD because of [Founder/Artistic Director]

Roberta Uno's vision. She really created the home for this convergence of artists—and also the next generation of artists—coming out of that particular performative cauldron. There were dancers who were hip-hop theatre performers—movement-based explorers.

So that's the third phase of the arc. It was just the perfect nexus of this collaborative process. Performers like Universes, Baba Israel, Rha Goddess, who are innovators, looking at text and movement—a new generation who all came through New WORLD.

New WORLD was the next arrival place for me as an artistic director, curator, and collaborator. It was definitely a place to further my ideas about the curatorial process as dramaturgical practice and to guide, support, and inspire that particular generation of artists at that time. It was short-lived but perfect.

For example, one of the beautiful things that got added into the curatorial mix in a very unique way was the built-in intergenerational nature of Project 2050, the youth retreat program at New WORLD. A number of folks I just mentioned—Rha Goddess, Baba Israel, Steven Sapp, and Mildred Ruiz—worked as teaching artists and mentors for Project



2050. Those folks were also artists who were being supported, presented, and produced at New WORLD, but who were also working in collaborative ways with young people that I think furthered the conversations about how to think about interdisciplinary work and how to make work that crossed a number of different lines in very organic ways.

**PRISCILLA** | I'd love to hear about what you're working on now.

**TALVIN** | I'm working as dramaturg on an adaptation of *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Cotes, with **Kamilah Forbes**, who is the conceiver and director, at the Apollo Theater, and Lauren A. Whitehead, the adapter. We're still formulating the language around it: concert performance, oratorio, meditation that evolves from a chorus of voices. It will be presented at the Apollo and the Kennedy Center in April 2018.

I'm in production for Harrison David Rivers' play *This Bitter Earth* at Penumbra. That opens in April as well. The piece I've just finished directing at the University of Minnesota is *Machinal*, by Sophie Treadwell, which I approached as a dance-theatre piece that explores movement of the Jazz

Age as a foundation inside of this American Expressionistic form.

I'm working with Baba Israel on his hip-hop musical, *Cannabis*, as well as the ongoing tour of *The Peculiar Patriot*, by Liza Jessie Peterson. I'm working on a jazz cabaret with Urban Bush Women called *Scat*, and there is future work with Ping Chong and Ain Gordon.

**PRISCILLA** | Beautiful. What surprises you the most? In theatre, in life?

**TALVIN** | What inspires me is what's next and what's coming. And the importance of being connected to that in a collaborative way. I want to know and work with new artists, the emerging, the newly established, the makers of now. That always continues to inspire me.

What surprises me most is the pervasive, endless racism in our society. As naive as that may sound, it surprises me because it is so enduring. It surprises me and exhausts me, this wasteful activity.

I understand my career as a privileged series of rooms. I've lived through, and have experienced, many generations of artists. I've

been in the room with and made work with Carmen de Lavallade. I've been under the tutelage of the founders of Crossroads Theatre, and they supported my early launching as a professional artist. I have a long-standing history with Penumbra Theatre and the incredible work that they allow me to think about and to make today. I was just produced by the National Black Theatre in Harlem and Hi-ARTS, these two incredible institutions committed to making new work.

I just spent time at Jacob's Pillow with Urban Bush Women and the Bebe Miller Company. In December, I was in residence with Camille A. Brown for the premiere of *ink* at The Kennedy Center. I am blessed in this navigation of generative practice. In this unique realm of collaboration with artists making new work, that's a career. It's a wonderful place to live. That's what I'm feeling right now. **SDC**