

## Doug Varone with Susan Yung

by Susan Yung

Doug Varone founded his New York-based company, Doug Varone and Dancers, in 1986. In addition to choreographing for his own company, which has toured the world, he has directed and choreographed opera, theater, and musical theater. Doug Varone and Dancers will perform at the Joyce Theater from February 24 through March 1. The program will include the new work *Alchemy*, to a score by Steve Reich; *Tomorrow*, to songs by Reynaldo Hahn; and *Lux*, with music by Philip Glass.

**Susan Yung (Rail):** Can you talk about the genesis of *Alchemy*, and the title?

**Doug Varone:** I first heard Steve's score at a Carnegie Hall concert, a celebration of his 70th birthday. I was totally taken by it and I wanted to find a way to create a work to it. I've created several works to Steve's scores. The musical landscape that he speaks in, I feel very comfortable moving within. The way he builds narratives and allows your brain to move through them I feel is kind of similar to the way I deal with dramatic work that doesn't have specificity to it.

He allowed us to create to the score. I was interested in creating a work not necessarily about the source itself, but about the larger issues around the source. So I wasn't interested in creating a work about Danny Pearl, I was interested in creating a work that dealt with the humanity and the scars left behind by acts like this.

I did a lot of research on Danny Pearl, and also went back to the Bible, because a lot of Steve's inspiration is text woven from the Book of Daniel, and also the inspiration of Pearl himself. These two men named Daniel that were very heroic, in many ways, martyrs for their religion. They were both Jews, and they were both held hostage. So we began building a body of material and a body of gestural work, movement work, that were based around images culled from these stories and then slowly began putting ideas together, kind of losing our way from the original source, letting a work evolve that resonated with these images, but were not specific to them.

The word alchemy came from an interview that I read with Tamara Pearl, Danny's sister, and the Pearl Foundation. Its mission is to support work both artistic and journalistic that moves Danny's idea of what freedom of speech is out into the world. She said they tried to think of themselves as alchemists—trying to turn something horrific into something good. And that's an image that stayed with me within the creation of this work and I feel that's in many ways what Steve's music does.

The hard thing about creating this dance was giving up. There was a place in the creation of the work where I had to let go—of the Pearl saga, of being beholden to these images that so potently took me to the place of creation, because it felt like it was a tight girdle that was holding me in.

So it was at that point where I had to place all the research away and liberate myself, let myself feel. That was a hard thing to do, because I lived for so long with all this information. But ultimately, the work is about all of us, not just one person.

**Rail:** Your choreography is so much about being human —about the complications, the rituals. How does that work when your dancers collaborate with you on the movement?



**Varone:** Over time, I've learned the type of artists that I am drawn to. They are artists who feel as if they are part of my brain, from the very first time that we work together. They have shared instincts. Everyone in that room, as well as artists I work with on other projects, are very different colors on the palette that I create from, and they're all there for different reasons. I'm drawn to people who have life experience, and can draw on that life experience to interpret the work that I do. I see them as great allies, great interpreters.

So they bring their emotional textures of their own lives into the work, and it turns me into a better director. I think working in theater and opera has turned me into a better choreographer of dramatic work because when you're dealing in theater and opera, everything has to have a reason. It doesn't always have to in dance. The grey areas are greater.

Finding those people is always a humbling lesson, because you can be drawn to the most beautiful dancer, and if they can't work within your process, then it's pointless.

**Rail:** Your work's very personal, and filigreed, and very human scale. When you're working at the Met Opera, is it a different way of approaching it?

**Varone:** Yes. It has to start in a different way for me. The scope is larger, and I usually begin with broad strokes, and then figuring out what kind of detail needs to be put into that. The opera that I'm working on now, I'm building large canvasses of ideas and until I know what the vocalists will bring to the table, I can't really fill in the remainder.

What I love about working in opera is that it allows me to take what I know as a dance-maker, on a completely other scale, and it moves me forward as an artist. And as a result of that it moves their art form forward, because they're seeing and doing things they've never done before. And that's exciting.

The thing that's so great about dancers, about the art form, is that you don't have to see the end of the road in order to believe that the end of the road is there. When you are making work with actors and singers, every moment needs to be made sense of before they go onto the next moment. And I've learned that as a director. But, I've also learned the moments when I can say to them, "You know what, I have no idea why I'm going to ask you to go and stand there, but I need you to trust me that we're going to find the reason together." And if I've earned their trust as a director, then together we'll find that. And that's a beautiful place to be in the creative process.

**Rail:** Can you talk about your company members being a wide range of ages?

**Varone:** I feel like I've been able to build a really positive working environment that allows artists to be fulfilled. I treat them as adults, I allow them to be a part of the collaborative process of building work. I'm looking for how we bridge the gap between our youthful sense of what dance is, and our mature sense of artistry, and everything in between, and building a family of artists that reflects that on every level. So I can have Alex Springer, who's 22 years old, and I can have Larry Hahn who's going to turn sixty next year. and that's what my palette is. And that's what life is, and as we get older, I want to keep working with those people, so at the age of seventy and eighty, there are these great dancers on stage that have a life and history and they're being complemented by dancers that are twenty, and thirty, and forty, and fifty—and we see it in terms of the work that we create, and I don't understand why we can't see it in the dancers we share.

Working with artists like Larry and Nina Watt and Peggy Baker, you don't have to share words with them. You give ideas, and they take them and mold them into other things by the time you turn around. I love working that way, and I love that my life will hopefully be that, that the history of the company will be reflective of the ages of the people that are working in it.

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Doug Varone. Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.*

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