



Artist As Leader: Banning Bouldin

In 2010, after almost a decade dancing in some of the world’s best contemporary dance companies and teaching and choreographing in vibrant cultural hubs throughout the US, Canada and Europe, Banning Bouldin returned to her hometown of Nashville. Two years later, she founded company New Dialect, Nashville’s first professional contemporary dance company, very quickly positioning contemporary dance as one of the cultural pillars of Nashville’s rapidly expanding arts scene.

New Dialect is also a dance research lab and serves the city as its first daily dance-training program. New Dialect’s most recent Summer Intensive welcomed 50 dancers from across North and Latin America.

In this interview, Banning reveals how her training and personal curiosity led her to found and lead a company that places conversation—within the company and most importantly with the surrounding community—at the heart of its mission.

Rob Kramer: Well, I’m going to go right to the heart of the matter. Do you consider yourself a leader?

Banning Bouldin: I consider myself both an artist and a leader, yes.

Rob: Tell me more.

Inherent in my practice as a former dancer, now choreographer, creative director, producer and the leader of a nonprofit arts organization, I see how my experience in the field of dance has equipped me for leadership and vice versa.

Banning: Well, for me, the two are not mutually exclusive. Inherent in my practice as a former dancer, now choreographer, creative director, producer and the leader of a nonprofit arts organization, I see how my experience in the field of dance has equipped me for leadership and vice versa. There's sort of a dialogue between the two that is a through line for me in my current experience as an artist and leader, for sure.

Rob: So when did you realize that you had that combination of skills?

Banning: I spent a lot of time in my career as a dancer in contexts that were highly collaborative, where I was engaging in companies and creative processes where there was a constant sort of exchange of leadership, whether that was the nonverbal proposal-making that happens whenever you're in an improvised partnership or in the very verbal context of teaching a class, offering language to help creatively direct the group that you're working with. And certainly as a choreographer. So for me there wasn't a hard-and-fast date where I suddenly felt myself like, "Oh, I'm a leader now!" It was a much more progressive process.

I will say that when I started, I was living in Sweden and then in France for about five and a half years in the mid-2000s. While I was in France, I started teaching a lot more and really developing my own movement curriculum and language, and the more time I spent — I want to say in front of the room, but it's not that; it's working to illustrate and to expound using language as much as I was using my physical body to illustrate — I really began to fall in love with that particular way of relating to dancers and other artists using language as a means of unlocking a multitude of different responses rather than kind of asking people to monkey see, monkey do.

So starting in 2007, I was spending a lot more time in what we would consider a directorial capacity, and I fell in love with engaging with dancers, mentoring dancers in that way, which ultimately led me to do what I'm doing now, which is I'm also the founder and director of a nonprofit organization.

Rob: How would you say that the skills from your discipline in dance and directing and choreography translate to the skills you use as a leader?

Banning: Oh, when you say the skills I use as a leader, do you mean the skills I use as the director of a nonprofit? Because for me, there's a lot of crossover and overlap between the different leadership roles and co-leadership roles I have with New Dialect, which is the nonprofit I run.

Rob: Right. So the definition we've been using for leading is *the ability to gain willing followers towards a vision within the given context that the leader is working in.*

Banning: Oh wow, yeah. That's a great definition.

Rob: Thank you.

Banning: So in my training, I was really fortunate to study at the Juilliard School under the direction of a brilliant man named Ben Harkarvy, who's no longer with us. His philosophy was really about developing artists as citizens. He believed that the studio was a place for connecting to ourselves, connecting to each other in the spirit of inclusion and diversity, that it was a space for positive acts, and that it needed to be that in order for our art form to have the kind of transformative effect that it can and, I would say, *ought* to have on the audiences and the communities that we serve.

Ben was really open with us about how in tandem with our excellence artistically, who we are as people and becoming good citizens was essential to our work as artists, that we couldn't neglect who we were as people in our growth as human beings, that that had to be just as important as our artistic development. It's common in dance, you see a lot of like body-typing or even companies or schools looking for specific kinds of people. Ben was able to bring together groups that are more diverse than I've ever seen. Having as a young person access to peers who are coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds, different religious backgrounds, different countries, cultures, races, and in this Petri dish at Juilliard where there are like 25 of us per class ... !

I really learned so much from how he curated each student body group, and I have endeavored to continue to bring those values into how I lead New Dialect, not just making room for but *celebrating* differences, which sadly is not pervasive in the dance field at large, I would say. You hear that there are a lot of conversations around, "Here we are, it's 2019, almost 2020, and we're still trying to increase awareness of the value of African American women in dance." I think Ben had an incredible impact on me in terms of being not just aware of but open to and celebrating differences in others and just how important it was to cultivate my life as a citizen, a good person, for a lack of a better term, alongside my work artistically.

I was 15 years old when I met him for the first time and was exposed to this way of thinking about dancing, art-making and also developing a value system around the kind of person I wanted to be, thinking about and making strides with my work as an artist that are really rooted in how am I engaging with my community right now. Is the work that I'm doing having a positive, galvanizing impact? Do I need to reassess? And then I

can't have any of those conversations in a vacuum by myself. They're relational in nature, those questions, those conversations, so I would say that for me, when I first ...

I moved back to Nashville, TN, which is where I grew up, after about five and a half years of living in Paris, working as a dancer with a couple of companies and teaching. When I moved back to Nashville, I started getting to know the dancers who are here, the teachers who are here, the talented folks who were working in their own corners trying to create work, trying to get funding supports, looking for professional development opportunities. I saw within the first year of being here that, God, there was just so much potential and passion and that I could help by drawing on my experience and on the artists that I knew to try to create some of the opportunities that had historically been missing in Nashville — whether they were professional development workshops, which is how we started, and certainly a full-time paid professional dance collective in Nashville, a contemporary dance collective specifically.

So I think for me, long answer to your short question: connecting the community here, staying open to their needs, being willing to ask questions, to listen to their answers, to brainstorm with other leaders in the arts community to make proposals, make leadership proposals in terms of new infrastructure that could exist, developing a new class series.

Over time as New Dialect has grown and continued to implement that kind of curious relationship-based approach, I've found that what we set out to build or what I have hoped to build for artists locally has met larger needs nationally and even internationally, that we now have people traveling to Nashville from all over North America, Latin America, even Europe and Israel, to come and grow with us, learn with us, exchange with us.

Rob: Great. I love it. You know, what you're making me think of is another interview we did with Vivian Howard, who's a chef in a very small community in rural North Carolina, and essentially now she's a celebrity chef. She's won major awards; she had a TV show; she's getting ready to launch a second TV show. What she did, moving to this small community where she grew up to start her restaurant, was have an intentional finger on the pulse of community development. Ultimately what she's done is economic development for the town of Kinston, NC, and in surprising ways, you can see how the town has built up around her restaurant over the years. It sounds, Banning, like it's similar to what you're doing: having a sensitivity to your community, engaging your community, seeing what the community needs and then building your programs around that need. Is that accurate?

... that's foundational to who we are, that we're actively working to continue to meet those needs, to ascertain what they are and how they're evolving, how we can serve our community through our art form.

Banning: That's absolutely it, and I think that that's why New Dialect has been successful in a relatively short period of time. Listen, we built a contemporary-dance training program and professional company in Nashville where there had never been one before, and the fact that we consistently sell out shows, that we have artists traveling from all over the place to come and train with us I think is a testament to the fact that we are meeting needs where we are. Yes, that's foundational to who we are, that we're actively working to continue to meet those needs, to ascertain what they are and how they're evolving, how we can serve our community through our art form.

Rob: Do you find more satisfaction coming back to your home community and doing this work versus doing what you did abroad with major dance companies? What's the difference for you between leading and developing in your home versus doing it abroad?

I couldn't be doing what I'm doing in Nashville in the way that I'm doing it without all of those experiences, so I see them more as on a continuum.

Banning: I would say that all of the experiences that I had as a young dancer training and then working and living as a professional dancer in cities like Chicago and New York, Stockholm and Paris, had their own pros and cons and were each and all wonderful learning opportunities for me that are a part of the fabric of my personhood now. I couldn't be doing what I'm doing in Nashville in the way that I'm doing it without all of those experiences, so I see them more as on a continuum.

As far as starting New Dialect, I wouldn't have even had the idea were I not in Nashville and in a place where I could see that there were needs that weren't being met. For me to create New Dialect in New York City or in Paris or in another larger dance mecca, it just doesn't make sense there because it's not needed there. Here it was, and that's where the ideas came from. The programs and all of the activities were developed out of the desire to connect and meet the needs of the communities here.

I'm not fond of comparison in this way, but when I look at my career as a dancer and how singular my focus was versus the broader scope that I've developed leading New Dialect, it's been so meaningful for me, this work of being involved in the community and having a positive impact, or at least endeavoring to.

Rob: As the head of New Dialect you have also become a cultural leader in Nashville, which is a rapidly changing city. Could you talk a bit about that responsibility. How do you serve a community that is changing so quickly?

Banning: I would say I have become an accidental leader of culture in Nashville. I think tapping into and being available to hear the needs of first and foremost the artists we are serving is what is creating the culture for contemporary dance here. As we talk about Nashville growing, its population and also what's available to citizens in our city,

we have a ton of dancers and choreographers who are starting to move here from other larger cities like Berlin, like New York, like San Francisco. They're leaving saturated cities and are excited to pioneer with New Dialect and the number of other arts organizations that now exist in Nashville to contribute to the development of this culture.

I think partnership is a huge part of, I wouldn't even call it a leadership strategy, but it's why the contemporary arts culture and scene in Nashville are growing so much. ... Interestingly a large number of these organizations are led by women in the Southeast, which I find really challenges a lot of the stereotypes that people associate with the Southeast.

So from my standpoint, I think partnership is a huge part of, I wouldn't even call it a leadership strategy, but it's why the contemporary arts culture and scene in Nashville are growing so much. You have organizations like OZ Arts, which is the first and only contemporary performing arts center in Nashville. We have an incredible gallery district in Wedgewood-Houston now. Metro Parks has done phenomenal work to open up all of their community centers to provide more opportunities for people to engage with everything from African dance to contemporary dance to creative process, and so it really is like a multi-organizational effort. Interestingly a large number of these organizations are led by women in the Southeast, which I find really challenges a lot of the stereotypes that people associate with the Southeast.

It's been a community effort on a lot of different fronts, and for us I would say as far as the contemporary performing arts are concerned, the fact that the demographic makeup in Nashville is continuing to expand and broaden and we have people moving here from all over the place is really essential to us being able to not just grow our own individual projects and organizations but also to the birth of new ones so that our culture can expand, our cultural offerings can expand here beyond just the four or five organizations that are leading the fields at the moment.

Rob: As you and New Dialect have had a lot of success in recent years, you've also now had to deal with some health issues, correct?

Banning: Yes, I have.

Rob: You were diagnosed with MS, I believe?

Banning: I was, yes. I had my first episode in November, 2016. After having spent my whole life being incredibly coordinated and athletic, I woke up one morning and couldn't feel my legs, my arms, my hands, my feet, had difficulty walking, and I ended up in the hospital for a week of tests while they were trying to figure out what was going on. It

took some time for me to get a diagnosis, which is not uncommon with multiple sclerosis, but yeah, ultimately that's the diagnosis I received, and yeah, it's been an extraordinary challenge, I will say that. And then an opportunity in its own way too.

As a leader who's interested in collaboration and the inherent sort of relational dynamics that are at play in a communal art form such as dance, I have really had to learn to develop new skill sets in how I use language to communicate and illustrate both choreographically. I've had to really lean into this sort of horizontal hierarchy of co-leadership ...

As a leader who's interested in collaboration and the inherent sort of relational dynamics that are at play in a communal art form such as dance, I have really had to learn to develop new skill sets in how I use language to communicate and illustrate both choreographically. I've had to really lean into this sort of horizontal hierarchy of co-leadership where there are certainly days when I don't ... it's not that I don't feel well, like I can sleep it off and I'll feel better in 24 hours, but here are days, weeks even, where I have difficulty moving around. And so the collaborative co-leadership model that we're operating in with New Dialect has been really fantastic in that way. It's like it's built in already for other people to lead other things so that I can take care of myself and come back. But yeah, it's definitely been a challenge.

Rob: How has this health challenge impacted the way you view yourself as a leader and as a leader of artists?

My limitations and oftentimes my need for other people and collaboration for support ... provides a clearing and opens up avenues for other people to uncover their own leadership potential and develop skill sets.

Banning: In a lot of ways, it's reinforced what I already suspected, that true leadership isn't found in the kind of strength that we socially and culturally assume is the strong person with the most X, Y or Z and the sort of top-down approach. In fact my limitations and oftentimes my need for other people and collaboration for support, that provides a clearing and opens up avenues for other people to uncover their own leadership potential and develop skill sets. I think as far as our collective is concerned, it's really contributed to an environment of transparency, clear communication, trust, long-term commitment to each other. Yeah, [sighing] this sounds terrible but not making lemonade

out of lemons, I certainly see some of, I think, the gifts or the benefits that have come from something that at the outset was just terrifying.

In the beginning, I couldn't see much except for everything that I feared I would lose, and in the end, I've ended up gaining skill sets and relationships that just wouldn't have been available to me without what happened to my body and what's happening in my body. So it's this fine line of ... of course I feel grief from time to time, but I also have a lot of gratitude for the things that my life with MS and having MS is teaching me about leadership specifically, for sure.

... if I'm the only person who's taking care of things, then we can only grow and serve as much as my capacity will allow, and so I've had to learn how to delegate and become willing to delegate, again not in this top-down sort of model but really in a collaborative, horizontally hierarchical way.

I'm fully aware that if I'm the only person who's taking care of things, then we can only grow and serve as much as my capacity will allow, and so I've had to learn how to delegate and become willing to delegate, again not in this top-down sort of model but really in a collaborative, horizontally hierarchical way. That was already becoming a really strong part of New Dialect, and then I think my illness expedited the process for us. There was a bit of a natural progression, but it was expedited by the severity of what was going on with me.

Rob: So what do you think it would take to encourage more artists to step up and lead?

I think we could be doing a lot more to encourage dialogue in the classroom at an early age, to encourage young people to practice using their voices, especially women, and really nurturing their creativity, not just their ability to take direction, nurturing young artists' ability to dialogue with each other and giving them helpful tools to be able to problem-solve so that they're actually equipped for when they get into their professional careers.

Banning: Speaking for my art form and from my experience specifically, I think the pervading education model for dance Oftentimes young dancers, when they're first beginning their studies, there's such an emphasis on discipline and quiet behavior. We're praised for our wordless obedience; you see a lot of nodding. I know there are a number of programs that are working to address these issues. New Dialect also is working to address these issues. But I think we could be doing a lot more to encourage dialogue in the classroom at an early age, to encourage young people to practice using their voices, especially women, and really nurturing their creativity, not just their ability to take direction, nurturing young artists' ability to dialogue with each other and giving them helpful tools to be able to problem-solve so that they're actually equipped for when they get into their professional careers. They're emotionally mature. They're in touch with their creativity. They have the courage to use their voices. They know how to respond to proposals. They have tools to relate to each other. I think we could go a long way with reassessing the education model in the dance field for sure.

Rob: Is there any advice you wish you had received when you were a young artist leader?

Banning: Yeah, I mean, really it deals with what I just said. I think as a younger artist, I was really focused on pleasing people in front of the room, and it wasn't until I met Ben Harkarvy and spent four years at Juilliard that I started to unpack that and to consider what we were doing in a more relational way and less about making sure that my directors were pleased with me. Yeah, I think I would have loved to have had more encouragement to use my voice and to not be afraid to stand in a group full of people and to express my ideas. I'm in my late 30s now, and I've had a lot of practice doing that at this point, but yeah, one thing I wish I had heard is, "Don't be afraid to use your voice."

Rob: That's perfect. Banning, thank you for your time.

Banning: Thank you so much. It was really a pleasure.

Epilogue

Words like courage, collaboration, vulnerability, strength, and openness only begin to describe the artist leader that is Banning Bouldin. Lessons we can take from our conversation with her include:

- **Learn from mentors.** For Banning, her first major influencer helped her see the value of developing oneself as a better person and citizen. Remain open and be a lifelong learner.
- **Embrace diversity.** Perhaps more than in any other field, the arts include all kinds and walks of life. Celebrating differences builds stronger teams, organizations and communities.

- **Question your role.** One of the hardest challenges can be to ask yourself what your own role is in making the world a better place. Ask yourself how you want to show up in this lifetime.
- **Listen and stay open.** Building a better community involves understanding what the community needs. Clarify the need first, brainstorm solutions and then take action.
- **Challenges can become opportunities.** Facing your barriers, such as major health issues, can be a springboard to developing as a greater person and leader. Find the possibility in your situation.
- **Have the courage to use your voice.** Develop important dialogue, collaboration and co-creation skills. Communicating authentically is a powerful tool for co-creating innovation, growth, adaptability and change.