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Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

Ed Henry was a dancer with the Viola Farber and Dan Wagoner dance companies in New York. He joined Farber's company in 1978 and research indicates he performed in *Dandelion* (1978) for which Robert Rauschenberg designed the costumes. He also studied business and economics and has worked with not-for-profit institutions, having served as associate dean at Columbia Business School and as president and CEO of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, New York.

Transcription of phone interview with Ed Henry conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on December 13, 2021. Edited by Rauschenberg Foundation staff for clarity in 2025.

Ed Henry [EH]: I'm Ed Henry. At the time of this story that I will tell involving [Robert] Bob Rauschenberg, I was a new dancer with the Viola Farber Dance Company located in New York City. And the year was 1977 or 1978.

DW: So, you danced with Viola in 1978, you think?

EH: Yes, 1977, 1978 was when I joined her company. I was replacing Jeff Slayton in the company, not that anyone could ever replace him, and I was learning several pieces before the company went on tour, which would be my first performances with the company. Jeff was in the film, which was recorded before I joined the company. Viola mentioned that the designer was coming to the studio to watch rehearsal. At that time, I did not know any of the repertory or any of the costumes for any of the pieces. And so, I remember being busy with rehearsal and this guy came in. He looked a little familiar, but I didn't know. I was brand new in New York. I was young. I was working as hard as I could to learn the dances, being taught my parts, to learn the pieces of the repertory. The designer sat down on the floor in front of the mirror, and we continued rehearsal.

And then a little while later, probably a couple weeks later, I received a big bag, like a giant Glad bag, and it was individually addressed to me. Since the piece had been performed before, the other dancers already had their costumes for this piece. Inside there were five pairs of leotards and tights and so let's say tops and bottoms.

And the sets were the same, the top and the bottom were the same, but each set was a different color. And inside was a note, I remember, addressed to me. “Ed,” it said, “enclosed are five sets of leotards and tights. At each performance select any set that you would like to wear, but don’t tell anyone,” and it was signed, “Bob.”

And what that meant was, when you’re on tour, you look for things that you know because a stage is always a different size. The lighting is supposed to be the same, but it’s always different, and with all of these variables, you rely on many senses during performance. Besides your muscle memory, and the steps, and so on, you are used to this person coming across, dressed in red or whatever it is. And suddenly with this piece, and with the instructions of a choice in choosing what to wear at any performance, you had no idea what color anyone else was going to be wearing. And so, this made every performance especially alive. On stage and in your field of vision, every performer might be different from another performance. Your steps would be the same, partnering would be the same, but these different colors moving across the stage would be different.

It was really enjoyable for the dancers because you’d always assemble in the wings before the piece started, and you’d kind of look at each other and say, “you’re yellow,” “you’re blue,” “you’re green,” and then the piece would go on and you would do your parts, but you had no familiarity of a color to rely on of someone at a certain place at a certain time. So, it just enlivened the whole performance at that moment. And then you realize from out front, you would be seeing a different wash of color all the time. Every performance would be different.

DW: It sounds so like Rauschenberg.

EH: Yeah, and there were the practical things. We took care of our own costumes and the fact that you had five sets, it meant you could do a whole weekend of performances without having to wash things out, because you’d just switch colors. You would switch sets.

DW: Well, so each dancer got this bag with the five sets of leotards and tights in different colors, but was it the same five colors for each of the dancers, so that everyone got a red one for example?

EH: No, everyone had different colors. I'm sure there were some things that repeated, but every set was individually dyed. So, I remember my favorite one was a robin egg blue and no one else had that color. So, I'm sure maybe there were a couple of red sets – I really can't place that – but everyone really felt they had their individual set of colors. And it is only now that I realize Robert Rauschenberg came to watch rehearsal with a new dancer joining the company because he was going to make a set of colors for this dancer – who happened to be me – and I was simply so unaware at the time.

DW: So, I can see if they were individually dyed, then of course you could have different variations of that . . .

EH: Yeah. And dancers were different sizes, so my note said "Ed," so he knew my size. I think I probably had the biggest size. I was the tallest male at that time. Generally, the women were smaller. We were all different sizes. So, he had made individual sets for each dancer. I think we all became possessive of our own set of colors.

DW: Well, particularly because then they would fit you.

EH: Yeah. Right. Yes, absolutely.

DW: This ties in with so much of Rauschenberg's other work, where for example, he'd do an edition of prints and there'll be a fixed part and then a part that changes with each individual print within the series. So it sounds like a variation of what you're talking about – so he was just doing the same kind of thing, carrying that flexibility and the vitality within the work. That's a wonderful story.

EH: Yes, he and Viola, of course, left it up to the individual dancers to select any for every performance – "pick any set that you want, but don't tell anyone" – as if it would be a secret when you went on stage. Of course, often we had to share dressing rooms, so it's not like it was really a secret, but no one else had control over what you were selecting except you.

The dances were set. We didn't change steps once the piece was complete.

DW: Yeah. Did Viola . . . do you have any sense of her reaction to this? Was it something that she was delighted with or upset with or?

EH: Yeah. I think she was delighted by that. Because from her perspective, looking at the piece, it was the same and different every time. The steps were the same, but the visual image could be different.

DW: And what was the name of that piece, do you recall?

EH: Only with research do we know it was *Brazos River*. [Further research indicates that the piece Henry refers to throughout this transcript is likely *Dandelion* (1978), rather than *Brazos River*. *Dandelion*, which also features costumes in a range of pastels designed by Rauschenberg, was regularly included in the company's program throughout 1978–79.] I did not remember the titles of the dances, until I saw the list of pieces and when they were choreographed. Seeing the list of titles brought so much back.

EH: Did [Rauschenberg] only do one piece for [Farber]? I mean, I didn't really know, but I assumed. [In addition to designing the costumes for *Dandelion*, Rauschenberg also designed the set and costumes for *Brazos River*; and the costumes for *Tracks* (1980) – all three choreographed by Farber. Farber in turn performed in *Spring Training* (1965), choreographed by Rauschenberg. Together, Rauschenberg and Farber also performed in many dances together choreographed by others like Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor.]

So many of the people then, they all worked together – because Viola had come from Merce [Cunningham] and Jasper Johns was around and the poet Frank O'Hara here and . . .

DW: I'm not sure how many things he did specifically for Viola. I know he worked for the Cunningham company as artistic director for quite a few years, so was certainly involved with costumes for Viola as well as the rest of the company. So, they certainly were very connected. That would be another thing that would be interesting to just pursue.

EH: Yes, I only had this one experience, and it was as a young dancer just trying to do the work. I didn't know anything, [inaudible] learning my steps and do what I was supposed to do.

DW: And then did you continue with the company for a bit?

EH: Yes, not that long, for just two and a half years. And then I joined Dan Wagoner's company because Viola was taking her company to a long-term residency in France and that wasn't right for me at that time.

DW: Well, this is just the kind of thing that I love hearing and getting because these oral history stories are often about a specific incident or a situation. So, just as you're saying, it's wonderful.

EH: I wish of course I had saved that note. Yeah, but I didn't. Then it was just a note and a bag of costumes, but I just remember it so well.

DW: And do you recall was Rauschenberg around anymore at rehearsals or performances or anything that you would've been aware that he was there?

EH: Just no memory of that, so I can't say. I assume he did come to see then what it looked like, but I really have no way of knowing that.

DW: Right, after a few decades go by, it's very, very hard to recall things that you think at the time are so vivid and so memorable.

EH: Right.

DW: Okay. Well, unless you have anything else you particularly you want to add, I'm absolutely delighted with what you've said.

EH: Yeah, that's it for me. If I think of anything, I'll definitely get back to you for sure.

DW: It will be nice to meet you. Okay. And many, many thanks.

EH: Thanks David. Bye-bye.