

YOUNG INVENTOR

Jonah Bokaer's
studio is a lab.

BY EMILY MACEL

Jonah Bokaer is everywhere these days. Whether he's choreographing operas for avant-garde theater director Robert Wilson, building new spaces for dance in Brooklyn, collaborating on a fashion shoot for *The New York Times*' *T. Magazine*, or presenting multidimensional performance pieces, his calendar is brimming with cool collaborations in nontraditional spaces. Yet with so much on his plate, the voracious go-getter has the constant desire to do more. He's a new breed of dancer/choreographer/innovator/impresario.

Judith Sanchez Ruiz, who is working with Bokaer on his current project, *Replica*, says, "He is like many at once. He is what you need in order to achieve things in this complicated and difficult world of art."

Replica has its New York premiere this month at the New Museum. In it, an 8' x 8' white box (designed by Daniel Arsham) onstage acts as a projection screen, and a portal into and out of another dimension of reality. Filmed images of a person destroying a wall, in reverse, play on its surface as chunks of the box are torn apart from the inside out.

Bokaer and Ruiz emerge from the box in a series of duets and solos, mingling limbs, mirroring actions, and reflecting impulses of movement. At times, Bokaer's choreography makes a dancer look like a marionette, being manipulated from the outside with sudden impulses to move this way or that. And yet they are often tied to a larger theme related to the video projection, or they perform moves in opposition that melt into a synchronized series with grand sweeping arms and lofty leaps.

While Bokaer, a 2006 *Dance Magazine* "25 to Watch," has been



Jacob Sutton for The New York Times Style Magazine

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Experimenting with motion capture technology

working with technology since he began choreographing five years ago, he recently started infusing his work with scientific concepts, particularly human perception. For *Replica*, which was commissioned by the cultural programs of the National Academy of Sciences, he incorporated his research into biomechanics and neurology. While working with mirrors, he says, “*Replica* came to me because of doubling vision and reflection.”

Born in Ithaca, New York, Bokaer is one of six children; his mother is a theater director and his father, who is from Tunisia, is a filmmaker. When Bokaer was 12, choreographer and former Cunningham dancer Jim Self, a faculty member at Cornell University, invited him to take classes there in Cunningham technique, ballet, and yoga. He was also performing with Ithaca Ballet, a regional company that uses students. He received scholarships to study at the Washington Ballet School, Jacob’s Pillow, and The Ailey School. “Jacob’s Pillow was revelatory because I discovered Merce there,” Bokaer says. He was able to observe the Cunningham company perform and teach. At the age of 15, he went to the University of the North Carolina School of the Arts, where he learned more about Cunningham technique.

“We immediately knew he was somebody special,” says Brenda Daniels, assistant dean for contemporary dance at the UNCSA. “We could tell his outward beauty right away, but his inner beauty is an equal match.”

Daniels, who teaches Cunningham technique, received a phone call from Cunningham assistant Robert Swinston saying they were looking for a male dancer. She didn’t hesitate to suggest Bokaer. “I said we have someone who is quite young but unbelievably mature.”

Bokaer had been a standout in her class from the start. “He’s got a lot of facility, nice legs, clean lines, a balletic

look to the body, real gorgeous openness and clarity to his movement—that big voluptuous clarity.”

Bokaer graduated in 2000 and moved to New York knowing he had a place with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He plunged into a five-week rehearsal period and a tour to Lebanon, Spain, and Austria. “It was a whirlwind experience and eye-opening in terms of different avenues of artistic expression,” he says. Being part of the Cunningham milieu, he naturally developed an interest in site-specific work, contemporary music, and technology.

At 18 years old, Bokaer was the youngest dancer ever to join the company. During his eight years of performing and touring—to 32 countries!—he also completed a degree in visual and media studies at the New School.

At the New School, Bokaer studied several computer programs, such as Maya and Isadora, that can translate movement into digital imagery (“Plugged In,” Dec. 2007), and he learned of William Forsythe’s improvisation technology (“Doing Double Duty,” Nov. 2003). Bokaer’s interest in contemporary animation was at the core of his first solo studies, which he created at the age of 20 but didn’t perform until a few years later, including *Nudedescendance* in 2005 and *Charade* in 2006.

Bokaer also sought out collaborations with choreographers like John Jasperse and David Gordon. “I was hesitant to be pinned down, or to remain satisfied with dancing in one place with one company,” Bokaer says in his careful and articulated language (he can seem like a tenured professor with boyish looks). “I wanted to keep my professional experiences as expansive as possible.”

In early 2007, he was approached by Robert Wilson about choreographing for his large-scale operas, first for *Faust* at the Polish National Opera. Later that year, renowned writer Anne Carson invited him to collaborate in a work called *Stacks*, which premiered at the Skirball Center in 2008. With the onslaught of creative opportunities, Bokaer decided to leave the Cunningham Dance Company. “I told Merce I wanted to pursue my own artistic vision, and we parted peacefully.”

In addition to his choreography, Bokaer has been active in building community. In 2002, with a group of artists



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Rachel Foster of PNB photographed by Matthew Karas

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and choreographers, he founded Chez Bushwick, an artist-run organization dedicated to the advancement of interdisciplinary art and performance, with an emphasis on economic assistance (offering rehearsal space for only \$5 an hour). In 2008, he co-founded the Center for Performance Research with John Jasperse. It is Brooklyn's first LEED-certified green performance art building. The 4,000-sq.-ft. facility, which opened in September, provides affordable space for rehearsals and performance as well as arts programming, education, and community outreach.

As dynamic and aggressive as he is in moving the field forward, Bokaer is a quiet and gentle soul, humble of his accomplishments. Daniels calls him "a super Boy Scout."

For his social activism in the field of dance and his own choreographic endeavors, Bokaer was named a Young Leader by the French-American Foundation. He joins Hillary and Bill Clinton on the list of alumni leaders and is the first dance artist to be given this honor.

Bokaer already has two premieres lined up for 2010: a second collaboration with Arsham involving 3,000 Ping-Pong balls that is headed for the Netherlands; and *Cipher*, a work that will be performed in a large-scale circular space in the fall. This past September, the Ferst Center for the Arts at Georgia Tech invited him to join in a long-term residency involving collaborations between the colleges of architecture, engineering, computer science, and applied physiolo-

gy. "The field of dance," he says, "needs to forefront itself in the conversation about what's possible with technology and the body."

Bokaer says that he makes about one solo and one group work a year, and he tours 20 weeks out of the year. His aesthetic range is wide, from the technology-influenced solo *False Start*, inspired by the painting of the same name by Jasper Johns, to *Prayer & Player*, a trio for Paradigm dancers Carmen de Lavallade, Valda Setterfield, and Gus Solomons jr (all are past the age of 65). They wore MP3 players that transmitted oral histories of their careers for the audience to hear.

While much of Bokaer's work has been for himself or small groups of dancers, Robert Wilson's invitation to create movement for four of his operas has broadened his scope. Some of the operas include as many as 90 people onstage—a far cry from the 14 or 15 in the Cunningham company.

Bokaer is hopeful for the future of dance, but plans to keep pushing borders and exploring technological advances, as Merce Cunningham told him to do: "I was able to spend two hours with Merce before he passed away, and we spoke with humor and good feelings and good memories," says Bokaer. "One of the things he said was to keep going."

And that's exactly what Bokaer plans to do.

Emily Macel is a dance writer based in Washington, DC.



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