

## Q&A: Jodi Lomask

A modern dancer and her troupe turn their attention to science ... and really big trees

BY ANNE CASSELMAN, 09 MAY 2007



IMAGE: ANNE CASSELMAN

Jodi Lomask hangs off an old growth Douglas Fir in the woods of SE Washington state. While on site, she and her partner (and juggler) Zack Bernstein, helped collect field data for her hostess Nalini Nadkarni, an Evergreen State College ecologist, and developed moves for her upcoming show "Biome."

For any electrician a capacitor is a device for accumulating and holding a charge of electricity. But for Jodi Lomask, it's the name of the San Francisco dance company she founded in 1997. The group regularly employs aerial acrobatics, juggling and even video game avatars to make their point, which starts with science and spreads outward. And, yes, their performances are highly charged.

"Within Outer Spaces," a 2002 performance, used human bodies as a metaphor for heavenly ones to great acclaim. Their latest show, "Digging in the Dark," journeys through the layers of the Earth so well that one Berkeley geophysicist suggested that it should be requisite viewing for all geology students.

With the upcoming "Biome," Lomask will tackle the relationships that underpin ecological webs. For homework, she took her dancers to rainforests in Costa Rica. With such unorthodox methods situated so proudly on her sleeve, it's hard to imagine that this sprightly brunette carries the triple crown of modern dance, having studied at the State University of New York, London Contemporary Dance School and Rotterdam Dansacademie.

I caught up with Lomask last August in southeastern Washington, during her visit to tree ecologist Nalini Nadkarni's field sites. Every so often I would catch sight of Lomask dangling from virgin Douglas-firs on a rope the width of my thumb, gracefully building the movement lexicon for "Biome."

**With Capacitor, you've often brought scientists into the dance studio as consultants. How is it that the tables have turned and you're now an artist in the field surrounded by ecologists?**

I was looking for Capacitor lab participants to join us in Costa Rica this fall for our new show. So I emailed Nalini Nadkarni to invite her and in the meantime she invited us to join her for this scientist/artist confluence in Washington. I just thought it was such an amazing opportunity.

**On the surface it does seem like an unlikely pairing, a modern dancer spending a week in the company of forest ecologists. Yet you seem to be taking it in stride.**

I come from a family of artists and scientists, so to me this is what I'm used to. It's not a stretch. The idea that artists and scientists can work together and really have impact on each other's work, it could be really hokey and dumb. It could be really spacey and hippy-dippy. I understand the skeptics but I also think it is really worthy work.

**Tell us about your upcoming performance.**

I was inspired to create "Biome" while I was on a birding trip with my mother in Panama in 2002. We went to Barro Colorado Island, which is part of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.

What struck a chord with me was this intense network in nature. And I was thinking how in humans technically and culturally we're always trying to copy nature. Even in art we're always trying to copy nature, because no artist can make anything nearly as beautiful and complex and interesting as nature does all over the place.

**I understand that a key step in developing your performances, which bring art and science together, is to hold "Capacitor Labs." Tell me about these experiments and what you have planned to help "Biome" along.**

It's basically a think tank where I invite a specific group of scientists and researchers into a round circle meeting with the dancers, composer, set designer, costume designer, film makers, etc.

With "Within Outer Spaces" I couldn't visit the moon and hang out in outer space to do the Capacitor Lab. And then when I did a show with geophysicists on the deep Earth, "Digging in the Dark," we couldn't exactly take a little trip to the Earth's core to fuel our creative process. But the nice thing about "Biome" is we can go to the jungle. So we're hosting our next Capacitor Lab in Costa Rica this fall.

**What is one of your goals in creating "Biome"?**

I want to create an intimate show in which we envelop the audience and set them in an environment that takes them out of their usual life.

**And how does science serve you in this endeavor?**

I can go into the woods anytime and just hang out there and "feel the vibe." You know, pay attention to how birds are interacting with insects and insects are interacting with plants and so on. And maybe that would be a totally valid way to experience the forest. But if I can take what researchers have been studying in detail about it, maybe I can get a little deeper into it. Once I understand the code beneath what I can see on the surface, maybe I can feel it in a deeper way. That's what science provides me and my creative team.

**Will "Biome" have a strong message then?**

I'm not interested in edutainment. I'm trying to make really good artwork and a really good performance. But I do think that if artists interact with scientists, interact with the tree canopy, interact with the woods and create really good artwork, people are going to be interested in how they did it. So even though I'm not going to create a show that says "Save the trees" or "All the monkeys are dying," I think that if we make really great work then conservation messages are going to come out.

**What does the process of dance have in common with the process of science?**

At the highest level art and science are the same thing. The best scientists in their best moment are totally creative. And for the best artists at their best level, their art becomes a science. It becomes totally precise and sophisticated and elegant.

So there's this way that success in the arts and success in the sciences both require access to a larger portion of your mind or an opening of your mind – an ability or willingness to step out of what's already been considered good or okay or acceptable. You have to be interested in things and alive in that way. And have the desire to go towards what you don't know. Artists share that with scientists.

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