

MARINA LOPEZ ~ FULL INTERVIEW

Name & Job Title

Marina Lopez

Licensed Massage Therapist, Business owner, Student

1. How do you spend your time these days?

Movement is a thread that weaves through the many layers of my life. My work as a massage therapist is a beautiful dance: a conversation that relies on deep embodied listening. I seek ways to relate from that place that are not only an internal process, but also an externalized expression of connection. I've found it in Japanese Jujitsu, a martial art whose formation is based on the integration of conversations with other lineages and teachers. A form whose unfolding choreography is dependent on embodied listening as a practitioner and responding to external forces. I can clearly see the ways in which dance has prepared me to undertake an undergraduate program in which I develop the curriculum for and whose participation in is largely self-directed. As a dancer, I cultivated the ability to see the larger picture and dissect it into smaller pieces that allowed me to digest and integrate. This education is very much a beautiful, improvisational dance that is slowly unwinding to reveal it's full and authentic form that draws on multiple ways of being and knowing. My partner and I also happen to live in a magical place where the Redwoods meet the Sea on the coast of Northern California. Its weighted history with the many tribes is always present as we negotiate our presence on their ancestral land.

2. What age did you start dancing with The Vanaver Caravan?

As soon as I turned four, my mom made sure that I was enrolled in Livia's creative movement class. Though, she has always told me that I was the one who made sure I was enrolled: Asking week after week, "Mama, did you sign me up for dance class yet? How about this week?" Keeping her on course. I still remember the exhilaration of running across the creaky wooden stage of the Studley Theatre, thick velvet wing curtains a blur as I sped, eyes fixed on Livia; my small hands waiting for the upward and equal force of her hands in mine, propelling me upwards. A moment of pure ecstasy.

3. For how many years did you study/perform with TVC?

One of the beautiful aspects of The Vanaver Caravan is the familial fluidity that shapes the professional company. As a child, I can still recall the thrill of having the beautiful 'older' dancers come back from college or their life somewhere else to perform in shows. To me, they were an extension of my family, a warm lap to be passed to and from, flowing hair to run through my tiny hands, and twisting gymnasts to dazzle at. I looked up to them tremendously, and felt immensely cared for by them. The ebb and flow of experiences and relationships became my home and roots. I spent close to twenty years as a consistent member of the Vanaver team: as a dance institute student, a dancer in the Youth Company, a member of the professional company, a teaching artist, and as an administrator. In the last four years of living in Northern California, I have had the privilege of returning to perform with the Company on a few occasions: always amazed to see the younger generations growing gorgeously into incredible people and performers alike, just like generations before.

4. In what ways has The Vanaver Caravan impacted/shaped the life you live today?

In every way. What Livia and Bill do is an incredible manifestation of all of the ways in which dance can be a connective point and catalyst for creating and maintaining community. Growing up with them as my dance and music parents as well as my God parents, they have nurtured a desire to find those connective points in person and place alike. I love that you can tell them, I'm going to be in 'X' place, and they will most likely have a recommendation about someone to meet, or a story about being there, and definitely an instrument or a costume. They have shown me generosity, honesty, and the different forms of family. I have learned what it means to commit. Whether it be to a character as a part of a story told through dance, or showing up for my community. Most importantly, I have experienced first-hand what it feels like when someone commits to your well-being, to your care, and to nurturing you as you navigate your way through the many complex facets of this world. I was given a window to the world and a vehicle in which to traverse it. I equally value the unique experiences of the individual and the collective ancestral history they carry. Those components are the sinew that bridges the singular to the many. It is what contextualizes an individual dance into a broader [his]story that exists as an integral part of any culture and people. Within each element of my life, I find myself in dialogue, seeking that broader understanding so that I may be veracious in my work.

5. Tell us a story! Can you share an event / memory / funny anecdote / quote from your history with Livia and Bill & the rest of the 'van' ?

Wow, there are so many. Life in the caravan never lacks adventure, and has a way of drawing out the humor no matter how jet lagged, lost, or small the stage is.

One that always makes me laugh involves Bill's navigation system he named Simone (this was before smartphones). Simone was programmed to only speak French, and was a staple in the 'Vana-van.' On this particular evening, we were lost leaving a venue, and of the six or seven of us in the van, none of us knew what Simone was saying. With each wrong turn, her French words pleaded more desperately. For what? I could not tell you. I can't remember how we found our way, but here I am to write about it, so it must have worked out! I just love that Bill was set on learning French from his navigation system.

6. Do you have a favorite song/dance that you learned with The Vanaver Caravan?

Deportee. It is a gorgeous piece from *Pastures of Plenty: Woody Guthrie in Dance and Music*. Over the years my rendering of the movements and meaning has significantly changed for me, but my love and connection to it remains deeply visceral.

Below is an excerpt I wrote as a part of a portfolio to receive undergraduate credit in *Exploring diverse cultures through movement: Dance Education, Performance, and Community Programming*. It speaks to the personal and historical connection I have to this piece.

*On January 28, 1948, a plane crash near Los Gatos Canyon, California killed thirty-two people, four Americans and twenty-eight Mexican farm workers who were being deported back to Mexico. The four American names were printed in the January 29, 1948 New York Times report, while the twenty-eight Mexicans in the crash were referred to merely as, "deportees." This act of blatant racism that is representative of American attitudes towards Latinx immigrants was given a platform in Woody Guthrie's song, [Deportee](#). As a dancer, I am a trafficker of stories. My body embodies the lineage of my Mexican ancestors' stories of equal parts strife, strength and resistance. I am a bridge that connects audiences to the beauty, and artistic expression of Latinos. I felt this affirmed when New York's toughest dance critic reviewed the performance in not just any publication, but the very same one that sixty-four years before had devalued the lives of those twenty-eight Mexican immigrants. On August 17, 2012, the front page of the [New York Time's Art Section](#) had an extensive review of our performance, *Pastures of Plenty: Woody Guthrie in Song and Dance* and in it, dance critic, Alastair Macaulay responded to *Deportees* by saying "...And in the 'Deportees' song, the way Marina Lopez, here barefoot, used the whole of a musical phrase to extend an arm gesture was a perfect image of expressive grace."*

7. Do you feel that your experience with The Vanaver Caravan reflects our mission statement? In what ways?

Why do people dance? That was the question that was posed to students at the beginning of every school arts education residency, and very often in the Dance Institute classes. In many ways, the reasons why people chronicles dance to our present day in a history that is multifaceted. There are the movements themselves, and then there is dance as a form of ritual and social practice, entertainment, art and spectacle: spanning thousands of generations, cultures, and geography.

My story of dance is equally as nuanced. The Vanaver Caravan is an organization that authentically embodies their mission and vision. Their work as pioneers in Arts Education provides children across socio-economic backgrounds, age, and gender access to a greater understanding of the diverse ways of being, knowing, and expressing that exist in this world. So much of compulsory education is geared toward visual and auditory learners, who are expected to sit still while engaging information.

These arts education residencies provide the opportunity to activate the brain through movement and enlist the use of kinesthetic learning styles. Children are given the chance to connect with each other through healthy touch and a shared excitement and camaraderie. Equally as important is the connection that is made to the academic information that is now tied to a visceral experience. Moving or dancing throughout the school day increases students' mental stamina, growth in emotional intelligence and maturity, and cooperation within the classroom.

What allows The Vanaver Caravan to so completely tell stories through movement is the diverse professionals they attract. Dancers in the company come from different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds as well as movement training. I've had the privilege of not only learning from, but also performing with award winning Lindy Hop and Swing Dancers, world renowned Irish step and tap dancers, highly regarded ballerinas, Capoeiristas, and West African drummers whose craft was passed on from generation to generation.

In our 2012 World Dance Pilot Program in Udaipur, India, we witnessed the unifying power of dance in a community segregated by class and status. Since then, the program has prospered and expanded, and has even been endorsed by Arun Gandhi (Political Activist and Grandson of Mohandas Gandhi). I am proud to have a long history with an organization whose more than forty years of work is a direct reflection of their commitment to transcending difference and cultivating unity through music and dance.