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## Dreaming, Collaboratively...



The creators of *Lucid Dreams* - composer Edward Bilous, choreographer Alison Chase, and filmmaker Mirra Bank - talk with BAM executive producer Joseph V. Melillo about their creative

process, their concerns, their delights as they complete their work together, and await the Nov. 11, 2005 premiere on ACO's Orchestra Underground series at Zankel Hall.

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### Ed, what was the impulse to seek out Alison Chase as a collaborator?

I've always been interested in exploring themes and ideas that live at the fringe of human awareness and often turn to dreams, myths, religion and psychology for inspiration. For this reason I tend to be drawn to artists who use words and images as metaphors to create multiple layers of meaning.



Alison's work with Pilobolus is extraordinary in exactly that way. Using movement and imagery she's created a powerful visual language that strips away convention to reveal underlying archetypal forms and energies. Her work is deeply personal yet it communicates on a profoundly universal plane.

Three years ago, Alison asked me to compose a score for "Star Crossed", a dance she was creating for Pilobolus. We worked very well together and since then have collaborated on three other projects. When I decided to write a piece about lucid dreams it seemed only natural that

she and I would collaborate on this as well.

### **Alison, what was your response?**

I need to preface these answers with the fact that Mirra and I are in the middle of a very intense interfacing as we prepare our material respectively for stage and for film. We finished filming the choreography for camera just last Wednesday, October 26. Today [October 29] we had a conversation as to what images to use on film and stage for a refrain of the first section that comes after the second section. Do we return as does the music to earlier material? We are trying to figure out our sequences so there is a meaningful and intentional relationship between the film and stage actions.

Although we have worked together in the past we have never collaborated in this way and we are evolving our method of working together one day at a time. It is challenging because Mirra is in an editing room in a different state and I am in the studio with the dancers. I filmed the filming of the dancers but I do not have the actual film footage to reference! There is the additional dilemma for me of the stage picture being so radically different with a full orchestra and a large projected film behind two dancers who have a space of 40 ft. by 12 ft to move in. It is wild and exhilarating. I confess to a bit of panic. All the people involved in each dimension are so excited that the combined energy propels me forward.

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Right out of the box I was flattered and enthusiastic to work on another project with Ed and especially one that involves a full orchestra. Ed and I have been having an ongoing dialogue about creating a new style of theatrical experience that is non-proscenium and combines live music, dance, film and technology. This is the beginning of that experimentation. We approached Mirra who jumped on board. We will not know how all the layers will connect until the evening of November 11 but there has been a lot of energy generated around the aesthetic details of getting there.

### **Mirra, you have collaborated with Alison Chase before -- what do you continue to discover about the intersection of the art forms of dance and film?**

I have made two award-winning documentary films with Pilobolus (*Last Dance*, a feature; and *Monkey & The Bone Demon*, a half-hour film) as well as a number of short pieces. I love the way a Pilobolus dance evolves on film: collaborative, in-the-moment, improvisation-driven. Dance is a seductive and tricky subject for film, because, just like a documentary or fiction narrative, it demands a pliant and convincing 'story' structure to work. With *Lucid Dreams* this story-creation came with particularly



rigorous limitations: a score, no naturalistic sound or dialogue, two dancers moving in a dark 'dreamscape.' So, it's a minimalist palette of 'subject matter' - but rich in beauty of movement and ambiguity of meaning.

Given the richness of everything happening onstage: singer, musicians, conductor, dancers - I felt that the visual projection had to be elemental. So, the high definition video for *Lucid Dreams* uses the landscape of the dancers' bodies - and the point of view from the dancers' bodies moving through space - to create a '4th dimension'. These moving images reveal facets of dance movement not seen by the audience; and the edited, layered projection expands the temporal space in which choreography, music & video unfold. This expansion is like the alert awareness of a lucid dream: the dreamer 'sees' the dream, knows that he is dreaming, while being in the dream.

What I have discovered in working with Alison on *Lucid Dreams* is how her trust and delight in the dancers empowers them and informs our work in the shooting. She is a deeply confident performer and maker of dances who approaches her work with absolute openness - and this is constant impetus for surprise and energy on film.

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**Ed, this is your fifth collaboration with Alison; what has happened with this specific artist that compels you to continue an artistic journey together?**

Alison and I share many of the same artistic goals and interests. To begin with, we both want to create works that are sensory feasts yet have multiple layers of meaning. Also, we both strive to create a seamless merger between what is seen and what is heard, a balance between the eye and the ear if you will.

Above all, Alison and I have really enjoyed working together. It seems every time we complete a new piece we become inspired to start working on the next. We currently have two new projects we're developing; "Sacred Spaces", a kind of multimedia cantata that uses Gnostic texts and features chorus, percussion and electronics and "Calabi-Yau", an exploration of the same concepts as "Sacred Spaces" but viewed from the perspective of modern day physics and super-string theory.

Finally, I have a profound respect for Alison's work. She's been a maverick and a trailblazer her entire life. Few people have been able to make the kind of contributions to their art form as she has. Working with her has been a tremendous inspiration.

**Alison, what have you learned about Ed and his art?**

My initial encounter with Ed

was a phone conversation. I was in the middle of a project and seeking a composer who could understand where I was trying to go with the piece, despite the fact I could not articulate clearly where I was going. It is through the dialogue and conversations that surround the details of getting the work ready for stage that I learn more about the depth of Ed's musicality and perfectionism. First of all his music is great for dance. Though complex his music is rhythmically accessible...the dancers never ask "how do you count this?" His music is also incredibly emotional. Each piece we have done he has rewritten and rearranged and continued his perfectionist search for the right sound. For one piece he did three upgrades after the premiere. This perfectionist drive is contagious and infectious. Once his music is completed the choreography catapults into new dimensions.



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**Mirra, what challenges have both Ed and Alison provided you?**

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Ed gave us the enchanting original challenge of lucid dreaming - the dreamer aware within the dream - and we all agreed that we'd work with three classical aspects of that state, roughly identifiable as: Eros, Flight and Secret Spaces. Ed provided an edgy, energized & layered soundscape which challenged us to meet it with equally muscular movement on stage and on film.

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Alison gave me the unique and welcome challenge of creating film passages that she would then build on or counter in the live choreography. Our layers of movement will sometimes intersect; sometimes diverge. This has been specially rich for me because we are inventing the movement/film aspect of *Lucid Dreams* as we go. It is never pre-structured 'recording' of choreography. So, as the filmmaker, I have to find the true impulse every second in what's happening as we shoot. I try to anticipate, respond, re-shape my ideas. Alison & the dancers bring in what they've been developing in rehearsal, I come with an underlying thesis about the moving-image narrative - and then together we knock it down and re-build it based on what develops as the dancers improvise further and we shoot.

In addition, Alison, Ed & I have had to come up with ways to allow the dance onstage and projected film to exist harmoniously with a live orchestra, percussionist, singer & conductor. And since we won't all meet until the day of the performance, we've had to 'imagine' ourselves into the situation, and 'dream up' artful ways to bring the audience the fullest appreciation of all the elements.

**Ed, what has been the most difficult artistic decision you have had to make in this specific collaboration?**

The biggest challenge I faced while writing *Lucid Dreams* was finding a way to express my diverse musical interests while acknowledging the

training and traditions of orchestral musicians.

For example, there is an underlying groove in *Lucid Dreams* that's influenced by North African drumming and in some ways the melodic material unfolds more like a raga than a theme. The most difficult part of the composing process was finding a natural way to weave these and other musical elements together into a language that could be applied to an orchestra.

I no longer use the word "classical" when describing my own artistic journey. Instead I think of myself very simply as an American composer. So in some ways writing a work for the American Composers Orchestra seemed a metaphor for a much larger aesthetic question that challenges me.

### **Alison, how has this collaboration challenged your art?**

This work has totally challenged and changed the way I sequence my source material together.

In the past, I took an organic approach to linking the choreographic phrases, always attempting to make one image give birth to the next or attempting to follow a narrative. Here I have to take into account how Mirra is cutting and editing the dance on film. Consequently my reasons for placing one phrase next to another are so different. At times the film takes the foreground and I have to find a complementary still point. Mirra and I have endless conversations on how to approach a specific musical transition. Should we be the same or different? Where are our points of contact and intersections? The very subject of lucid dreams demands an attempt to capture that landscape between waking and dreaming. How to create a dream state on stage with the two dancers in real time? I had hoped to be able to suspend the dancers....it was a great disappointment for me when we found out that was not possible...but at least on film the dancers will be seen dreamily suspended. Then there is the musical challenge of having a synthesized score and hearing the orchestra live for a rehearsal or two.

Luckily I am in the hands of a great composer, and great dancers who by the time we get to November 11 will have instinctively digested Ed's rhythms and phrasings so as to handle the translation to full orchestra.

### **Mirra, has this been an art enhancing experience for you as a filmmaker?**

Absolutely. One of the best in my filmmaking life - and certainly unique, for the all reasons mentioned above. Rarely have I had the chance to work this 'playfully' and intuitively with artists whose work I deeply admire. I am learning so much about the integration of disciplines, because - although I also direct theater - most of my film work has not been for live performance, but for more conventional tv or movie exhibition. *Lucid Dreams* has been a leap of faith, seat-of-the-pants journey for me, and I'm thrilled to be on it.

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- Joseph V. Melillo is Executive Producer

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