

Lawrence and Anna Halprin interview – 05.28.2006
At the Halprin home in The Sea Ranch, California

LH – Lawrence Halprin AH – Anna Halprin

JvS – James van Sweden SC – Steel Colony

JvS: I'm a great lover of ballet, in fact I even studied ballet, at the ripe old age of 40 I started taking adult classes at the Washington ballet because I became friends with some of the principles of the Royal Ballet in London and uh..

LH: ...Anna is not a great fan of ballet.

AH: You didn't have to say that.

JvS: Are you an admirer of modern dance?

LH: Yes ...

AH: Well, post-modern.

JvS: I'm interested in all kinds of dance. I see dance all the time.

AH: Well they're very different. They're as different in design as your modern landscapes are from Victorian design.

JvS: That's an interesting point, exactly. I'm talking about dance in general, as related, also tapestry, weaving. I interviewed Jack Leonard Larsen and Judith Lieber, the great handbag designer and Martha Schwartz, you probably know her.

LH: I'm not an admirer of hers.

JvS: No, but she's very interested in sculpture so I interviewed her because of her interest in sculpture.

LH: Its interesting because she gets so involved with thinking that landscape architecture has to be like sculpture. I'm not approving of that exactly.

JvS: I'm just wondering, since this book is about how all of the arts inspire

LH: Each other

JvS: Garden design, I'm just interested in what art other than gardens themselves have inspired you? And I know because of Mrs. Halprin, I've heard that you're inspired by dance.

LH: Oh indeed.

JvS: And I just wonder how and what projects ..

LH: Well, we've been married now for 60, how many? 7 years?

AH: 67 years.

LH: 67 years

AH: We ought to get a medal for that. All the awards we've gotten, that would be the most important..

LH: That would be the most important one.
When I was at Harvard Anna was teaching and making a little money so that we could live (sparingly ? studently?). Since then we've been interactive, very interactive all the time. That's amazing.

JvS: That is amazing. How exactly do you think this interaction manifests itself in your work?

LH: Have you read "The RSVP Cycles" [[The Rsvp Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment](#) (ISBN: 0807605573) Halprin, Lawrence] that book that I wrote about

JvS: Yes, its been awhile.

LH: It talks a lot about the relationship of movement and dance and how it has affected me personally and what I do because in a sense all my designs have to do with movement through space and I think of the design of the landscape that way always... as places in which people move and have their being and so it is very much beyond just static design where objects are what we make (?).

JvS: Its the dynamic quality.

LH: Yeah.

JvS: Well that's true of the Roosevelt of course, its that wonderful sequential flow to that memorial.

LH: So in that sense, for that reason, I'm very violently opposed to what Martha Schwartz does.

JvS: Right, hers is more static.

LH: Very static and its much more like A piece of sculpture or A piece of architecture and not at all like places where people are involved in life forces that are going on.

JvS: And she doesn't even bring in the dynamicism (dynamics) of plants, she doesn't like plants which are always changing of course.

LH: I don't mean to insult her, I like her personally but I do want to make it clear that I am not of that type.

JvS: I guessed that.

JvS: Well the great news to people when I lecture is when I show paintings, for instance Helen Frankenthaler, and talk about them as a metaphor for garden design people can't believe it, they never thought of looking at painting that way so that was kind of the beginning of this book idea, to inspire people to look at other arts and understand how that can influence their design of gardens or landscapes.

LH: As I say, when I was at Harvard it was at the high point of the Bauhaus period and they believed, Gropius actually believed intensely about the same point and after all he had dancers who taught in Bauhaus and he had designers and, I think of it all as a piece of theatre actually, where people who are designing are designing for things to happen, so I agree absolutely with that point of view.

JvS: We're including the theatre and the photography.

LH: I always talk about it as theatre and movements through space and I agree, I find that when I talk that people are a little astounded that we talk about as painting.

JvS: Isn't that surprising?

LH: I don't always talk about it as the influences of painting in the design of gardens. I don't even call them gardens if you allow me to say that because I don't think of this that we do as gardens, I think of them as spaces to be in,

because otherwise everybody thinks that you make a living taking care of people's gardens. And its a long time since I refused to call them gardens.

JvS: I don't know how well you know Wolfgang Oehme's and my work but its great masses of planting which certainly looks like a Frankenthaler painting, that kind of scale and use of color, it's a great painting on the ground plane or tapestry or whatever so that's why and that's why we refer to it as uh, and our work is more gardnesque than most landscape architects' work is. We do use plants in an enormous way. W. Oehme is the great horticulturalist and also a great designer with plants and I come from the architecture side so that's how we met in the middle.

JvS: So ballet or dance comes to mind when you are designing a garden and painting?

AH: I don't differentiate really.

JvS: All of the arts, just like the Bauhaus because of course the Bauhaus included every art, pottery, tapestry, weaving.

AH: That's right.

LH: When I went to Harvard this was the essential character of what we were doing.

JvS: What project do you think most expresses this?

AH: Franklin Roosevelt.

JvS: Certainly the Roosevelt does.

AH: I think the Roosevelt project does something beyond the integration of the arts, I think it integrates the mythology of people's lives and since it was a memorial for a person like Roosevelt it reflected the mythology of who he is as the designer. It became very personal as well as the country, that's why that's my favorite thing that Larry ever did because it became a social statement, an archetypal statement, a mythological statement, it really had an inner life of people, of the highest level. I mean now when I think of that memorial and I think of what's going on in that country today it makes me appreciate it, you know, that much more.

LH: Let me interrupt for a second cause I think that the social problem of the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial, it was very important to me, that's what you're leading up to I think

AH: No, that isn't exactly what I was saying. I was dealing with the idea of integration cause you're talking about use of all the arts and I was saying why I thought that was my favorite because it included an integration of people's lives on a mythological level so it was very spiritual to me and I just wept, I just wept by the time we got to the cortege.

JvS: Right, that's so beautiful. It leads up to that, that's the real focal point isn't it?

AH: I mean it was so emotional.

LH: But I also want to make the point, of course it had sculpture

JvS: Yes, even the rocks

LH: But it also has a social and a political statement and I want to make that point because it's particularly important right now when we've got, I don't know where you sit,

JvS: Very left wing.

LH: OK. I despise what this guy has done to this country and I feel very strongly because on the walls of the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial were all the social statements Mr. Roosevelt stood for and that's part of why I'm so, uh in answer to your question about what my favorite or whatever it is, and that more than almost anything else that I or I think that almost anybody has done, the social statement about the politics of living is what the Roosevelt Memorial is about. And therefore I think that integration is another step that is beyond the physical.

JvS: Right, it is also a meeting place for people, they gather in those spaces in a social way, and in that sense, the same.

AH: I think that the Promenade in Jerusalem is very important.

JvS: Which is in the paper today.

AH: Because I think it includes people's lives in a very transformative way and I think that its another dimension besides the bringing in of all the arts is one way to make it more sensorial but to bring in its history or to bring in its impact culturally is very important.

LH: I also want to say something in that connection and one of my other favorite ones is where I just was, in Yosemite. I was just in Yosemite yesterday because I redesigned a whole area and developed new trails for disabled people.

JvS: I have new respect for the disabled.

LH: We're about to start on another part of the national park and there too, the relationship of that national park the way I hope I think it is the way that it affects people is way beyond the idea of people's relationship to nature. It deals with how it affects the symbolically and what's the word rather than religious?

JvS: Spiritual.

LH: Spiritual. When people stopped me yesterday, I was walking along on a trail there that I had designed, they didn't realize, some older folks, they didn't realize that I had designed it. They came this way and I came in and some of the older ladies stopped me and said "You know, I was so anxious because I thought I was gonna be called upon to walk all this way and I am so glad that I walked it." She said, "It helped me spiritually."

JvS: That's important. I notice you didn't have a handrail here on your stairs. I hung onto Steel.

AH: I usually hang onto him.

LH: A lot of young people in the office do the same thing for me, they catch me.

JvS: I wanted to tell you that the Roosevelt is so beautiful at night and often if I have people visiting from out of town we have dinner and then we go there and just walk at 10:30 – 11:00 o'clock and sit on the tidal basin and have reflection of the Washington Monument and the Roosevelt Memorial.

LH: Oh that's the nicest thing you could say.

JvS: Oh it is so beautiful, and the Jefferson in the distance also reflected? Talk about spiritual.

LH: The evening time, the night time, is much my favorite period there too, so I am glad that you mentioned that.

JvS: I probably will use the Roosevelt Memorial then in the book and then I'll interview you further as we get farther into it. I pass it everyday. My office is on Capitol Hill, I live in Georgetown and now because of construction I go

down the river, right along the river behind the Roosevelt, and I must tell you the planting on that berm? Gorgeous, just gorgeous.

LH: Thank you.

JvS: Its matured now, its so beautiful.

LH: Nobody has ever mentioned the planting to me at that area, you're the first one who has mentioned the plantings.

JvS: Cause I'm not driving now, I'm usually traveling with one of my landscape architects who picks me up, and we admire that very much and we always look at it because it's a lovely combination and its planted on that and its high as the Memorial. Again, the idea of mystery, you wouldn't even know there was a memorial there. So we are great admirers of that. I'm glad I had a chance to tell you that because nobody talks about the backside I'm sure.

LH: No, they never do.

JvS: And its so important, its so beautiful.

LH: I feel the same way.

JvS: In fact I want to walk there now sometime, just walk along the edge, just to study what's there.

LH: I don't travel very much anymore either because of my back and so forth but I'll inevitably get there so we can walk then.

JvS: Let me know when you come.

LH: I sure in hell will.

JvS: So there's a sequence and all of the arts including sculpture of course, I didn't mean just the Roosevelt but the way the rocks are sculptured its all beautifully drafted.

LH: Thanks, I appreciate that.

SC: I think there's music there too, the music of the water.

LH: Yes.

JvS: Yes.

LH: I always try to explain that fountains go way beyond the visual because I always think of the water and the sound that the water is making as part of the design.

JvS: And the great power of the cortege is that it is quiet, after all the racket, you know the loud noise of the water then you have this quiet and that's what's so, brings you to tears its so impressive.

LH: Right.

JvS: Do any particular artists come to mind that you

LH: Well Robert Graham and I have worked a lot. Do you know his, Bob Graham? He's from Los Angeles and has dealt mostly with the female figure.

JvS: Sculpture?

LH: Yeah. And of course George Segal exemplifies for me after all the idea that social problems and social events are part of what you design for.

JvS: Right, which is what he depicts in his sculpture.

LH: And so I immediately, when I first was given this task to design it, I immediately thought of George Segal and we did a lot of talk about this, you know we've been working on this thing for 25 years.

JvS: I know very well, I've been in Washington for more than 40 years.

LH: And we spoke and philosophized a lot about the influence of sculpture in this memorial and not only what it would look like but also the affects that it would have on people.

LH: We had to explain what we were doing. At the beginning of a project people don't trust you. At the end of the work they trust you more. Now that I'm getting older people trust me more.

(Mentions just returned yesterday from visit to Yosemite)

JvS: What were you doing out there?

LH: Redesigning some of the trails there that I laid out years ago. The Park Service wanted to modernize them and make it easier for visitors to move around. I wanted to blend them into the park better and make them less obvious. I thought, "When I'm finished I hope that no one knows I was here."

There is thought about how people should approach and view objects. What are you saying about a 5000 year old tree? How do people experience the quality of a tree that has fallen 1000 years ago? Its about movement. Everybody moves. The way you move and what you see and hear as you move affects the way you feel.

(LH accidentally shut off recorder. There is a small break in the tape. Chairs are re-arranged, Halprins speak of whale watching, some images of Yosemite are produced)

LH: (Referring to old trees) They're not quite like whales but they're in some ways much more alive.

JvS: They've been alive a long time.

LH: Some of these guys have been alive 5000 years.

JvS: Can you imagine, 5000 years? That's the south end of Yosemite.

LH: And I was so, almost unnerved by walking around in this the other day because I have to do something about it now, because what has gone wrong is they haven't learned how to deal with what they're trying to say about it, and that's what I have to make out of this experience.

JvS: Circulation?

LH: Not only circulation but the spiritual question of how do you relate to a thing like this? (Viewing tree photos) How do you talk or have people feel the quality of something like this that has fallen over after about 3000 years? And of course, that's the root system.

JvS: That's the roots, wonderful for the wildlife.

LH: And so I'm really bemused by how I'm going to deal with this because they've treated them as if these are objects, and I've got to deal with how you're related to them.

JvS: How it all goes together.

LH: I just got back and that's why I'm talking about it so much, because I was just drawing it.

JvS: No, its fascinating and I haven't been to Yosemite for a long time.

LH: Its very different.

JvS: Is it? I would love to go.

LH: The guides who went there first really had to study it, (unintelligible name), Tom Garret, and Clark. Even the presidents, you know, Roosevelt,

JvS: Theodore Roosevelt.

LH: Was really enhanced by that. You know, he was involved, it mean a lot to him.

JvS: He was a great president.

LH: Yeah! You can say that. And damn that guy who's in there now.

JvS: Well we agree on our politics.

AH: I hope.

LH: She admires your landscape architecture.

JvS: Oh thank you.

LH: I've shown her your book and she said: "Now here's another good landscape architect".

JvS: That's a great compliment, thank you.

AH: I wanted to say something about

LH: Wait, the funniest thing, the funniest thing about this., let me just. He gave me a medal last year and when he gave it to me I, well first thing he was looking down and I thought, "Oh God, I forgot to zip my fly".

JvS: I know that feeling.

LH: All of a sudden he said, "Oh, you have Merrel shoes, that's the kind of shoes that I wear too", this is from the most powerful man in the world.

AH: He didn't know what Larry did or

LH: Let me say that to him. I wanted to get through to him, I said to him, “You know Mr. President, I designed the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial”, and he said, “Re ally?”, not: really.
(Unintelligible)

JvS: How brilliant.

AH: I would like to say something about the word dance. I think of it maybe differently, and that is that I think, when Larry said I am not an admirer of ballet, that’s true, but I don’t think that’s the point, I think the point is that there’s a way of looking at movement and take it out of the realm of dance, just looking at it from the realm of movement which is universal to all people. Everybody moves. Not everybody dances alike, but everybody moves and there are certain universal movements that evoke certain feelings so that if you design, if you create a design and everything is geometrical forms, in sharp curves, and so when you move, you move this way, this is going to affect the way you feel, but if you design in curves and things flow, this is going to affect the way you feel. If you have places to sit, if somehow or other your sitting is like this you feel one way, if you’re sitting like this you feel another way, if you’re forced to look up, that creates another different feeling then when you’re looking down and I think that if landscape architects thought about the connection between movement and feelings that this is what has

the subject shifts to Anna and dance)

AH: It has to do with how people are guided in their movement in the outdoors, how they’re guided in being able to use their eyes so they can focus on the forefront, a mid-front and so on, I’m looking out this way, if I can focus on you and the trees and the horizon, that’s going to affect my ability to connect with things holistically rather than what we call spot focusing and those are the kinds of things which create the ability to take in the sensorial information, whether its sound, whether its and airplane or a bird that flies overhead, whether it’s a smell that the ability to be able to look and see holistically all the elements simultaneously is - so you design things that go up, you design things that go down, you design things that go out, that’s what I would say was important to me, not that its dance.

JvS: And you’re also talking about layering the stakes, creating mystery that way.

LH: Well I just

AH: Wait a second. Its not just mystery, its, they, the wholeism (?), in the sense of integration, of seeing things holistically is a different way of experiencing yourself and others. For example, if you're designing areas that are going to be attracting lots of people or areas that are very sparse, and so little intimate areas, this affects you very much like you go into a public space and there are a lot of people all around you, that's going to affect you differently. That little space that you have in the Roosevelt Memorial which is very small and very intimate so not more than one or two people can be in that space at any one time and you can cry and feel very private but if that space that had something in it that was so sad, you know brought up so much sadness, and it were a big public space, you would feel inhibited. So I think that, I am a dancer, but I think that, and my medium is movement, but I don't think my esthetics as a dancer or anybody else's esthetics as a dancer is worth, doesn't matter. That's not at all interesting, who cares? That'll go out of style in 10 or 15 years but the commonalities that we have in relation to movement are constant.

JvS: Taking the adult class at the Washington Ballet in some ways changed my life because of the way I moved, and just getting up in front of an audience, standing correctly, and looking out at the audience and breathing, I've learned so much from taking for 4 years, going to that class a couple times a week. It was amazing and what you're talking about is exactly what happened to me. I became aware of how I was moving, how I was breathing, and how I was relating to other people in that sense, and standing, it was really important.

LH: Well I might just comment because that certainly is what I feel about how it has affected me in terms of my design because it isn't how I (... unintelligible...) but how they are affected by the movement of space through space as far as their minds are concerned.

JvS: So you learn how people move by studying dance of various countries, I think of Baryshnikov just walking across the stage, its just unbelievable. That's all he has to do just walk across the stage.

LH: We saw him jump one time, he was up in the air at least 20 minutes.

AH: He was like a bird in flight.

JvS: Well this is great, we'll probably be in touch with you again as this book progresses. I just happened to be coming here with Jim and Mallory and Steel

and I thought it's the perfect chance to meet you again and talk about these questions. You've inspired me greatly. ...

SC: (To AH) You've done so many pieces where you are directly interacting with the landscape. You as sculpture in the landscape, in the stream, the woods and leaves.

JvS: Have you been photographed doing that?

LH: Oh yes, there are films about her, she was just in France where they asked her to show a lot of this and we also have an outdoor dance theatre at our house in San Francisco which has, as she has often said, influenced the fact of what she does and how it comes out, (unintelligible), just the mere fact that it's outside, don't you feel that way?

AH: Yes.

JvS: Are there images you think would be inspirational for this book?

AH: I think so.

SC: I think they're wonderful.

JvS: I haven't seen them so

AH: I think I have a brochure with some of them.

JvS: Oh good.

LH: And the dance deck itself has been printed on many occasions in lots of books. The dance deck itself is a piece of art.

JvS: I have a feeling I've seen it, it sort of brings back a memory.

LH: I think I designed it 50 years ago.

SC: People sometimes don't make that connection between a landscape architect designing a space in the outdoors for dance versus planting a couple trees.

LH: Yeah, it isn't only plants that we design with by a long shot.

JvS: We design space and

LH: Space to, and specifically, the elements that change people's lives, I mean the dance space is not just a

(AH brings brochure of dance in the landscape photos of her)

JvS: Ah, here you are, right here.
Have you been photographed in the Roosevelt Memorial?

AH: No.

LH: There were several people, (Icon Promo? unintelligible) wanted to do a thing.

AH: So did I but they wouldn't let us.

LH: They said that if they once allowed Anna to perform as in a theatre there that we would be forced to allow anybody that wanted to

JvS: That's true, they're very fussy about it, the Park Service

LH: And I couldn't do anything about it. The fact of the matter is that I can still try. The President gave me a medal of honor, literally a medal of art, and I could try again because having gotten that through it may be that we could get, I'd love to have Anna dance there.

JvS: I immediately thought of that, move through.

LH: Yeah.

AH: I think that your idea is right though Larry, if they let somebody do it then everybody

Again, I think those images represent, you know, a personal esthetic, my personal esthetics about my relation to the natural world. I don't think it necessarily answers your larger question.

JvS: Right

LH: (Referring to image) This of course is down below in the cove,

JvS: Yes, I can see that.

LH: We have a cove down there where we fish and get abalone and all kinds of things.

SC: (Referring to images) Its got to be something larger, I see something larger.

AH: Not everybody loves them, I'll tell you the truth.

JvS: That's what everything unique and beautiful and

AH: But I did have them, they were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and they blew them up so they were about this big and they had the whole series of them, it was quite nice.

(There is general comment on the Rodin and Henry Moore sculpture gardens)

LH: The other interesting thing is how these people, these great artists have been influenced by nature and spaces in nature.
Moore of course was very much influenced.

JvS: Yeah, the voids, leave the negative space as much as possible.
... And do you come to Washington?

LH: Not anymore. I've had to cut back a bit to projects that are more or less local... because of this...

JvS: I understand, completely.
Well I hope you come, we can walk the back side of the Roosevelt Memorial. I go by it everyday, I'll keep an eye on it for you. I also go there after dinner with visiting firemen... and its beautifully lighted.

LH: We spent a lot of time on that.

JvS: Yeah you did, we can tell. I lived through all those years. I remember the first design was a professor of mine at Michigan who won, this awful thing, "like Stonehenge" they called it. I was a student then.

AH: I'm glad they didn't do it.

JvS: I am too.

AH: Where did you go to school?

JvS: Michigan, University of Michigan and then I studied at the University of Delft in the Netherlands for 4 years. I did my graduate work and that's where I got all my crazy political ideas. I grew up a nice Dutch Calvinist. I went to the Netherlands a nice Calvinist Republican boy and came back 3 ½ years later a raving socialist atheist man. Changed my life for the better... all my

- grandparents were Dutch... wanted to find my roots ... parents were very Republican. ...
- LH: And I remember about the New Deal and all the red social events we were able to put through.
- JvS I voted for Nixon the first time then I went to the Netherlands and that's when I changed.
- AH: My father, we had to take him to the hospital when Nixon was elected he got so upset.
- JvS: Well we got so upset when Truman was elected.
- AH: Well this one is worse than all of them.
- JvS: I think he is too.
- AH: I think even the Republicans are beginning to... if only because he has affected peoples' relationship to America... only because of that.
- JvS: Exactly.
- LH: He has ruined the country's image abroad.
- JvS: Oh he has, definitely.
- AH: And the brutality that some of our soldiers are engaging in. Unbelievable, I just can't believe that... and now they are unearthing massacres that those Marines were doing...
- LH: War is very bad. People who have not been in wars don't realize it. My ship was cut in half and that's how I happened to be here because I was sent back on survive leave (?). I was one of the few people on the ship who wasn't killed. A kamikaze plane caught us. What happens to people when they are in a war, its hard to explain. They become brutalized.
- JvS Human life is meaningless.
- LH: Well they had to feel that way.
- JvS: Of course, they had to kill.
- LH: Otherwise, what are you there for?

JvS: Right. Well that press conference the other night with Tony Blair and George Bush was just painful.

LH: I missed that.

JvS: Good thing. So shallow, so trite.

LH: Well Blair has gotten to be worse because of that election shit (?).

JvS: Oh yeah, he didn't say anything. He only said it in quite nice English, George Bush speaks Texan which is something else.

Well I think we are going to go off, thank you for your time.

(Photo taken)