

James Strecker Reviews the Arts

ALLEN KAEJA, CO-ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF KAEJA D'DANCE, ON HIS CREATION I AM THE CHILD OF... IN A WORLD PREMIERE DOUBLE-BILL PROGRAM WITH HIS WIFE KAREN'S NEW PIECE TOUCHX WHICH PREMIERE AT HARBOURFRONT CENTRE THEATRE NOVEMBER 11-13, 2022.... A REVIEWER INTERVIEWS PEOPLE IN THE ARTS

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**KAEJA**

**I AM THE CHILD OF...**

**31**

**TOUCHX**

Two world premieres  
**TOUCHX** by Karen Kaeja  
**I AM THE CHILD OF...** by Allen Kaeja & Bruce Barton  
**'CHILD'** is a collaboration with Vertical City Performance

PART OF TORQUE International Contemporary Dance Series 2022  
 November 11 & 12 @ 7:30pm, Nov 13 @ 2pm  
 Harbourfront Centre Theatre  
[www.kaeja.org/k31](http://www.kaeja.org/k31)

Photo by Drew Berry of Melo Salazar and by Kevin Jones of Nekeisha Gerrick & Karen Kaeja

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JAMES STRECKER: Please tell us what you want the public to know about your newest work. For instance, what exactly is it and why does it exist? How is it new?

ALLEN KAEJA: My newest work, *I am the Child of...* has a lot of history behind it. Twenty-five years ago, I created *In Blood*, the first of eight stage works and eight dance films based on my father's experiences during the Holocaust. His entire family was murdered including his first wife, child, parents, siblings and entire extended family. Only those who left Poland prior to WWII survived.

After the war, he went to Deggendorf Displaced Persons Camp. He was a refugee, who spent years trying to find a home. After three years, he was sponsored, but only after the Canadian government retracted its policy of None is Too Many, which banned Jews from entering Canada over a decade prior, during and following the war. Once here, he built a family, a business, a life and upon his passing, was made an honorary police officer for his outstanding community work. A penniless refugee who was feared by our society.

In the past, I have drawn from personal experience to reveal universal extremes. These include: my father's Holocaust experience and survival; child abuse through my extensive work with Children's Aid Society; anti-Semitism, discrimination and bullying from my own youth.

I was inspired to create "*I am the Child of...*" by a Facebook post I created in 2015, that was a direct statement when the former Prime Minister, Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau were in running against each other, and Harper said he wanted to limit the refugees coming to Canada. The post began with "I am the child of a refugee".

I began rehearsals for "*I am the Child of...*" in March 2018. I have been profoundly affected by the response, brutal honesty and power of the stories that have come forward by the performers during the hundreds of hours of rehearsals, personal writings by the dancers and physical investigations.

The current cast of eight brilliant dancers is multi-generational and of distinct physical and dance practice backgrounds. The experiences that have been written and spoken about during the process range from deeply emotionally raw experiences of: surviving sexual abuse, poverty, war, Highway of Tears, and discrimination, through to the other complex sides of childhood: frozen dinners, stickers and wolves.

I have drawn directly upon the personal writings of the performers, about their experience within the frame of: *I am the Child of...* We are deeply complex individuals and I encourage the dancers to focus their writing/dancing/interacting that is directly associated with the statement.

I have also integrated Augmented Reality and multiple perspectives as an essential component of the piece. There are now eight physical and five AR performers: 13 in total. Each interacts with the other and the audience is encouraged to bring their devices (fully charged) to experience the piece in all its intricacies.

I am in collaboration with Dramaturg Bruce Barton and his company Vertical City Performance on this new multi-digital experience.

My wife and Co-Artistic Director of Kaeja d'Dance, Karen, is also choreographing a new piece called *TouchX* which will premiere alongside *I am the Child of...* in a double-bill program at Harbourfront Centre Theatre November 11-13, 2022 as PART OF TORQUE International Contemporary Dance Series.

*TouchX* is a contemporary moving image of what has 'touched' us most over our lives – the thought, memory, fragility, ephemeral nature of touch. Directed and choreographed by Karen, the dance work is a multi-sensory visual world of what remains in the body through wanted and unwanted touch, contrasted with when our hearts have been touched. An ensemble of dancers is joined by a brave collection of everyday community folk, who boldly take space in a complex world of protection, disassociation, fantasy, surrender and connection. *TouchX* holds a fertile immediacy and essentiality in a time when the human need for touch is unmistakable.

*TouchX* is seeded in years of research and development with professional dancers and community members. More information about both works, as well as a link to buy tickets, can be found at [www.kaeja.org/k31](http://www.kaeja.org/k31)

JS: What kind of audience will this project interest? What new audience are you also seeking? Why to both questions?

AK: I would venture to say that for my piece, "*I am the Child of...*" the audience would be somebody who is both fascinated with deeply personal stories from each of the dance artists, plus fascination with the integration of digital technology in live performance. Anyone who I've shown the Augmented Reality to is entranced, ranging from teenagers through to people in their 70s. Dance is universal; therefore, I think that the quality, integrity and brilliance of these dance artists is an invitation for all to be immersed.

*TouchX* similarly has a universal appeal because it features both professional dancers and community members. The audience can see themselves reflected in the work, and everyone who experiences the performance can draw connections to their own memories of touching moments.

JS: What might others not understand or appreciate about this work?

AK: Both Karen's and my works are contemporary in nature, therefore we are creating imagery and dance that is integral to the intention of the piece, but does not directly infer the piece. Karen and I are not working with either a linear storyline nor representational dance.

JS: How did doing this project change you as a person – and as a creator?

AK: For *Child*, and due to the pandemic, I began investigating the technologies of Augmented Reality a year and a half ago, as a way for audiences to both view dance anywhere/anytime in alternative locations, but also to be able to dance with the AR dancer. Karen and I were working with Zoom five years ago on a different project and I have decided to also integrate the idea of audience agency with how they would like to view/experience the performance at times, by choosing which camera perspective they find most fascinating. There are up to three cameras that are integrated by the dancers, at times, during the piece.

JS: What are the most important parts of yourself that you put into your work?

AK: I have been telling my families stories for decades, my father being a Holocaust survivor. For *Child*, it was important for me to hear/dance the stories of others and how we are all interconnected through our histories, ancestries and sensibilities as a community and society.

JS: What are your biggest challenges as a creative person?

AK: Slowing down.

JS: Please give us a brief autobiography, some stuff about yourself that is relevant to your work in the arts.

AK: I am a father and husband first and foremost. Family is everything. I am Co-Artistic Director of Kaeja d'Dance with Karen Kaeja, a choreographer, Dance Film Director, educator, performer, and cyclist and I follow my fascination.

My former involvement as a wrestler (invited by the 1981 Ontario Olympic Federation to compete for the team) and Judoka (1980 gold medal at the CanAm games) deeply influenced my current partnering work.

JS: If you could re-live your life in the arts, how would you change it and why?

AK: Why? I have loved every struggle, direction and failure I've accomplished. I can claim absolute ownership of my life decisions.

JS: What exactly do you like about the work you do in the arts?

AK: The unknown. I love walking into rehearsals as a *tabla rasa*, finding truth as we discover it.

JS: Please tell us what you haven't attempted as yet that you would like to do in the arts. What's next in the coming few years of your creative life?

AK: I have never done a re-mount of an old work. I am hoping to actualize the re-imagining of *Resistance*, my choreography that toured North America for six years and was turned into a dance film. I will invite a number of choreographers to re-create each 15-minute section of the whole sixty-minute piece.

I will also be creating a new Dance Film inspired by *I am the Child of...* in the new year.

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