



SILVERFOX

TORONTO +
MONTRÉAL

JAZZ EDITION
RACONTEURS
MUSICIANS

TouchX

Karen Kaeja is has spent 7 years developing a new work that delves into personal themes of what has 'touched' us most deeply over our lives - the thought, the memory, the fragility, the ephemeral nature, and the agency of touch. Touch X will bring five trained dancers together with the impeccable presence of up to 100 everyday people on stage.

Kaeja d'Dance

© Harbourfront centre



TouchX

TouchX has been shaped over many years and has arrived at a time where there are still reservations about touch. TouchX began seven years ago and, during its development, I explored various aspects of touch. Since then, much has happened in the world related to touch and non-touching. Now, the concept of agency in regards to touch is even stronger and more prominent.

As the pandemic hit, we were approaching the performance. Almost 40 people including 29 community dancers and 8 company dancers were participating in the work, which required us to consider touch in a new way. "How do we touch? Why do we touch? How do we choose to receive touch? Whose decision is it?" These were questions that we examined in depth. Some sections of the work relied on a score that allowed the performers to make choices, connecting the work to real life in a meaningful way. I'm interested in incorporating elements of reality into my work.



Photo | Drew Berry

I am the Child of... embodies personal experiences, bringing them forward in dance. This multimedia production features physical investigations of childhood memories, resulting in unflinchingly honest stories of resilience. *I am the Child of...* is ever-changing, with structured moments interlaced with a responsive immediacy of movement, creating an unpredictable experience within every performance. Allen Kaeja collaborates with Bruce Barton and Vertical City to develop different perspectives and perceptions for the audience using augmented reality technology and multiple camera angles filmed live by the dancers. It's a show where mobile devices are welcome and part of the viewing experience!

I am the Child of...



ON SILVER HAIR

Karen Kaeja

As for my personal experience of silver hair, the pandemic helped me embrace myself on both an external and internal level. I used to dye my hair, which was fun and refreshing, but other things became more important as I delved deeper into my thoughts. I have long hair with streaks of silver. During the pandemic it became half silver and half dark. The end strands were tinted with whatever washed-out color remained visible.

When I saw footage we shot for an upcoming solo film, it was clear that my hair had changed, as did I. It shocked me and I thought about reshooting, but then I realized that this is who I am.

I'm embracing this side of myself, letting go of expectations. There's a connection to my body as well. As a dancer starting out at 18, I didn't have any preconceived issues that sometimes dancers develop when they start training at a young age and are encouraged to maintain a specific body type. I didn't have that, but I did face other external pressures in my training.

I don't see my body as a dancer's body; it's just a human body. In the past, I struggled with it and engaged in extreme behaviours like bulimia. But now, and even moreso since the pandemic, I feel good.



Kaeja d'Dance

Allen Kaeja

How do you see dance and art as it intersects with well-being?

Dance is breath and breath is life. I feel the more we can express ourselves within the realm of movement, the healthier and more vibrant we are. The more we interact with each other, as a sensitive and listening collective of individuals forming a community, the more we can ensure the health and wellbeing of a community and society.

My wife, Karen, is a goddess and I have learned, over the years, that to witness, immerse and be responsive to the depth of her quality and intuition, the more informed I am as an individual. In rehearsals with many individuals, this responsiveness is critical to the creative process

where I can choreograph a piece honouring the voices of the dancers, thus creating a healthy environment where the dancers are able to express themselves in a safe and vulnerable environment.

Our imaginations are what define us as individuals and as a community. Each cannot exist without the other and in our practice of honouring and supporting each other's vision, breath and expression, the quality of our lives and interactions becomes essential in our movement of compassion and understanding. It is essential that we respect and listen to each other's lives and stories and try not to impose our own beliefs on others, that allow us to become the incredible mosaic that we are becoming as a culture.

Can you tell us about three personal elements that guide your process as a choreographer?

The unknown: I am fascinated by the immense variations in which we can tell our own or someone else's story, and the differing mediums in which to explore. I am examining so many different approaches, which include: stage, film, Augmented Reality and multi-discipline practices. I prefer to go into a process not knowing where I feel I want to go or what to say, but allow the impulse of the moment, the dancers I'm creating with and medium I'm working with to define the outcome of a piece.

I am always investigating and challenging my knowledge, both with Kaeja Elevations and in my works. I would say I'm intrigued by the unknown and am driven to find clarity and insight. It is inherent in my being and creative process to push and push, until I reach a level of understanding, then use this as a base to move forward. I feel Karen's and my company, Kaeja d'Dance, has been based upon these principles of

always-moving forward, finding new directions and understandings

I am the child of a refugee and Holocaust survivor: This aspect of my life has also defined who I am as a choreographer and filmmaker. The depth of trauma, loss and family has been critical to myself as a creator and teacher.

I have learned over the decades, especially from my wife, Karen, that to be responsive, supportive and a vessel for the creative process, that it is critical that, even as a child of horror, that in my listening to other's stories, I have a lifelong task to be as compassionate and vulnerable to other's pain and reflection as I can and help to refine their experiences into a creation.

I also have learned that collaboration is a key to the success of a work and process of creation. I co-created I am the Child of... with Director/ Dramaturg Bruce Barton of Vertical City Performance and welcomed the vision, insight and creative inspiration from: Digital designer: Ian

Garrett of ToasterLab

Composer: Edgardo Moreno

Lighting Designer: Simon Rossiter

Point Zero (.0)/Kinetic response:

Point Zero (.0) is an immensely important process in my development. I was personally frustrated by trying to re-capture moments from a structured improvisation that would last up to twenty minutes (sometimes through video and sometimes through note writing) and thought, there has to be a more comprehensive way of working with impulse-driven work, – the unexpected nature of the unknown and to somehow capture the essence of a moment or series of moments right away, without compromise. I have always believed in the creative brilliance of my dancers and because we developed and used this process inherently, I felt that by “codifying” it, we could use .0 as a set of parameters from which to break free. The importance of a defined structure is to find its limits and challenge its outcomes.

Over the past twenty years, I have

credited my dancers as: Created with and performed by.

I feel that many choreographers don't credit their predecessors enough with how their personal training and experiences influence their choreographic development and work. I don't believe that this means compromise, as we all strive for our own physical language.

I encourage anyone using .0 or my Elevation techniques to credit where the influence came from.

I try to work as a comprehensive, creative and impulsive team. I have also defined my vocabulary much more, so the Elevation techniques now play a much more definitive role in the choreography.

Please share three surprises you encountered during this process of creating these pieces.

That the Augmented Reality does not need a target image. My original experience with AR was that it needed a target image to become activated. Discovering that aspect of the digital

technology opened a whole new world to myself and allowed me to create a Mio/Mini Mio duet with herself that the audience could witness through their mobile devices.

The dancers did not need to “see” the AR to interact with these digital dancers. We initially set up a “confidence” monitor so that the dancers could be responsive to the AR dancer and our performers said that it was too distracting. They felt that because the process of creating the AR was similar to them creating their solos/duets/group sections, they could deeply relate the AR's dance would interact with their intuition rather than visual cues.

No technology needed. The performers were so clear and powerful in their roles and with each other, that during one of the runs, the digital component crashed, but the dancers carried the whole piece effortlessly and with incredible passion and connection, Child could be experienced by the audience with the multiple perspectives and AR, and be completely immersed and

moved by the dancers themselves.

What were the challenges encountered in the process of creating this piece?

The greatest challenge was that over the five years of investigation / creation, finding the most connected team of dancers was essential to the success of the work. There were twenty-five dancers throughout the process and by the time we reached performance, there were thirteen – eight live and five AR dancers. My collaborator and co-creator, Bruce Barton, felt that by honing the cast to it's core size was important for the structure of the piece.

The entire soundscape and musical score was designed entirely of the dancers voices and stories. Our composer: Edgardo Moreno, recorded the cast telling their personal story (edited by Bruce Barton), a song from their childhood and a shared song from Mio Sakamoto.

I designed the piece to be performed in the middle of the pandemic,



Photo | Megan Anderson

therefore I was prepared to have between 1 – 11 dancers at any given time. I also thought it may have to be livestreamed or filmed, so prepared for all possibilities.

What do you want our readers to know about you and your company?

Karen and I are passionately driven to pursue our fascinations. Kaeja d'Dance was created as an umbrella to support the vast range of activities that we were involved with: Stage, Film, Education and Community engagement. We both began dance "late", but discovered our voices through our determination to become professionals. We both travelled the world, independently and together.

We co-founded a number of festivals to elevate and support our professional dance community, as well as developing a number of education programs that range from public schools through to pre-professional programs and to the professional community world wide.

We also have two children, who both danced with us on stage and in our films when they were younger, but who pursue to very different professions now.

As written on our web-site: Kaeja d'Dance is driven by a commitment to innovation in the performing arts through the expression of dance and gesture. We explore identity, personal stories and the complexity of the human experience by integrating the interconnected mediums of live performance, dance film, and community engagement. Kaeja provides platforms for and fosters the creation of new Canadian professional dance works which are featured locally and internationally that inspire connections between professional artists and the broader community.

How much sleep do you get?

My preference is 8-9 hours, but during a stage or film production, I average 5 hours.

Please name some of the playful things that sustain and nourish your life as a dancer and a choreographer.

I love the outdoors and spend a lot of my time either hiking or biking. I love travelling with my wife Karen, as she shares the wonderment of engaging with people and cultures from other countries. We've toured to Japan, India, Israel, Sweden, Spain, USA, Venezuela, across Canada and the UK among many of other countries. We are fascinated by new ideas and approaches to dance. With our children, we hike, bike and play many types of board games whenever we're together...a fun and laughter filled time.

I have, over the past couple of years, done a few solo bicycle trips: Tuscany, Italy and the Connemara Mountains, Ireland averaging 50-70km/day. I plan on doing one a year now.

I love biking my birthday, and began this tradition when my friend, Blake, suggested I do this at age 55 (I had

cycled 70 km that day and Blake said, "Why don't you just bike your birthday"). I cycled 63km on June 22nd this year.

Over the pandemic, I began writing, what I call, "Thank you Thursday", and wrote 104 over the 2 ½ years. This process is transitioning into a new book to be published in 2023.

Please name one of your favorite collaborative projects from early on in your career?

Beare: A Celtic Odyssey: was my first full evening multi-media/multi-discipline production in 1987. I worked with a brilliant cast and creative team including Karen Kaeja (performer), Loreena McKennitt (composer played live).

How did this project inform the work that came next (or future collaborations)?

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 interact 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 premiered 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.

Please share one of your favorite unexpected moments that arose from the project

For *Child*, and due to the pandemic, I began investigating the technologies of Augmented Reality (AR) 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 were three cameras that were integrated by the dancers, at times, during the piece.

How do you define success?

I don't feel it's up to me to define whether I'm successful or not. I just "do" and am blessed that I have the

love and support of Karen and our children.

I also feel blessed that I'm able to create with an incredibly passionate and talented community, as well as to investigate and immerse myself in my fascinations...

What have you noticed about how the world around you perceive silver hair today?

It's a fascinating dilemma, on the one hand, the physicality seems to demand youth, yet the emotional realms demand age and experience. We definitely need more depth in the contemporary dance performing field. My last production, I am the Child of... included both depth and kinetic brilliance. The eight performers' ages had a 40-year range, from 20's through to 60 years.

I believe that we absolutely need senior dancers on-stage, performing their brilliance, experience and connection to both the audience and the stage. I have had the honour to

have seen Martha Graham perform in her 90's and realized, even back in the late 1980's, that by seeing her brilliant performance, that there was hope for me, as a young dancer, that I can have an actual career that can span decades and I can be deepening my performance into my own 70's and 80's.

Currently in our 60's, Karen and I are still very actively performing in both stage and film and have no plans on slowing down. In fact, we're touring our duet show to the USA and Western Canada in 2023.

Karen is gorgeous with her silvering hair and I love seeing her grace the stage (and screen) with her presence, power, integrity, depth and effortless flight.

How do you celebrate the premiere of one of your works?

With family, friends, performers, collaborators and one of my favourite single malt whiskies Caol Ila-18 year.

How do you want to be remembered?

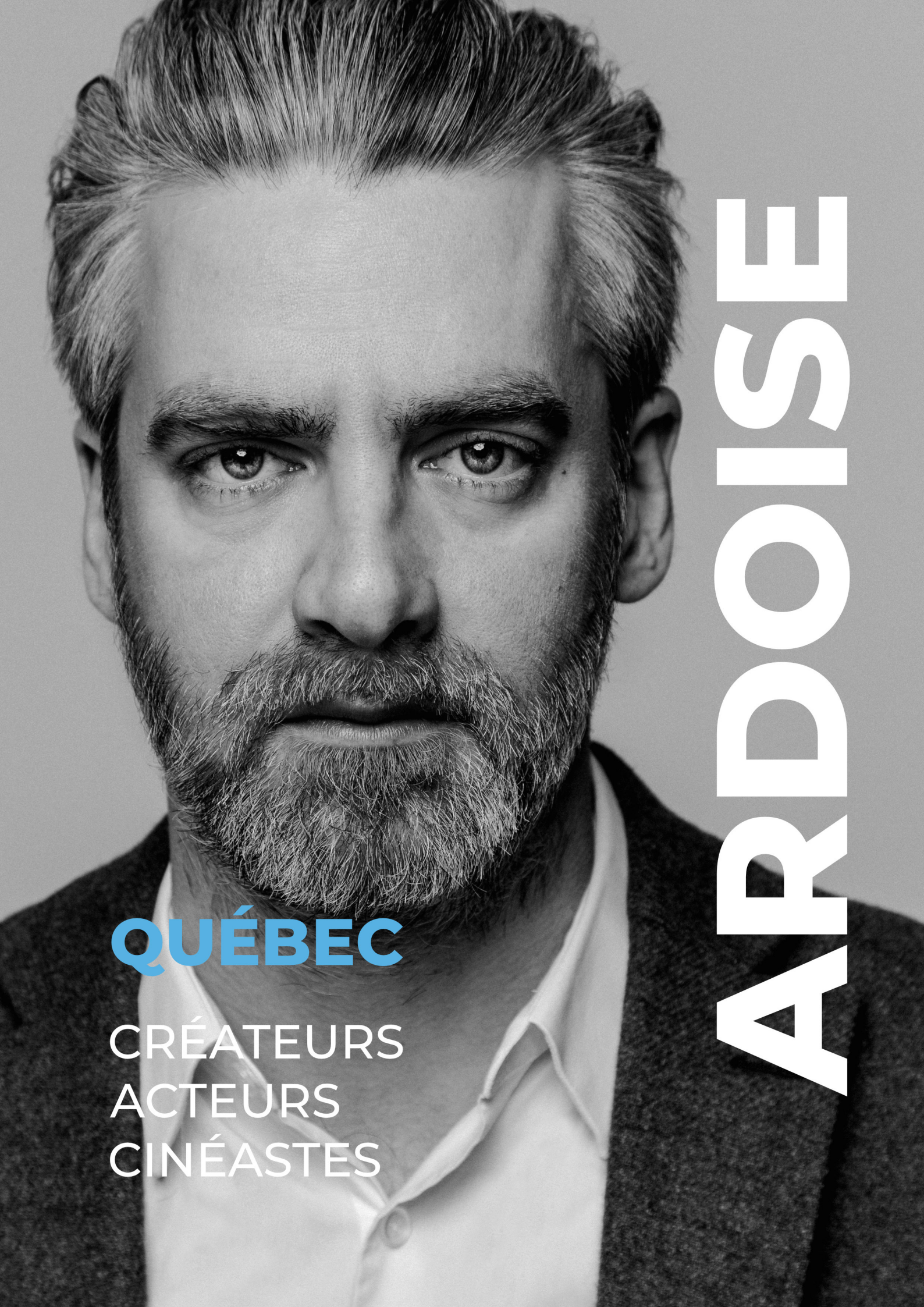
As a father of two amazing children, husband, friend, protagonist and creator

Kaeja Elevations

Thirty years of examining Holocaust inspired stage and film works

Express Dance: Educators' Resource for Teaching Dance; and Transcending Media: Adapting the dance production Asylum of Spoons from Stage to Film books

Co-Founder/Creator of fFIDA (fringe Festival of Independent Dance Artists 1991-2005-Canada's largest Contemporary dance festival), CanAsian Dance Festival (1998 - present), Co-Creator with Karen of Kd'D2: Canada's first emerging-professional touring dance company (2001 - 2005).



QUÉBEC

CRÉATEURS
ACTEURS
CINÉASTES

ARDOISE