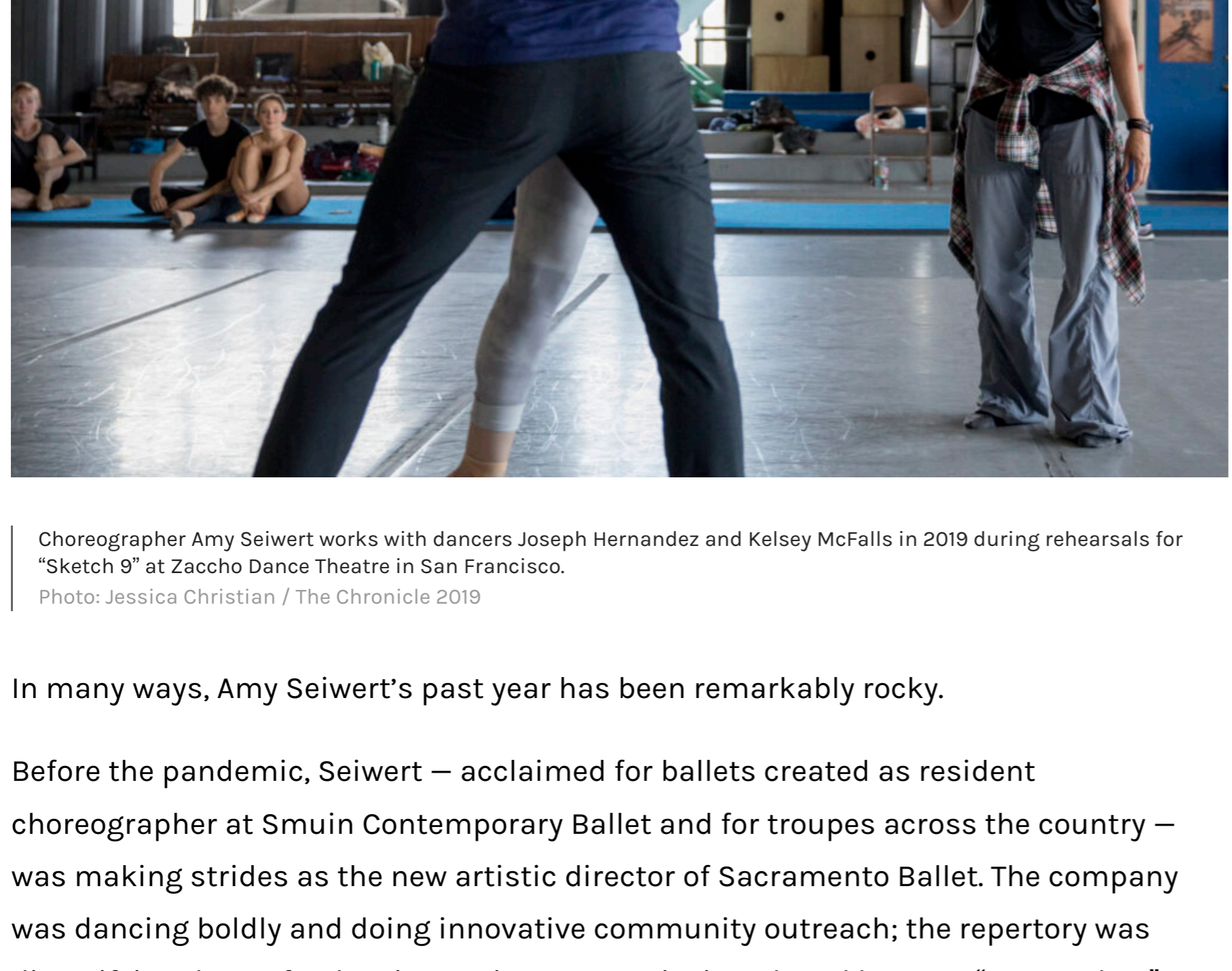


DANCE

Choreographers to create, tear apart ballets for ‘Sketch 11: Interrupted’

Rachel Howard | August 19, 2021 Updated: August 19, 2021, 11:17 pm



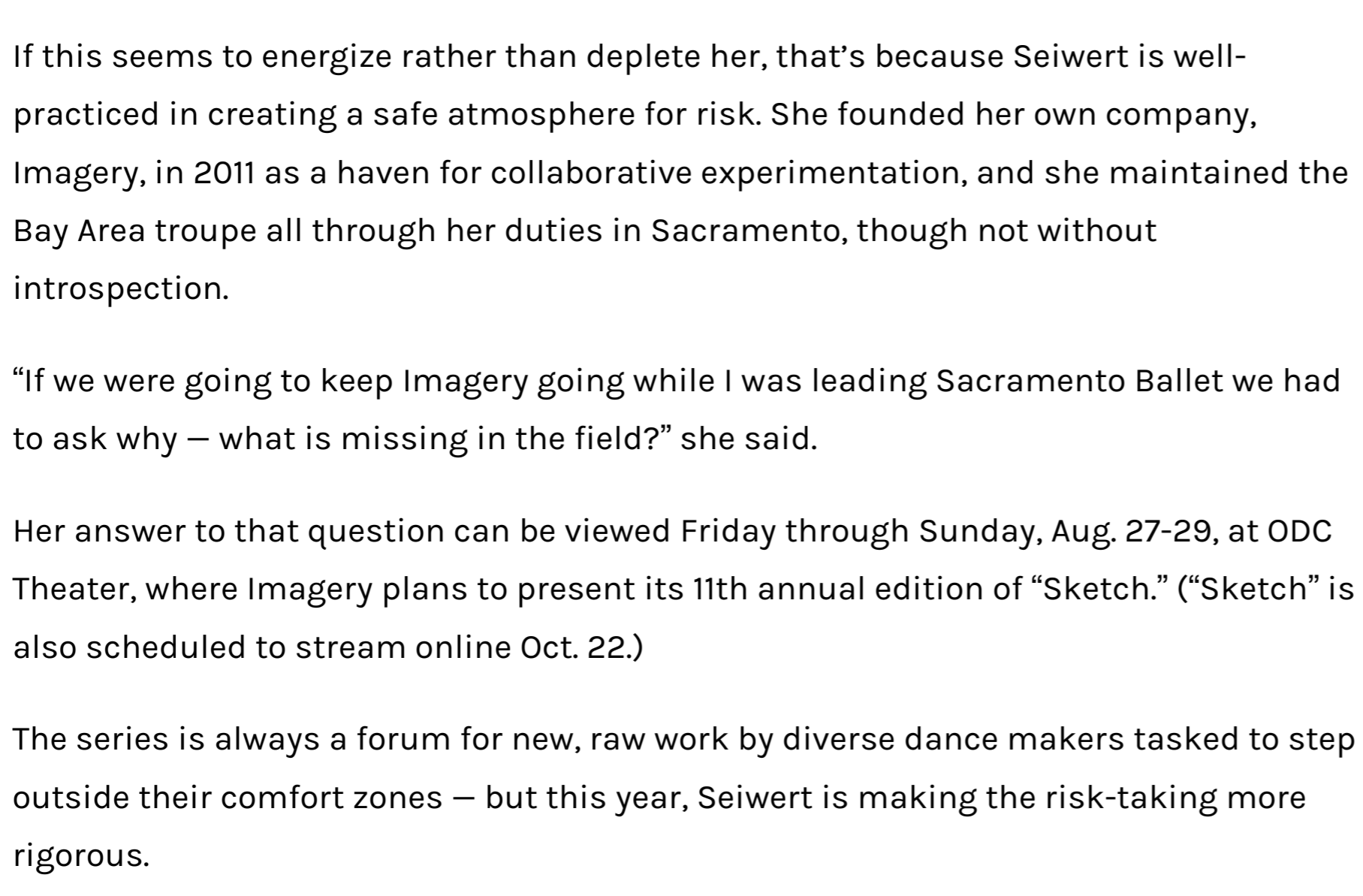
Choreographer Amy Seiwert works with dancers Joseph Hernandez and Kelsey McFalls in 2019 during rehearsals for “Sketch 9” at Zacco Dance Theatre in San Francisco. Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle 2019

In many ways, Amy Seiwert’s past year has been remarkably rocky.

Before the pandemic, Seiwert — acclaimed for ballets created as resident choreographer at Smuin Contemporary Ballet and for troupes across the country — was making strides as the new artistic director of Sacramento Ballet. The company was dancing boldly and doing innovative community outreach; the repertory was diversifying due to fresh voices Seiwert commissioned; and her new “Nutcracker,” which countered much of the gender stereotyping Seiwert calls “baked into” the ballet, was a hit. But then came COVID.

In July 2020, Sacramento Ballet abruptly terminated her, combining Seiwert’s job with the pre-existing executive director’s responsibilities. (The company declined to comment for this article.) Seiwert became a nomad, teaching a few months in her hometown of Cincinnati, and living tentuously coast to coast.

So you wouldn’t blame her for just wanting a bit of ease as she tucked her dancer’s frame inside a patio chair at the Oakland residence she was house-sitting. From a studio below, notes from her husband Darren Johnston’s trumpet floated up as he played a practice session, along with the smell of jasmine. Instead of asking for more relaxation, she said, “You have to continue to risk.” She stole her blue eyes thoughtfully. “Or we as choreographers should stop what we’re doing and someone else should step in.”



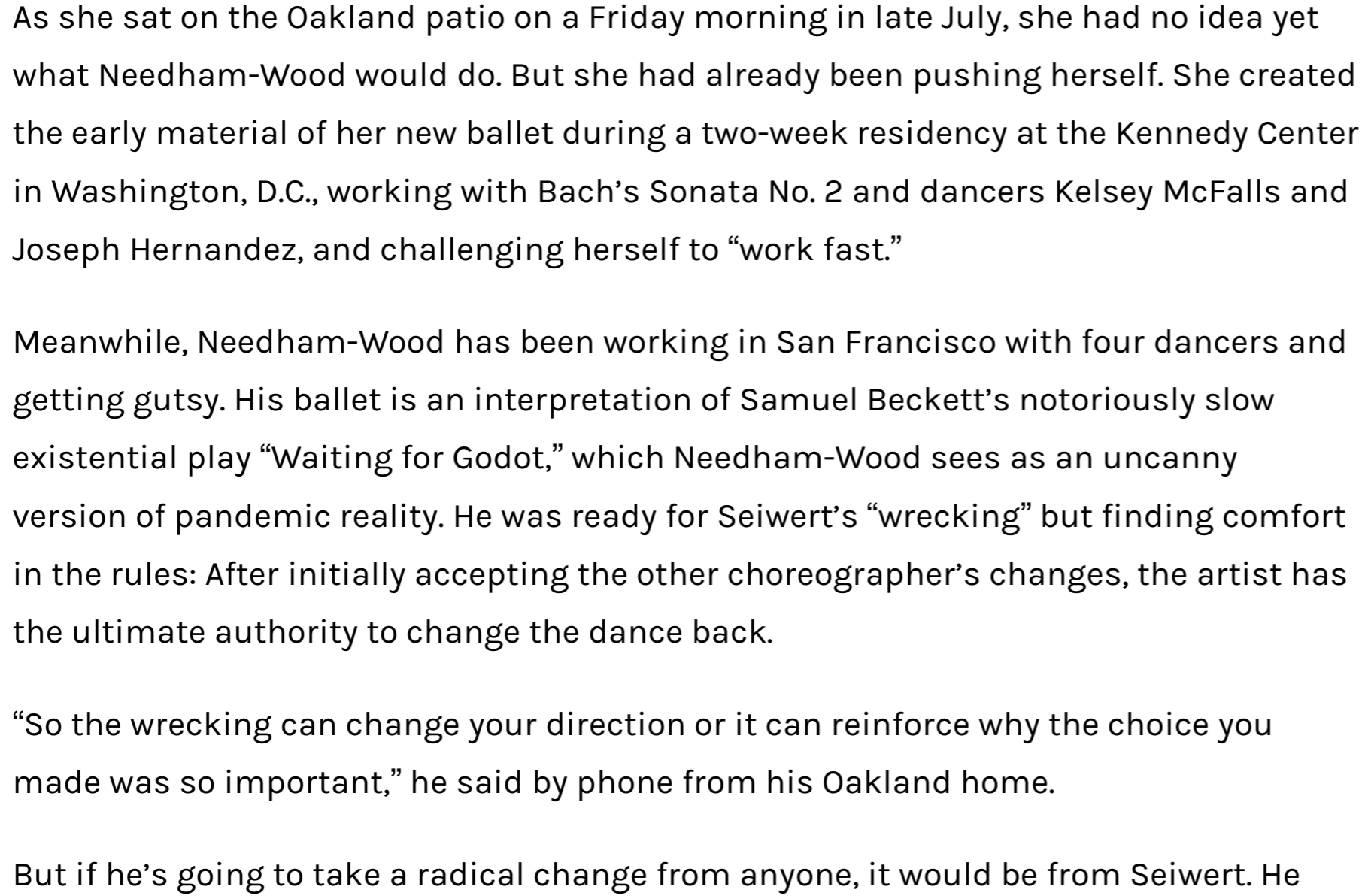
Dancer Kelsey McFalls (left) rehearses with Imagery artistic fellow Ben Needham-Wood for this year’s “Sketch 11.”

If this seems to energize rather than deplete her, that’s because Seiwert is well-practiced in creating a safe atmosphere for risk. She founded her own company, Imagery, in 2011 as a haven for collaborative experimentation, and she maintained the Bay Area troupe all through her duties in Sacramento, though not without introspection.

“If we were going to keep Imagery going while I was leading Sacramento Ballet we had to ask why — what is missing in the field?” she said.

Her answer to that question can be viewed Friday through Sunday, Aug. 27-29, at ODC Theater, where Imagery plans to present its 11th annual edition of “Sketch.” (“Sketch” is also scheduled to stream online Oct. 22.)

The series is always a forum for new, raw work by diverse dance makers tasked to step outside their comfort zones — but this year, Seiwert is making the risk-taking more rigorous.



Amy Seiwert (left) works with dancers Isabella Velasquez and Anthony Cannarella in preparation for “Sketch 11.” Photo: David DeSilva

Seiwert and Imagery’s artistic fellow, **Ben Needham-Wood**, have each made a new ballet. But they have also agreed to “wreck” each other’s ballets. The “wrecking” concept was coined by New York choreographer Susan Rethorst and learned from San Francisco choreographer Christy Funsch. A choreographer “wrecking” another’s work views the dance and then is free to make extreme changes, including moving sections, changing the cast or replacing silence or music with spoken words.

To say this shakes up Seiwert’s usual process is an understatement.

“In ballet, people don’t ask for feedback much,” she said. “Ballet choreographers don’t generally work with a dramaturg. And in ballet, you don’t talk about someone’s piece until you leave the room.”

As she sat on the Oakland patio on a Friday morning in late July, she had no idea yet what Needham-Wood would do. But she had already been pushing herself. She created the early material of her new ballet during a two-week residency at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., working with Bach’s Sonata No. 2 and dancers Kelsey McFalls and Joseph Hernandez, and challenging herself to “work fast.”

Meanwhile, Needham-Wood has been working in San Francisco with four dancers and getting gutsy. His ballet is an interpretation of Samuel Beckett’s notoriously slow existential play “Waiting for Godot,” which Needham-Wood sees as an uncanny version of pandemic reality. He was ready for Seiwert’s “wrecking” but finding comfort in the rules: After initially accepting the other choreographer’s changes, the artist has the ultimate authority to change the dance back.

“So the wrecking can change your direction or it can reinforce why the choice you made was so important,” he said by phone from his Oakland home.

But if he’s going to take a radical change from anyone, it would be from Seiwert. He met her in 2011 and has participated, as either a dancer or dancemaker, in nearly every “Sketch.”

“I know her work so well and she knows mine,” he said.

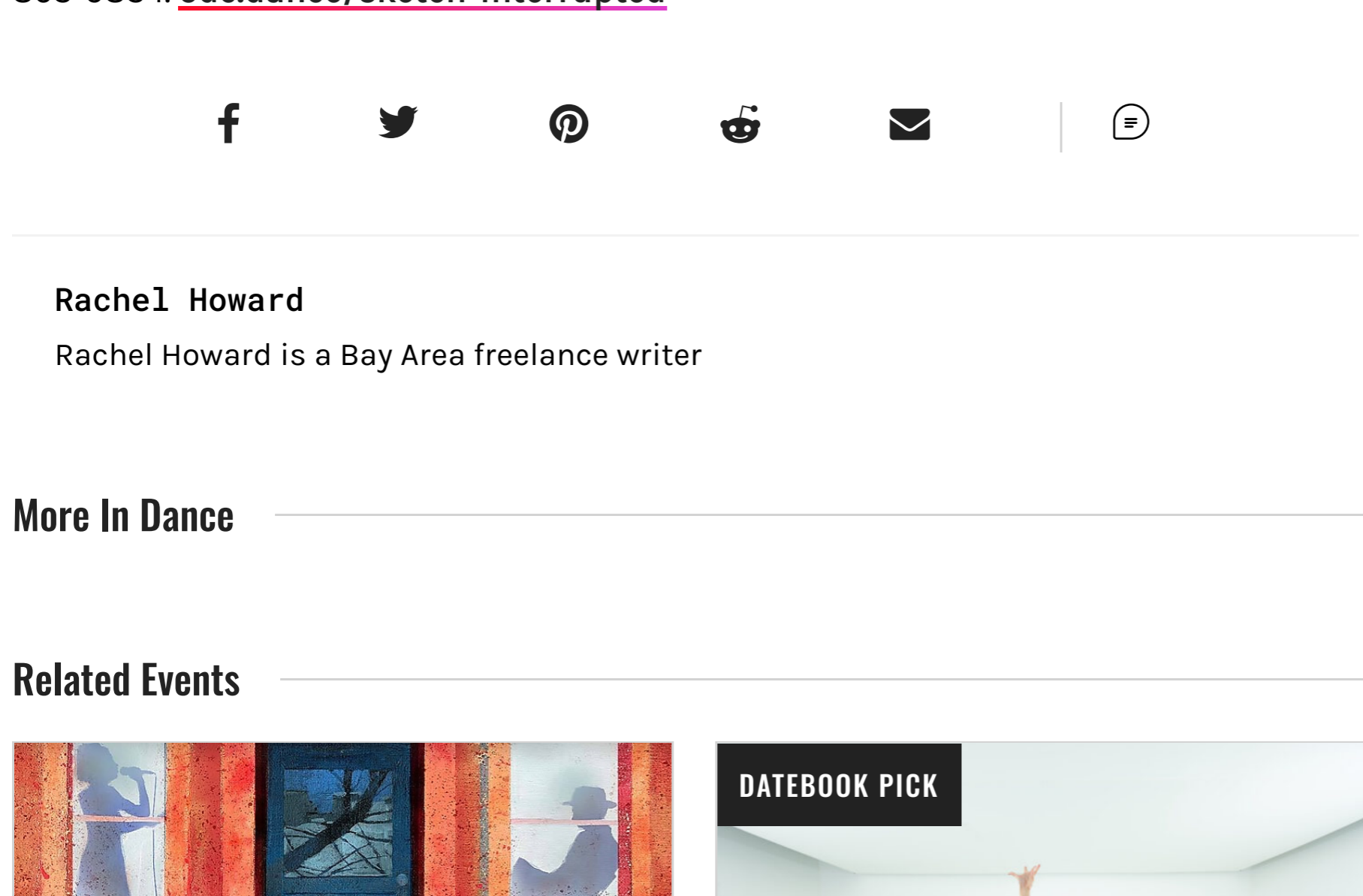


Amy Seiwert and Ben Needham-Wood rehearse “Wandering” for “Sketch 7” in 2017. Photo: David DeSilva 2017

The 33-year-old, who retired as a dancer from Smuin Contemporary Ballet last year, has been learning more than choreography from Seiwert. As Imagery’s three-year artistic fellow, Needham-Wood has shadowed company manager Annika Pressley. Before the fellowship, Needham-Wood had never read a budget and didn’t know the difference between an advisory board and a fiduciary board.

“Now I feel he’s ready to take on his own company,” Pressley said. Which is just what Needham-Wood is doing — his own artistic endeavor has just applied for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status.

This mentorship, too, is part of Seiwert’s response to the question, “What is missing in the field?” Imagery will soon be announcing its next artistic fellow.



Kelsey McFalls and Joseph Hernandez work on routines for “Sketch 11.” Photo: David DeSilva

Meanwhile, Seiwert’s own work is gaining steady exposure, with Smuin, Ballet Austin and American Repertory Ballet all dancing her work this year, not to mention a major commission soon to be announced.

It’s been a year of upheaval, forcing the dance world to face its racism and sexism, and this excites Seiwert in her work on- and offstage.

“The field’s had a reckoning,” she said. “It’s something Annika and I talk about a lot: What’s our mission, what are our blind spots? How are we failing and how can Imagery do better?”

“Sketch 11: Interrupted”: Imagery. 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Aug. 27-28, 7 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 29. \$25-\$55. ODC Theater, 3153 17th St., S.F. Also streaming 7:30 p.m. Oct. 22. 415-863-9834. odc.dance/sketch-interrupted



Rachel Howard
Rachel Howard is a Bay Area freelance writer

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