

## Getting Emotional/Strange with filmmaker Laura Taler on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of *the village trilogy*

Interview by Kathleen Smith

This year, Laura Taler's [<https://laurataler.ca/>] influential screendance, *the village trilogy* turns thirty. Premiered at the Moving Pictures Festival in 1994, when Taler was just twenty-four, the film has been broadcast, screened at film events around the world, won awards and served as an ageless exemplar of seamlessly merging choreography and the camera. Today, it lives online as part of the Canadian archive Collections Regards Hybrides [<https://collection.regardshybrides.com/>] and is poised for several celebratory screenings throughout the year.



Laura Taler in *the village trilogy* (screenshot)



Shot on black-and-white 16 mm film by director of photography Michael Spicer and directed by Taler, the village trilogy runs twenty-four minutes and consists of three distinct yet related chapters. The first—**casa (house)**—is set in an abandoned building. Through broken panes of glass, we first glimpse Taler, clad in dark baggy clothes, a cap obscuring her hair. She yawns, puts her finger in her mouth, and beats a hand against her armpit. This solo is vintage Taler, full of quirks and charm. The second chapter—**copii (children or kids)**—is set in a forest in early winter. Two men in old-fashioned coats and caps (José Navas and Luc Ouellette) move through the woods, hiding behind trees, sometimes sleeping. They're furtive when awake and look like lifeless bodies when they slumber among the fallen leaves. This could be child's play or some grim reality—it's hard to tell. We see that they may be brothers; each wears the same ageing photo of two young boys pinned to the inside of his coat. The third chapter of the village trilogy — **famiglia (family)**— begins with a young woman (Kim Frank) tenderly kissing a white-haired man (Donald Himes) on the cheek. As the camera pulls back, we see that they are part of a group sitting around a table outside in a paddock or farmyard. The dancers mime sharing food and feeding each other. They laugh and smile as the camera starts to circle them. The movement gets bigger, faster, more theatrical, as some of the performers lean back and disappear under the table, popping back up to reach ecstatically for the sky.

Many of the themes first tackled in the village trilogy continue to reverberate in Taler's current interdisciplinary and visual arts practice. Ideas about personal history, language, gesture, migration, family – all are often expressed in Taler's site-specific or multichannel installations, in live performances with screen elements and many other hybrid modalities. And the film itself has a continuing yet evolving relevance in our volatile, migratory, and shifting contemporary world.

We chatted about this and more on February 12, 2025.

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[Kathleen Smith]

The village trilogy was one of the first films you ever made. Can you talk a bit about how you became interested in filmmaking?

[Laura Taler]

It *was* the first film I made that wasn't part of a performance. But how far do you want to go back? I remember waking up early on Sunday mornings to watch musicals – *Singing in the Rain* and *An American in Paris* and all those great musicals. I also loved old silent films – Chaplin and Keaton. When I was a teenager, I acted in a television series called 9B for a couple of years. I think that gave me the bug of being on set. I love the process of making a film. I love all the people, the collaboration, the different jobs.

I would also say a big switch happened in 1992 when I was at the Canada Dance Festival in Ottawa. A bunch of dance films were just sitting in the library at the National Gallery (selected by Lisa Cochrane, I think) and you could just go and stick them into the VHS and watch – nothing formal as far as I remember. I watched all of them... and loved them. I can't remember the names of the films, but I can see them in my head. I loved the fact that these films created these different worlds, different from the one we live in, through set and costume and location and movement. That was a big inspiration.

That fall there was a big dance and camera workshop at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. At the last minute I ended up going with four other choreographers, five directors, five composers, and the company Le group de la Place Royale as dancers. I had applied as a choreographer thinking that I might want to direct eventually. When I left, all I wanted was to direct.

It was a hard three weeks. I think the only people who came out of that workshop who are still making dance films regularly are myself and Katrina McPherson. It was a very hard, intensive workshop and I was already thinking about *the village trilogy*. I had done the opening solo as a live stage piece and I had a group of dancers that I got into the forest in these funny outfits to do these weird little Laura Taler movements. And we filmed it.

Everybody hated it. There were people who were saying “you're mocking the dancers.” I mean, this is my memory of it. Of course, there were other people in the room. Maybe they have a different memory of it. Anyway, many just found it all very weird and that was hard to take. But when I left I was determined to go ahead.

[Kathleen Smith]

Was it always going to be a trilogy? Did you envision that from the outset?

[Laura Taler]

It started as such a weird little solo and I wanted to bring it out to other places without losing the intimacy that it had when I first performed it live at Dances For a Small Stage. I wanted to use cinematic tools like the close up and the moving camera to maintain that kind of intimacy. But I thought, oh, I can't just make a six-minute film because where are you going to show a six-minute film? I have to make a twenty-four-minute film because that's a broadcast half-hour. That way I can get it on these television arts programs that are popping up all over the world now, right? Mid-90s, right? Stuff was happening.

[Kathleen Smith]

That was the time.

[Laura Taler]

I thought, okay, I have this solo. What would happen after a solo? Well, let's do some work with two people, make it a duet, and then a group of people, let's make it a family. So it was always going to be a trilogy. I was once called a practical hard-nosed realist.

[Kathleen Smith]

How did you get the funding together?

[Laura Taler]

I'm always saying, "ah, the 90s."

So in the 90s, there was a program at the Canada Council, you may remember, called Explorations. And there was a program at the Ontario Arts Council called Ventures which was similar to Explorations. And these were programs to which you could apply as an artist to explore another medium or something that was outside of your wheelhouse.

So Leuten Rojas was the officer at Explorations and I called him and I said, 'Hi, I'm Laura and I'm a choreographer and I want to make this film' and told him my story and he was very nice and he basically said to me: "You will not get a grant unless you have a storyboard." And this was one of the most important things anyone's ever said to me. I would not have done a storyboard otherwise. And I think it was the storyboard that got me the grant because it showed that I have these cinematic ideas and that the choreographic material could translate cinematically, that I was already thinking cinematically in my head. So, I applied for Ventures and I applied for Explorations and I got both.

Which at the time was like a lot of money – I think it was a \$40,000 budget.

[Kathleen Smith]

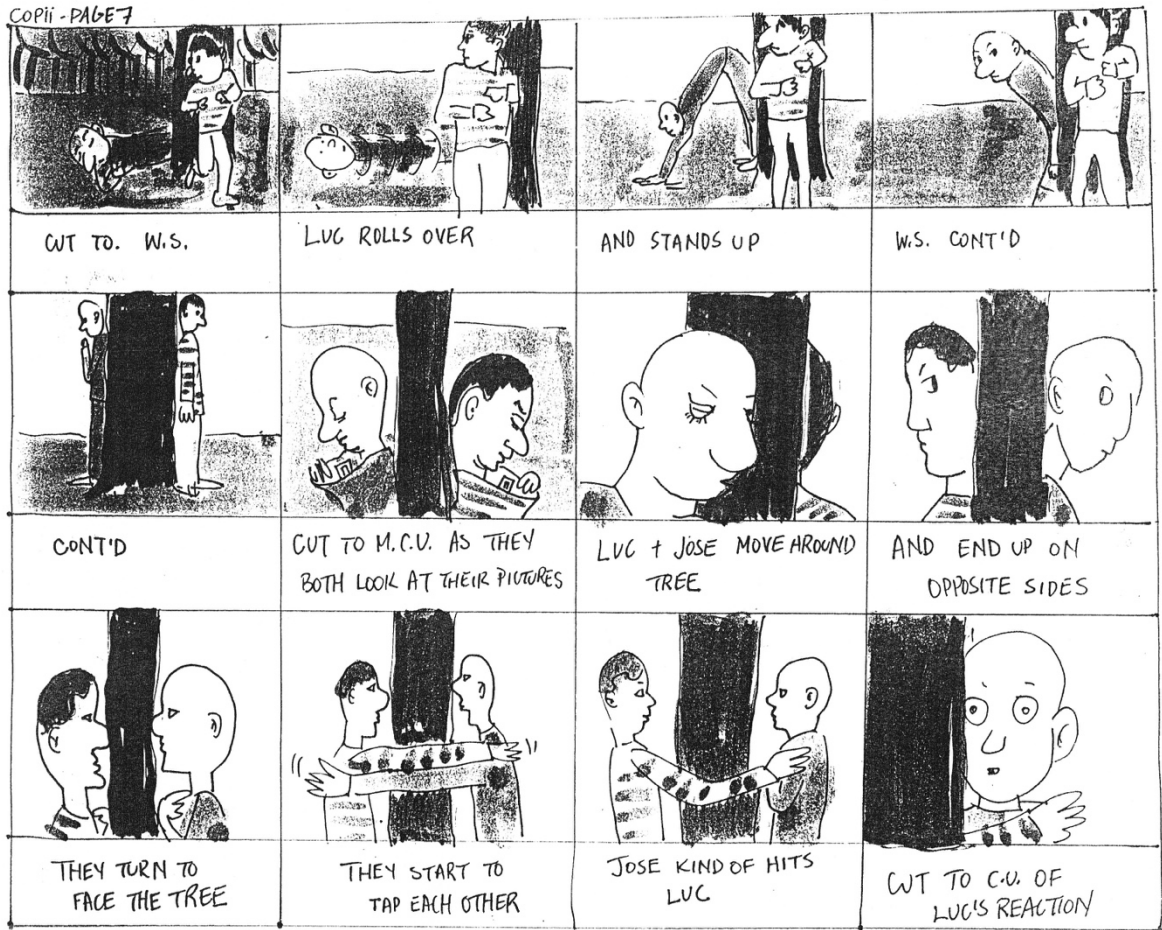
Yeah, that's a lot at that time.

[Laura Taler]

But I mean, to put it in perspective, the film I just made had a \$65,000 budget.

[Kathleen Smith]

Oh.



Storyboard for PT II: copii P7, storyboard artist: Xenia Taler

[Laura Taler]

Yeah, anyways. The *village trilogy* budget included Ventures and Explorations, and I think there was probably some money in there from the Toronto Arts Council and the Laidlaw Foundation and probably some from the National Film Board. We started editing at the NFB because we needed a Steenbeck and they had one. Then we ended up at the Canadian Film Centre Because they also had a Steenbeck.

[Kathleen Smith]

Wow. It's wild to think that you made that film on film.

[Laura Taler]

Yeah. For 10 years I made work on film but this was filmed and edited on film.

[Kathleen Smith]

That era though, the early 90s, there was this real embrace of the idea of interdisciplinary work, there was this climate of mashing things up and exploring and experimenting and taking risks outside your discipline. That's something I sometimes think we've lost. Do you find that's true?

[Laura Taler]

It's hard for me to tell because I just keep doing what I'm doing and I mean it's always been a bit weird and off the mark and it continues to be so. I do feel there's less of an appetite for stuff like that. Maybe within the programming world, people want things to fit into boxes. But then there's also stuff that is even more strange – and I use the word strange in the best sense of the word as something that we're not familiar with and that makes us think differently: 'Oh, this is something that's strange. I need to get to know it. I need to try to find ways to open my mind to it.'

It's like people want things they can recognize. You know, as much as I watch all the streaming services and Netflix and all that jazz, it really has messed with our ability to see things differently – because it's so formulaic. We're not open to different rhythms, different cadences, a different level of comfort — we're just not open to *difference* so much anymore. We're so used to these cookie cutter formulas that work and are satisfying. It's like eating junk food, basically. It's delicious. We all love it. We all do it once in a while.

I've always tried to play with the idea of creating something cinematic with movement, not necessarily like capital C choreography, but with movement where you're not being told so much through words. Lately I've been playing with singing a little bit too and lyrics.

And then trying to figure out like, what if it's not like what you would expect or what you would want. Instead it kind of pushes you to think differently or to slow down or it makes you uncomfortable, all those things, yeah.

[Kathleen Smith]

To go back to the village trilogy then ... some of these ideas you're describing and that you're pursuing now in newer works like *THREE SONGS* were in evidence in *the village trilogy* as well. Not just the movement quality or the choreography, but also the human voice that comes up, the look of it, the pace of it. And then there's the sort of personal history and those references that have consistently appeared in your work over time. Can you talk a little bit about your personal connection to the material in *the village trilogy*?

[Laura Taler]

In what way?

[Kathleen Smith]

Like in terms of your connections to your family's home, to your grandmother, to your native language.

[Laura Taler]

Well, I find it very complicated because I get so emotional.

[Kathleen Smith]

What? You're crying, Laura. Oh, my God.

[Laura Taler]

I think because we left when I was six my connection is so emotional. I've talked to people who left when they were like 12 or 13 and they have similar ideas around their relationship to living in Canada and coming from Romania. But they don't have this emotional trigger, they're more reasonable about it. I just go straight to the emotional. So I'm going to answer your question obtusely.

I'm working on a new project, which begins by going through a bunch of boxes in my archives that I have labeled "undone" or "unmade" and they're all the projects which I started and got to a pretty advanced level. The idea is to go back to these undone boxes and see like, what can I do with the past? Do I just get rid of the projects in the box or is there material in there that I can move into a future project?

All that to say, I went through these boxes and I could see in the projects, even the ones that I abandoned, how much I kept reaching back to my past, to Romania.

[Kathleen Smith]

Viewing the film you can sense a lot of these resonances and echoes and hallmarks of loss and yearning, looking for things. That's what I find most interesting about *the village trilogy* – all that stuff is recognizable even though people looking at it don't necessarily know anything about you. It's all there, it kind of comes off the screen. It's a point of interest for me, having just shown it to my students.

[Laura Taler]

The thing is I never intend to do those things. I never intend to *do* Romania. I don't want to do it. I mean, I spent most of my time, especially when I was younger, on moving away from it. I don't want to be an immigrant artist. I just want to be an artist. I don't want to be given privileges because I come from somewhere else. I want to be just who I am, whatever that is. It's complicated, but it just comes out because that's what's there.





On location filming *the village trilogy*, from L to R: Peter Irvine, José Navas, Micheal Spicer, Laura Taler, photo Stacy Clark

[Kathleen Smith]

Can you talk a bit about how your practice became more interdisciplinary? I guess the question I really want to ask is, did you consciously turn your back at any point on dance and film as standalone disciplines?

[Laura Taler]

I don't think so. When people ask me why I started to dance, I tell them that I never really felt comfortable with words. I was born in Romania where I went to German kindergarten. Then we moved to Italy where I learned Italian and Hebrew. Then we moved to Canada where I learned English and French. I didn't even know what people were saying to me half the time. When we went to Italy, I had no idea what people were saying to me. When we came to Canada, my parents sent me to sleepover camp after we were here for a week. I had like five words of English so I had to read people's gestures and facial expressions and I had to read the affect in the room. I had to read the affect to understand what was going on and so I would mimic people's faces or I would mimic what they were doing. I think I started to dance because I felt



really comfortable expressing myself in a way that didn't include words. I love moving physically but the dance I did was always a little bit not so dancey. There was always this theatrical element or character, small gestures or quirkiness. Then the film came really quickly. I was already working a little bit as an actor and as a dancer and then also in these cinematic environments.

[Laura Taler]

I don't know if you've read it, there's this great essay by Ursula K. LeGuin called The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction. It has an introduction by Donna Haraway. It's a short essay about the idea that story, our ideas of story are so particular and limited. You hear about the bone or the blunt instrument as the first tool, but LeGuin talks about the carrier bag as being the first tool. She talks about fiction more as this carrier bag or vessel that you carry. Anyways, you have to read the essay, but it's really worthwhile in terms of this idea of our obsession with plot. There are different ways to tell a story.

[Kathleen Smith]

It's great to talk about this because, you know, the thing about *the village trilogy* is it did so well that there was this sense that you were going to be a filmmaker now, like you were going to go on to make feature films. That was the trajectory. It was very clear and often when people are presented with a very clear career trajectory, they will follow that trajectory because they'll make a lot of money and be successful.

My point is you're so clearly not that kind of artist, right? You followed your own path and it's more about the integrity of your practice and what you're interested in personally and interrogating all these things from your past and current interests and different kinds of media. So much has become available to us in the last twenty years in terms of new ways of doing things and you're always right there messing around in it. So I think it's worth noting that this film was a launch pad that you did not use to launch yourself in the expected direction.

[Laura Taler]

I did try a little bit. I did get a Chalmers grant and went off to write a feature and it was torturous. I just felt like I was following this structure that was so bound.

[Kathleen Smith]

Why did you hate it so much?

[Laura Taler]

It just wasn't fun. This idea of the strange I brought up earlier... where you take something that's very close to you and push it away somehow and make it strange in order to look at it from a distance and be able to see it differently.

I always ended up back in Romania. So, this idea of making something strange is so you can learn something from what you're doing.

I worked on two features for a really long time and I tried really hard. I don't know if it's that I'm too stubborn or if I didn't learn enough about the technique of script writing – because it is a technique and it requires learning.

Maybe if I had dived right into a three-act structure Instead of just reading a couple books about it, I could have honed those skills in a different way. I'm a hard worker, I would have done that if that was the thing I wanted to do. But I tried to do it and it didn't attract me. And then the projects went in the box.

So now I'm going to go into the box and I'm going to say, okay, what of the stuff that went into the box that I worked so hard on still sparks me and makes me curious and can I take some of those elements and make something new out of it.

It's taken me a long time to figure out what I want to do and how I want to do it.

[Kathleen Smith]

Do you keep up with the screen dance community?

[Laura Taler]

It's so big now. It's not really possible to keep up with it. But there are a few people I do keep up with, colleagues I've met throughout the years. I sat on a jury at one point for the New York Dance on Camera festival and that was really helpful because I got to see a bunch of stuff. But that was a while ago. I feel more connected to the visual art community right now.

[Kathleen Smith]

When you're getting ready to show *the village trilogy* to a new audience now, how do you feel about it?

[Laura Taler]

I am always nervous before a screening. I am even getting nervous answering this question (as I imagine how I will feel before the screenings that will take place this fall). But that's part of the process. I think I get nervous because I want the audience to connect with the work. Even after 30 years of screenings, you never know what will happen. But I do love the film, it still makes me laugh and cry and feel all the good things. It also remains a bit mysterious to me and that makes watching it exciting. There's an unsettling duality of distance and proximity that the work brings. It's incredibly intimate and moving, but also so distant, as if it's taking place in another space, another time. I really value all the layers of feelings it brings.



Laura Taler headshot, photo Charlotte Frank

**In 2025, *the village trilogy* will screen in Montreal, Toronto, Peterborough and Vancouver in conjunction with masterclasses taught by Laura Taler.**

***Matryoshka Crush* (2025), Taler's latest video installation will run June 11 to August 16 2025 at AXENÉO7 in Gatineau, Québec.**

**Taler's video installation *Hex: Begin Again* (2018) will run November 1 to December 13, 2025 at Occurrence, 5455 De Gaspé, Montréal, Québec**

**Learn more about Laura Taler's practice at <https://laurataler.ca/>**