

# FRED TORRES COLLABORATIONS

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Article Posted on June 29, 2011

## The New York Times

### Talking Dance and Art With David LaChapelle and John Byrne

Article by Julie Bloom



Richard Perry/The New York Times

[John Byrne](#) and [David LaChapelle](#) used to be a couple. The romance didn't last, but the two have continued their relationship through art. Mr. Byrne, a choreographer and former dancer for Paul Taylor, worked on "Rize," Mr. LaChapelle's 2005 documentary about krumping, as well as "Elton John: The Red Piano." Now Mr. LaChapelle has produced Mr. Byrne's first full-length work of dance, "Transcending Form," with Fred Torres, at [Theater 80](#) every Wednesday through Aug. 24. In addition, Mr. Byrne has created a structured improvisation piece at Lever House, home to an exhibit of Mr. LaChapelle's work, "[From Darkness To Light](#)." Pedestrians can happen across this performance every Wednesday from 1 to 2 p.m. We talked to Mr. Byrne and Mr. LaChapelle about their new works, their collaboration and the melding of dance and art. Here are excerpts from the conversation:

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Q.

How did you two meet?

A.

John Byrne: We met in a club. I was dressed as an Indian. David LaChapelle: Amanda Lepore introduced us. He was a dancer with Paul Taylor and I went to go see a performance. And then we were boyfriends for three years and that was seven years ago. We broke up, but love doesn't dissipate, I believe. John was always there and seeing him dance on the jobs that we've done together, the Elton John show, John's a completely different person onstage. Also, we both went to University of North Carolina School of the Arts, just 20 years apart.

Q.

John, how did you get into dance?

A.

Byrne: When I was young I started watching old Hollywood MGM movies. It was just something I had to do. My first class was second grade — I had to dance to “Wind Beneath My Wings” by Bette Midler and I cried and I hated it, but I kept coming back. I just became obsessive about dancing. I got a scholarship to North Carolina School of the Arts and I eventually sneaked off to New York and auditioned for Paul Taylor.

Q.

What made you want to choreograph?

A.

Byrne: I love telling stories. It's just natural. I think that for certain people that have a hard time communicating through language or standard measures, it's a different kind of expression, it fulfills a natural need.

Q.

How did “Transcending Form” come about?

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A.

Byrne: This is my first full-length piece. It's basically a 70-minute theatrical dance story, including some live music, and artwork created by David. It's about the transcending soul. It's about people becoming enlightened through ordinary ways. I had seen these pieces by David called "Ascending Souls," which are photographs of figures on fabric, hanging. And he created these pieces for the Lever House. He gave me the opportunity to make a dance so I took the idea from the installation.

Q.

Did you have in mind specific characters?

A.

Byrne: I really like cinematic narratives. I love looking at a photo and seeing a story in it. I love the films of Almodóvar and Woody Allen. In a way I had in mind a complete story with all these different scenes. But then David came in and he loved half of it and hated the rest.

Q.

You obviously take his opinion seriously.

A.

Byrne: He's given me this opportunity and he's also mentoring me. I'm grateful to have someone like him. You need an outsider. He's told me a lot of choreographers or directors when they make their first big thing they try and put too much in it, he really edited me.

Q.

How did he edit you?

A.

Byrne: There were lots of parts that were really violent and he said yes you can show struggle but

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you don't have to have so much of it. We have certain sections where the dancers are just standing there smiling and laughing and he pointed out that that is a much more radical idea.

Q.

David, what made you interested in supporting dance?

A.

LaChapelle: I have this thing in my heart for dancers. All of my friends at North Carolina School for the Arts were dancers, my first subjects, my roommates. Nothing to me is more beautiful than the human body. So much of my work is figurative, the whole show at the Lever House is figurative, and I've just always loved it and I can't explain how it makes me feel. Dance is also one of the components of the Lever House show, I was inspired by Merce Cunningham and interest in chance, and developing that, and I thought it would be a bridge between the passers-by whether they be bankers, or delivery people or secretaries and the art.

Q.

Why did you want to help John?

A.

LaChapelle: There is this childlike thing with John and this highly sophisticated eye for dance. And I said it's cool, I'll pay for it. I love dancers. I'm in a place where I can put this on and I just thought why not?

Byrne: I've been waiting to do this for 10 years since I left Paul. I've seen the struggle that my peers have gone through trying to start a company. I wouldn't know how to write a grant, I wouldn't know how to get to PS 122. I'm so grateful to have someone who believes in me.

Q.

There's a photo installation in "Transcending Form" too?

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A.

LaChapelle: It's a set piece basically. I was afraid people were going to come thinking it was a LaChapelle show. I didn't want to do that to him. I'm not a choreographer, I'm not a dancer.

Byrne: You're a mentor.

LaChapelle: I'm not a mentor, I just gave you advice. Don't be humble pie. This is your piece.