



# MAKING LOST MOUNTAINS VISIBLE AGAIN



How Dance Exchange's 500-mile walk  
informed *How to Lose a Mountain*

Emily Macel Theys / Dance Exchange



We found a piano. We took a walk. We met a man. We made a dance.

This week marks exactly one year from first day Cassie Meador and the Dance Exchange set out on a 500 mile walk to trace the sources of the electricity that power the homes and businesses in the DC Metro area. In that year a lot has changed—a piano that was headed to the junkyard was turned into a series of new voices in the form of beautiful ukuleles and guitars; a walk took place over two months and 500 miles and took us to power plants and farms, to mountaintops and riverbeds, through snowstorms rainstorms, emotional storms; a man named Larry Gibson entered our lives as quickly as he left, an untimely and unfortunate passing last fall just as we headed to the studio to begin rehearsals for the stage production of *How To Lose a Mountain*. A dance was built with many hands and feet—5 performers, 1 choreographer, a dedicated staff of 5 and countless DX friends, family, partners, donors and supporters who made the whole thing possible.

In 2009 Cassie co-taught a course with Barry Chernoff, Director of the College of the Environment at Wesleyan University in Guyana, South Africa. After the experience of living and teaching in the rainforest, sleeping outside, and being in more direct contact with the resources she was using,

Cassie returned to DC curious about the resources that power her home. But some research unearthed the fact that her home's power in DC is fueled by coal taken from a range (or what is left) of mountains in West Virginia. Many of these mountains have been lost due to mountaintop removal, and Cassie wanted to see it for herself. So with a few years of planning and an entire organization leaning in more so than ever before, in the wake of transitioning from our founder-led dance company to one with a new generation of leadership, we found a piano. We took a walk. We met a man. We made a dance.

A year has gone by, and many more mountains have been lost. And we understand a little more about the human impact of Mountaintop Removal.

What is Mountaintop Removal and why is Dance Exchange dancing about it?

The Environmental Protection Agency defines it: "Mountaintop removal/valley fill is a mining practice where the tops of mountains are removed, exposing the seams of coal. Mountaintop removal can involve removing 500 feet or more of the summit to get at buried seams of coal. The earth from the mountaintop is then dumped in the neighboring valleys."

Along the walk, we partnered with Mark Twery of the US Forest Service to lead Moving Field Guides, nature walks that incorporate movement to engage participants in learning about their local community's history and ecology. We made stops at Glen Echo Park and Harpers Ferry, in Charlottesville and Lynchburg, Virginia. When Cassie and her hiking companion and backcountry guide Matt Mahaney made it to West Virginia, they had been on their own for a while (aside from the occasional bear or snake or friendly folks who would offer stories of their life in the towns we passed through). Cassie and the Dance Exchange artists and staff who joined along the trail collected stories (which are visible on a website about the project, [500miles500stories.com](http://500miles500stories.com)) about how people have seen their land change over time, about risks taken, rewards gained, and things people have lost at no fault of their own. At the root of the dance and the dance making process, this is how Cassie addresses the environmental issues at hand—through the stories told by the people it affects, which is all of us, really.

Larry Gibson, one of those people, had been protecting his family's land his whole life, especially the last 30 years when it turned out that the coal seams in his mountain, Kayford, became quite desirable. He showed Cassie his land and shared his story, and he encouraged her to make this dance to tell the story of the mountain. Unfortunately, he passed before he could see how his story found its way to the stage.





In March 2013, we premiered the evening length work of *How To Lose a Mountain* at Dance Place in DC, followed by an April trip to Sheboygan, Wisconsin to perform at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (a co-commissioner of the work). In May we will head to the Trillium Performing Arts Collective in West Virginia. We are in conversation with other communities along the trail to see if we can return to share this artistic project just as they've shared their stories with us.

Cassie writes in her program note about the work: "For me, making dance has never been about a single trajectory to the stage—it is a plunge into the unknown, a way to go new places and to return home, to reshape our lives and actions and to encourage our curiosity about who we are, where we come from and how we sustain our lives. When you walk 500 miles there is no way to avoid shaking the very foundation of the life you are living and building. This is also true of making dance. So what happens when you put the two together? You'd better be ready for a lot of making and unmaking, loss and discovery, both in the studio and in your life. I'm not sure this shift, the loss of ground you thought you were standing on, ever gets easier. But asking questions can be a way to navigate this shift. Questions have been our lumber on this project, the very thing that we have built the work from."

What is made visible on stage is not a retelling of the walk; not an indictment of the coal industry or an expose of Mountaintop removal; it is not a linear narrative or a complete tale and it doesn't try to be. What is visible are pieces of choreography developed by the cast from their experiences on the trail, songs written and sung by those who felt compelled to share what struck them from the stories they heard and a commentary on what we risk for short-term reward and what we lose when we take those risks. Oh, and a pretty great example of how trash can turn to treasure with the stark contrast of a broken old piano and beautifully crafted new guitars made from its wood.

The premiere of the stage work was another mile marker in the project but there are many more stories to be heard and told. Share yours with us at [500miles500stories.com](http://500miles500stories.com).

#### IMAGES

Pages 26, 29: *Jori Ketten*

Pages 28, 30, 31: *Zachary Z Handler*

