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PEAK

JOURNAL

THE 2019-2020 SEASON

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CLAUDIA LA ROCCO, editor



THE HEIGHTS OF IMAGINATION

PEAK JOURNAL

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In the three years that I've been editing the Peak Performances Journal, the most consistent feedback I've gotten from Executive Director Jed Wheeler has been to keep experimenting: to not worry whether the work I'm commissioning for the page is adequately tethered to the work he's commissioning for the stage.

I'm grateful for his belief and encouragement, coupled as it is with meaningful support for writers and editors. As Jed and I have discussed larger themes more than specific productions, the freedom to think expansively has led to writing that converses with live work in a variety of ways. One main theme of the 2019/2020 Peak season, for example, is language and how it morphs over time, sometimes shifting as it encounters new influences. Sometimes disappearing. And so you'll find questions of translation throughout these pages. Meditations on the importance of giving voice, as well as the necessity of quiet. You'll find writing that intersects with and departs from live work in ways both explicit and oblique.

You'll also find a belief in the importance of singular individuals expressing their ideas, in their voices. In this, I think, an editor's job is not so different from a curator's: invite people in, and trust that they will make something worth paying attention to — even if, or perhaps especially if, it's different from what you envisioned them doing.

Claudia La Rocco
EDITOR

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WHAT QUIET OFFERS WHEN REPRESENTATION ISN'T ENOUGH

BY **SARAH CARGILL**

THE ABSENCE OF SOUND IS A LANGUAGE OF ITS OWN. IN THE MUSICAL LINEAGE OF WESTERN EUROPEAN ART MUSIC, I WAS TAUGHT TO CALL SILENCES “RESTS.” A TIME TO WAIT FOR THE NEXT DIRECTIVE. THE NEXT ENTRANCE. A RIGID MOMENT OF “DO NOTHING” UNTIL IT’S TIME FOR YOUR NEXT SOMETHING. “REST POSITION” BECOMES ACTIVE PERFORMANCE. A WORDLESS, BREATHLESS, ANTICIPATORY SUBTEXT.

I am also familiar with booming silences. A ripe, weighty pause just before a recapitulated theme, or the space between the last note and the first applause. The space in which meaning is made and experienced all at once. Atmosphere-heavy, we keep ourselves buoyed above the density with a collectively held breath.

But then there is *quiet*. In his book “The Sovereignty of Quiet,” Kevin Quashie examines how the ethic and aesthetic of quiet continue to shape Black culture and history, offering an alternative lens through which to understand Blackness beyond narratives of resistance. In describing the difference between silence and quiet, Quashie writes:

Silence often denotes something that is suppressed or repressed, and is an interiority that is about withholding, absence, and stillness. Quiet, on the other hand, is presence (one can, for example, describe prose or a sound as quiet) and can encompass fantastic motion ... Indeed the expressiveness of silence is often aware of an audience, a watcher or listener whose presence is the reason for the withholding ... This is the key difference between the two terms because in its inwardness, the aesthetic of quiet is watcherless.

Quiet offers an internally generated context, an alternative set of guiding principles that alleviates the pressure to reach beyond the

expectations of White supremacy in order to prove one’s inherent worth. Here, exceptionalism and the push to “beat the odds” become irrelevant to one’s humanity. Turning one’s attention inward, one begins to make meaning of the unremarkable, the everyday. Framed as an alternative to resistance narratives that often flatten Blackness and Black identity into a singular trope, quiet is, per Quashie, an affect “akin to hunger, memory, forgetting, the edges of all the humanness one has.” Quiet complicates the subject, offering opportunities to define oneself by the range of one’s internal reality, versus the demands of publicness, hypervisibility and the limited projections of the White imagination. It is a porous yet protective refuge.

The demand to keep my practice contained to “the music itself” (a phrase often used to silence musicians who have something to say about the conditions of their working environment) is a cruel and impossible task, for neutrality is both a symptom and expression of a deep privilege I do not have. Countless White instructors and colleagues have offered their sweepingly paternalistic two cents on why I should consider playing the saxophone or jazz flute; to study music by “my people.” Hidden behind a thin veil of White innocence, this passive-aggressive condescension was frequently employed to diminish my sense of belonging.

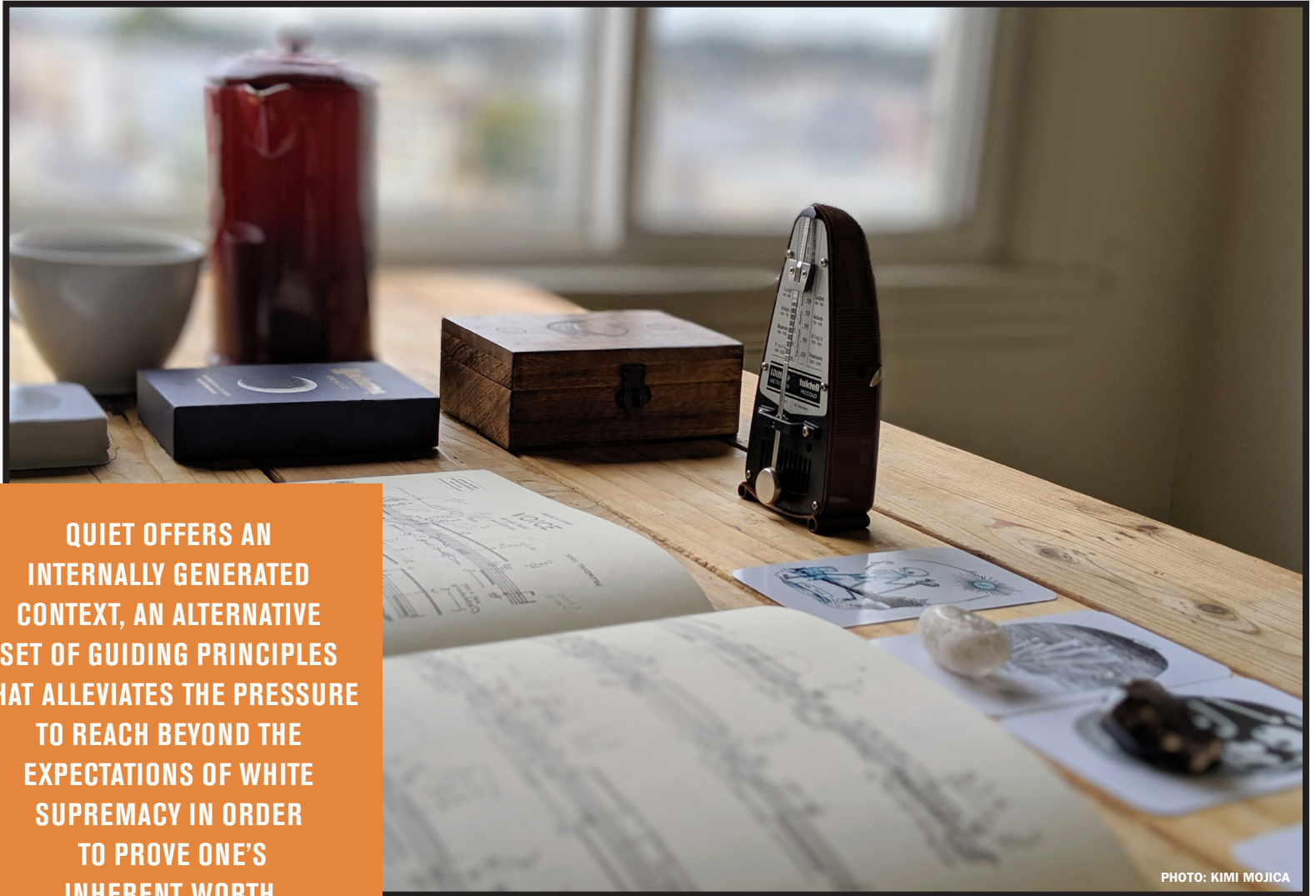


PHOTO: KIMI MOJICA

QUIET OFFERS AN INTERNALLY GENERATED CONTEXT, AN ALTERNATIVE SET OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES THAT ALLEVIATES THE PRESSURE TO REACH BEYOND THE EXPECTATIONS OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN ORDER TO PROVE ONE'S INHERENT WORTH.

During my graduate studies, I spent two instructional quarters staring at a 12-inch skeleton hanging from a noose over my music stand during private lessons. I inquired about the purpose of the toy skeleton and was told that it was “leftover Halloween decor.” I later learned it had been up for the last eight years. I recall the relief of spring break that soon followed, during which I spent most of my days baking pies in silence, rereading Audre Lorde’s essay “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Cocooned within the aroma of roasted sweet potatoes and warm nutmeg, staining my hands with blackberries and lemon juice, I cultivated a familiar quiet that led me back to myself. Here, quiet became the alchemical space where I transmuted haunting memories, personal and ancestral, into insight. Soon after, I chose to abruptly end those studies.

In his still-relevant text “The Souls of Black Folk,” W.E.B. Du Bois describes his experience navigating conversations with well-meaning White people:

Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question: Unasked by some through feelings of delicacy, others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They

approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or... Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?

I recall an instructor from my late teens who once revealed, with a great sense of altruistic pride, that she wished she had the opportunity to teach more Black students. When asked why, she replied in earnest that “Black people have better rhythm than anyone else!” I replied with silence, then scales, though I suspect that what she really wanted to hear was *gratitude*.

Representation alone will never adequately address my longing to be defined outside of narratives of resistance (or submission) to White supremacy. While representation has the potential to abate some of my loneliness, it does little to address how I can define myself for myself or dissolve cultural and institutional structures that protect White innocence. It cannot hold the full complexity of and accountability to past and present, and it cannot be the only means through which we imagine — let alone *live into* — futures that reach beyond White standards of polite tolerance and respectability. Here, the options are

slim: be grateful for what is offered or spend your life in resistance. This ultimatum serves as a reminder that representation won't protect me from the crushing weight of White fantasy. With this in mind, I cultivate quiet to animate the radical imagination needed to ground my sense of self in something other than the White gaze. Here, my existence serves a purpose beyond nourishing voracious colonial curiosities.

How does one access quiet through music and sound? Pauline Oliveros' series of text compositions, "Sonic Meditations," offers a rich example of how musicians may begin to explore quiet in their practice. By engaging with imagined and consequential sound through various exercises in sonic awareness, Oliveros encourages participants to find healing through the process of revealing their inner experiences to others, and having their values and memories integrated in the present.

In my individual practice, I have found quiet in long tones. Untethered by the pressures of measured time and tonal direction, I delight in the process of embodied euphony. I have found it in the space between changes of color, timbre and vibrato while exploring the opening C# of the flute solo in Debussy's Prelude to "Afternoon of a Faun." During performances and rehearsals, I have found it in the hushed, intimate buzz that seeps into rehearsal spaces during movements marked "tacet."¹ In this active, quiet space, I am temporarily released from the gaze. I suspend performance to hold water in my mouth and observe neighbors sharpening reeds, polishing instruments, releasing valves and running palms against dampened foreheads. Here, I gather meaning through moments that

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are perceptible, intelligible, valued and witnessed by no one other than myself. In claiming quiet, I learn to see my relationship to practice with more nuance and a fuller sense of gratitude for the unremarkable. Quiet satisfies the in/eternal longing to *just be*, even if that means becoming unintelligible within the epistemological structures of the White gaze.



In Japanese culture, "ma" describes the interval of silence and nothingness that exists between people, objects, conversations, actions and sounds. It is a fertile space guided by internal measurements of time and experienced in the imagination, both individual and collective, heightening the affect of that which came before and that which is to come. As a performer, I have found ma in the slight hesitation before resolving a suspension or the space between a preparatory breath and the entrance of a solo. It is in the moments just before the release of the next downbeat, when the last oscillations of vibration from the previous movement are more felt than heard. A reminder that no space is ever truly empty, despite the colonial mentality which asserts that blank — *cleared* — space is reserved for the imagination of those who wield institutional, economic and socio-political power.

When I sit in quiet, the pressures of exceptionalism fade into the background, giving way to the internal chaos, contradictions, nuance, imagination, memory and mundanity that make me wholly human. Quiet gives shape to internal sensibilities that structure everything I call into existence, including sound.

When asked to describe her definition of freedom, Nina Simone replied with unflinching conviction, "no fear!" In the space of quiet, my subjectivity matters, and in claiming it without fear, each performance, practice session and improvisation becomes my sovereign space.

¹ In musical terminology, *tacet* is a directive that describes a prolonged interval of silence, typically lasting the duration of an entire movement or large portion of a musical piece.

BREATHING THE LENS

BY **EMILY COATES**

SPEND 30 MINUTES
WATCHING DANCE ON FILM
WITH TOM HURWITZ,
AN AWARD-WINNING
CINEMATOGRAPHER,
AND HE WILL FLIP YOUR
VIEWING EXPERIENCE
ON ITS HEAD. INSTEAD
OF WATCHING THE DANCE,
YOU BEGIN TO WATCH
THE FRAME.



**The author in Yvonne Rainer's
"Three Satie Spoons" (1961).**

No photograph or film exists of Rainer, the original performer, executing this particular jump in the 1960s, a gap in the visual archive that essentially renders the jump an unknown.

You gradually become aware of the camera's micro-movements that keep the dancers in view: the feet are never cut off; the sliver of visible floor is always just right. As the dancers move left or right, the frame responds, tracking their path of travel. A perfectly timed zoom-out — a breathing of the lens — makes space for a lift.

We are watching the "Dance in America" taping of the ballet "Jewels," which George Balanchine adapted for television in the late 1970s under the direction of Merrill Brockway. Hurwitz explains the grammar of shots Balanchine and Brockway preferred: wide shot, full figure, or waist up (also known as the Cowboy or Tutu shot). The frame must never cut off the dancers' fingers and toes. "That's most likely my friend Eddie Fussell on camera," Hurwitz says, in a reverent tone reserved for gods or heroes, as he calls out a particularly fine follow shot in "Emeralds," the first section of "Jewels." We see Balanchine's choreography so clearly, circa 1977, because of the physical skill of camera operators like Fussell and Hurwitz.

Yvonne Rainer. "Three Satie Spoons, 1961" Performed in "Yvonne Rainer: Early Dance, 1961–1969" September 16, 2018, as part of *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done* The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 16, 2018–February 3, 2019. Performer: Emily Coates. Digital image © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Paula Court

Peak Performances is thinking this year about endangered performance languages. As we press further into the 21st century, the fragile ecosystems that supported the great 20th century dance languages show inevitable signs of decay. I am thinking of the systems that supported repertoires by such artists as George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Katherine Dunham, Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor: a daily technique class into rehearsals and new creation, and finally the public performance, which then informed the class ... and the cycle continued. What happened on the stage was merely a snapshot of a circular flow of ideas and discoveries. Over time, this system threatens to disintegrate because it is built upon the choreographer's live, embodied transmission of knowledge, and upon the knowledge of those who perform the work and teach the technique. As key artists pass away or retire, the original source becomes two, three, four times removed, and the information changes. Human mortality streaks through the ontology of dance.

An extreme nostalgia clings to the art form as a result. I launched my career in the 1990s and have danced in a number of major 20th and early 21st century repertoires — with New York City Ballet, Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project and ensembles led by Twyla Tharp and Yvonne Rainer. Because many of the dances I have performed were created decades earlier and passed on over time, I have frequently had the sense that we dancers chase ghosts: ever striving to look like the dancers who had originated the roles and to restore the choreography to some preexisting state. It is usually the older generations of dancers staging the work who privilege the past over the present — missing, perhaps, their own presence. The choreographer always looks ahead: working with whoever is in the room, preferring to create rather than reconstruct. The one repertoire in which I have not encountered this yearning for a bygone era is Rainer's 1960s dances, which I recently performed as part of the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done." Praising the reconstruction, a number of critics felt that our interpretation had restored technique to the historical narrative about postmodern dance. For although the dancers involved in Judson Dance Theater in the early '60s experimented with pedestrian movements and hauled mattresses around, they had started their days by studying ballet, Cunningham or Graham technique, or even West African dance. Fifty-five years later, with Rainer overseeing the 2018 reconstruction, we were free to perform her work with our range of technical backgrounds, from Balanchine ballet to Cambodian classical dance — feeling no need to look like anyone other than ourselves.

Notably, no film or video of Rainer's early 1960s dances exists. Recording dance became more commonplace by the late '60s and early '70s, and for a dancer, the rare videos from that era are like the Rosetta stone: a glimpse into an ecosystem caught in time, which can guide latter-day interpretations of a choreographic work. The recordings also produce the nostalgia, however: with Rainer's work, we had no basis of comparison and thus felt unburdened by the past. It's the gift of being able to see clearly how previous dancers danced that invites the comparison, and the yearning.

I became intrigued with the language of camera operators who shot dance in the last quarter of the 20th century because they created these recordings. They know the same repertoires that I do, yet their knowledge exists as a flip side or negative to my own. While I dance in the thick of choreographic fragility, their craft sits between us and the past, a shoring up against the ephemerality of the art form. What they developed is a secondary language — an embodied, cinematic technique that exists alongside great choreography to capture its essence. Much of their work can be found in the public television series "Dance in America," which first ran in 1976 and gave a cohort of directors, producers and camera operators an especially fertile platform on which to construct a grammar for recording dance. A range of styles and leading choreographers inspired their craft, starting with a mixed program by the Joffrey Ballet and including such work as "Holo Mai Pele," featuring ancient hula and chant. Film and video cannot prevent a dance language's demise; artfully filmed, however, we get something like a prehistoric bee caught in amber. Frozen in time, these documentations are nonetheless teeming with life.

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SIDE OR NEGATIVE TO MY OWN.**

Virtuosic camera work dissolves the frame into the viewer's experience of watching the dance. The camera operator's craft is so contingent on the dance that it takes a special technique to catch it: I have to watch the dancers with a soft focus and blur my vision slightly, in order to become aware of what's happening on the periphery. Once you begin to notice the deft, subtle motions of the camera operator responding to the dancer, it feels as though an entire third space opens up, a subtext that supports the music and the choreography. The movement of the frame is a language all its own.

The camera operators who worked on "Dance in America" in the early years perfected their craft on astonishing virtuosos. In the 1978 taping of Balanchine's "Chaconne," which you can now see on YouTube, the cameras confidently complement the movements of Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins in their quick duet. The leads exchange solos — first him, then her, their steps carrying them side to side and around the stage. In one extended shot, the camera follows Martins as he executes a sequence of small jumps. Right, left, right, left — dancer and camera operator carry the music

exactly. In a later entrance, his jumps grow larger, and the camera opens up, still perfectly tracking the rhythm of his side-to-side motions. When Farrell appears upstage right, the same camera operator picks up her next sequence, mirroring her circular path on pointe. She is not always centered in the middle of the picture; instead, she appears to push the edges along as she travels. Her dancing leads the frame.

On that same program — “Choreography by Balanchine: Part 3” — the same camera operators film Baryshnikov in “Prodigal Son.” Baryshnikov is at his most muscular and impetuous, and thus their camera work changes in response to his qualities. As he flies down the diagonal, so does the frame, picking up his energy. At the height of one jump, Baryshnikov’s fingers touch the top of the screen. One senses the camera operator, on the edge of his toes, zooming out as far as he could go.

We never get to see the people behind the cameras. And yet everything we see is through *their* eyes, the human eyes that frame the dance with sensitivity and skill.

“They’re like gunslingers, and marksmen, or precision engineers,” Matthew Diamond exclaims. A former dancer turned Academy Award-nominated director, Diamond took over directing “Dance in America” in the 1980s and inherited the camera operators who had joined the series a decade earlier. A number of them continued with him through “Dancemaker,” Diamond’s 1998 Academy Award-nominated documentary on Paul Taylor. “All I really do is talk to people,” Diamond says of the director’s role. “And I make a billion decisions. But it’s kind of like the general says to the soldiers: go out there and fight. Well, it depends which soldiers you have.”

By 1978, Brockway had formed a team of three cameramen that would continue with “Dance in America” for decades: Ed Fussell, Don Lewis and Ronnie Smith, three guys from Tennessee who possessed the right mix of aesthetic sensibility and nerve to film the best dancers in the world. All three had started in their hometown of Chattanooga, where they had worked for WTVG, a local television station. There, they trained their eyes and wits doing local news, kids shows, award shows and other small-town fare, 90% of which was filmed live, using only two cameras. One by one, they moved up to the larger station in Nashville, where they were tapped for “Dance in America,” which had just begun to rent out Opryland for its studio shoots. Dance history came to them: “It’s funny for me to think that a guy who was born in Chattanooga and has lived in Tennessee all his life could speak with some authority on dance,” Fussell observes wryly, after explaining to me in detail his thoughts on Tharp, Cunningham and Balanchine choreography, all of which he has filmed.

We tend to think of artists such as Balanchine and Graham working in the Northeastern United States and along a network between Europe and the United States. But the “Dance in America” sessions that occurred in Nashville, with New York companies flown in and a local camera crew, suggest a little-told cultural encounter. The Balanchine the cameramen describe is technologically curious,

respectful of their craft and wholly involved in the process of filming. To be sure, there was a chain of command: the director laid out the camera shots in dialogue with the choreographer. An associate director then rehearsed the camera operators through the script of camera tasks before the taping. But this did not stop Balanchine from coming down from the control room and onto the floor to peer through their viewfinders or in the monitors, to see how they had framed his choreography. “Too leetle!” he complained more than once in his heavily accented English, pinching the dancers’ heads and feet between his fingers inside the frame: Russian for, “zoom in!” The constraints they faced had to do with period technology: Balanchine had to adapt his choreography to fit the 4 x 3 ratio of 1970s television screens. In the triangular effect of the 4 x 3 ratio, dancers in the foreground fare better than dancers in the background,

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who get compressed into ants. One solution Brockway deployed early on was a camera on a crane, handled frequently by Lewis, which allowed sweeping wide shots of the stage. Watching Lewis ride around in the crane camera, Balanchine “thought it looked like fun,” Smith recalls. “So we put him in it, strapped him down and gave him a ride. We did Martha Graham the same way.” (Yet another untold story of dance history.)

Their stories offer a different slant on familiar figures. Balanchine “would sit and talk about whatever you wanted to talk about,” Smith says. When Smith’s back went out, Balanchine asked one of his dancers to teach him strengthening exercises. Graham was intense; Taylor loved to hang out. They nicknamed Martins “The Great Dane.” In his first take for “Prodigal Son,” Baryshnikov jumped clean out of their frames. Shooting ballet was more stressful than filming modern dance, but also felt more glamorous. “You could spot a Balanchine dancer. All these long-legged women come walking in,” remembers Fussell fondly.

Other camera operators from New York City later joined “Dance in America,” including Juan Barrera, a Cuban refugee who fled the increasingly militarized country in the mid-1960s, and Hurwitz, who



DANCE IN AMERICA

Twyla Tharp, one of the most sought-after choreographers in dance today, will be seen in her own "Sue's Leg" on _____ at _____ p. m. * over the Public Broadcasting Service. Ms. Tharp and her company Twyla Tharp and Dancers, are part of the new Dance in America series produced by WNET/13, New York under grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and Exxon Corporation and is seen nationally as part of the PBS GREAT PERFORMANCES series.

* Please check your local PBS station for area broadcast day and time.

had dance in his DNA from his mother, the prominent Graham dancer Jane Dudley. Hank Neimark was brought in to serve as stage manager from the very beginning and stayed with the series for many years; he remembers using his knowledge of the medium and his wiles to hold the set together. Jay Millard, a camera operator who also served as an associate director, or A.D., first worked with Balanchine on the taping of “L’Enfant et Les Sortilèges” in 1981. When calling the action for the camera operators as an A.D., Millard simplified his description of the dance into “spins, turns, leaps and lifts,” a running commentary piped into their ears. “I’m like an air traffic controller,” he says. “Flowery descriptions are useless. They just need to know how much space, and how high.” To listen to the camera operators describe their craft is to understand their language to be the result of physical and psychic labor — much like dance. To frame the choreography artfully, “you have to know the dance in your bones,” Hurwitz says. “I try to be as transparent as possible,” says Millard. “Shooting is musical. We feel what’s going to happen next,” describes Smith. “What they do is so *surgical*,” Diamond says. “I want every *frame* perfectly framed. And it’s those guys that do it. How? I am mystified. I really am.”

The camera operators do what they do by managing to focus on the present and the future simultaneously. “You really get into it, and you are keying off every move they make,” remembers Fussell, whose camera work gave us the crystalline shots of “Chaconne” I described above. His heart would begin to pound as they counted

**AND YET I LONG FOR THE DANCE WORLDS I SEE
IN THE VIDEOS TO RETURN — I AM A DANCER,
AFTER ALL. WHEN THE EVANESCENCE OF MY ART FORM
SADDENS ME, I HOLD ON TO WHAT DANCE
HAS GIVEN ALL OF US: THE ABILITY TO CHERISH
TIME, TO PAY ATTENTION AND TO FRAME
OUR FRAGILE HUMANITY.**

down into a taping. “Every dancer telegraphs to an extent: where they are going, how they’re moving. The problem is, the better they are, the less they telegraph, the more they surprise you. In a sense, you’re dancing with them. But then you’ve got this issue of what’s next. If you’re doing a pas de deux and it’s beautiful, and the arms and legs are going out, and you’re struggling to maintain that frame — you basically go into a Zen state, you’re into it, and you’re living in that moment. But you gotta worry about the next moment. I came



TOP ROW: EMILE ARDOLINO, RONNIE SMITH, MR. B, DON LEWIS.
BOTTOM ROW: ED FUSSELL, MERRILL BROCKWAY. PHOTO PROVIDED

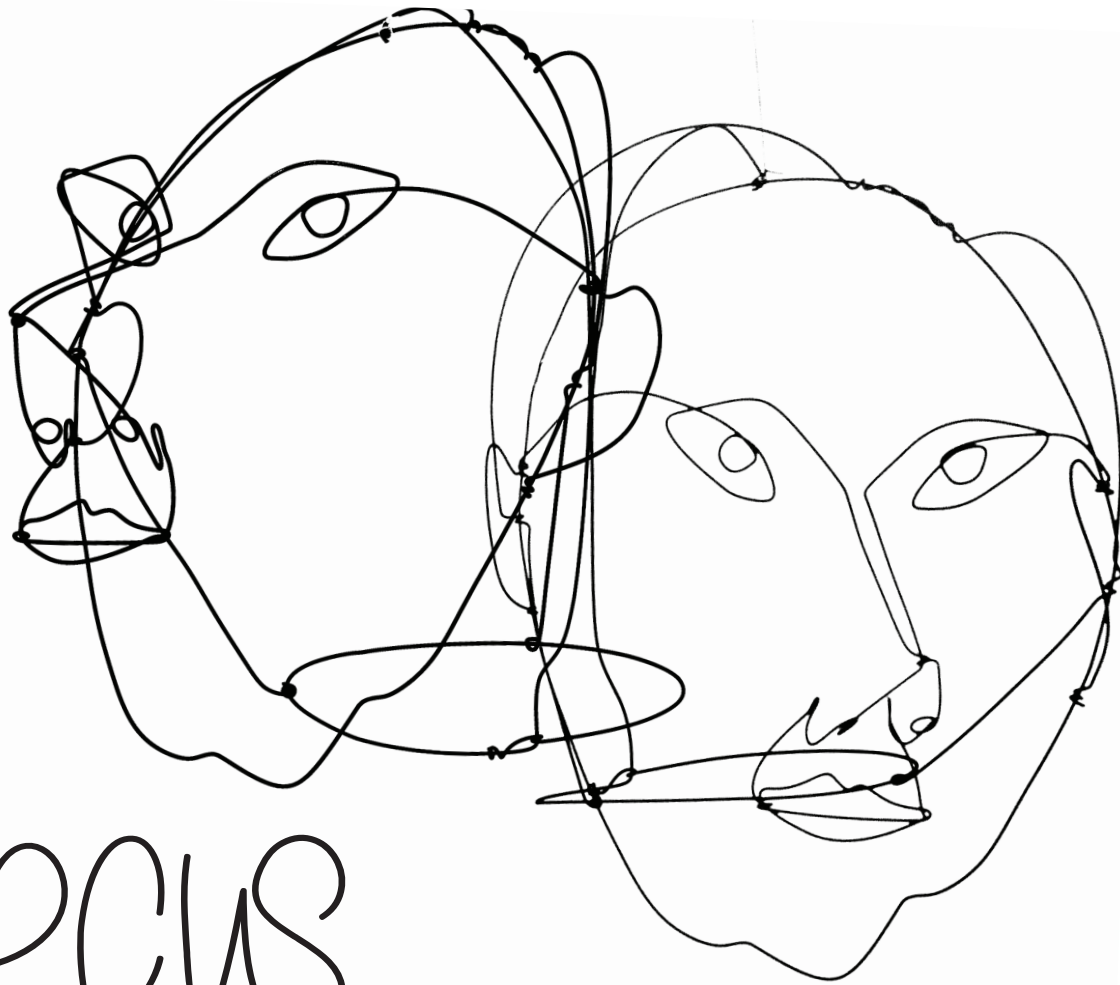
to live for, like, a long pas de deux, or solo, and you’d know where you were going to be for the next few minutes. But then reality hits and, oh God, what’s next?”

“Oh God, what’s next?” is a familiar refrain for those of us raised on endangered dance languages. It may also be a refrain for the entire human condition. Here, the craft of a camera operator may be the most useful salve against the vicissitudes of time. For if Fussell’s Zen-like attention to the present moment teaches us anything, it’s that *something* always comes next. A new present emerges out of the moment that just passed; new languages emerge out of the old. New dancers, too, arrive, with new interpretations of choreographic ideas, just as new directors and camera crews will appear to film them.

And yet I long for the dance worlds I see in the videos to return — I am a dancer, after all. When the evanescence of my art form saddens me, I hold on to what dance has given all of us: the ability to cherish time, to pay attention and to frame our fragile humanity. Nostalgia is not limited to dancers; each camera operator I spoke to looked back on his experience recording the great dances of the 20th century with hushed pride. “I don’t have anything more to add, only to say it was a wonderful time,” Fussell says wistfully at the end of our phone call, speaking to me from Nashville in late March. I could hear his dogs barking in the background. I found myself wanting him to live forever.

NOTE

I am exceptionally grateful to Matthew Diamond, Ed Fussell, David Horn, Tom Hurwitz, Hank Neimark, Molly McBride, Jay Millard and Ronnie Smith for sharing their stories with me.



CIRCUS TRANSLATIONS

BY **COLIN GEE**

WHEN I CONSIDER THE CIRCUS, I TEND TO THINK ABOUT VIRTUOSIC ACROBATIC ACTS INVOLVING THE MANIPULATION OF BODIES AND OBJECTS, WITH AN APPARATUS OF SOME SORT, BY PEOPLE IN COSTUME.

The action requires the acrobat to optimize mechanical advantages: tuck tighter to increase rotation, tuck quicker to increase time available to rotate. Maximum efficiency comes from maximum removal of idiosyncratic personal movements — the conversion from person to mechanical object is paramount — before a return to personhood with a gestural flourish at the end of the act. We're meant to watch acrobats very closely because they put their very existence at risk in the course of performing. This threshold of existence/nonexistence provides the tension on which circus dramaturgy has always turned.

Traditionally in the West, acrobats have presented as costumed people (versus theatrical characters), doing tricks in which the stakes are physical rather than psychological or circumstantial. But beginning in 1984, Cirque du Soleil has suggested that circus is theater. The company's circus is allegorical and fantastical, with fable-like stories in which acrobats perform as characters depicting experiences beyond the scope of daily life. When an aerial act features two lovers swinging airborne, wrapped in fabric, literally dependent on each other for support, it dramatizes the sense of loss they'd feel if made to part from each other — the danger of death, in other words, is used for the sake of storytelling.

**JUST AS THE MASKED PERFORMER
MOVES IN A MANNER APPROPRIATE
TO THE MASK, SO THE STORY TOLD BY A
CIRCUS MUST TAKE PLACE IN AN
EXAGGERATED WORLD THAT ENCOMPASSES
BOTH HUMAN STORYTELLING AND
SUPERHUMAN CONTROL OF
NATURAL LAWS.**

More recently, new circuses (I'm thinking of 7 Fingers, and Daniele Finzi Pasca directing Cirque Éloize) have used acrobatic acts as the dramatic expression of human experience in recognizable circumstances. There's a playfulness that grounds the work of these groups in more ordinary situations rather than in the allegorical forces of nature. Circus action is at a personal scale, the theatricality is minimal, and storytelling is rooted in the individual. In this new theatricality, acrobats can dramatize a variety of human situations: the banality of apartment living in a scene around a table, the deliberation of a jury, the strivings for professional success or the conflicts inherent in religious faith.

I think of theatrical masks (those worn on the face) as operating within a paradigm similar to that of acrobatics: rules and techniques are needed to sustain the particular idea of personhood the mask proposes, with the design of the mask dictating an appropriate way of moving. The stylization of movement must somehow match the stylization of the mask — the colors, shapes, angles or lines are echoed in some way by the performer's movements — in order for the viewer to accept the idea that the mask is part of the person. If the viewer doesn't believe in the mask, it is reduced to a mere physical object on someone's face.

Performance principles that can help animate the mask include moving only one part of the body at a time, since every movement has a heightened meaning in this context; breaking broader movements down into a series of small movements; and taking more time between movements. These actions help convert the rigid mask into an expressive instrument. Through the mask one can speak about the pace of thoughts (masked characters can seem to think very slowly); the power of single gestures; and the complex articulation inherent in silently shared long looks. In recognizing the truth of a mask, we accept the substitution of the artificial face in exchange for a closer look at how thoughts and feelings move through people in incremental and obstructed ways.

Just as the masked performer moves in a manner appropriate to the mask, so the story told by a circus must take place in an exaggerated world that encompasses both human storytelling and superhuman control of natural laws. And here, for the circus viewer, is a conflict deeper than the narrative one: the conflict between theatricality and sport. In "fatal charades," a first-century Roman practice in which executions were staged as mythological enactments, the existential threat was real and put to dramatic use; failure demonstrated how death was transformative, along the lines of the myth being enacted. Circus reaches for the mythic through storytelling, and acrobatics uses the mortal danger to the performers to deepen the effect of the performance.

When I think of fatal charades, I think of clowns. For me there's not enough clowning in the circus. The clowns tell the viewer that the acrobats are wrong to think of limitations as inflexible — they're porous — even while the acrobatics and its risks are real. The clown element tells the viewer that, though perfect in itself, the technical virtuosity of acrobatics misunderstands the lesson of boundaries. Without the clown element the virtuosity becomes commonplace, the stories too earnest. Similarly, the lesson in boundaries offered by mask performance is that while the viewer is asked to accept the truth of what they're seeing, they're also watching people with things on their faces. The humor of it hums beneath the whole enterprise, and the self-awareness of this is important.

Whereas the success of a theatrical mask relies on a viewer's acceptance of a world stylistically appropriate to that mask, in dance typically there's no object anchoring the rules of style. The dance's stylization relies on the performers' consistent adherence to its philosophic or aesthetic program. One of the things the experimental Judson Dance Theater movement asks us to believe, for instance, is that non-performance is possible, for performers on stage, in front of people who've come to see them. Whereas the stylization of mask and acrobatics is enforced by external factors (the mask itself, and gravity), dancers must enforce the stylization internally, themselves. An individual dance defines its own limitations. Can the dancemaker show the viewer that the limiting forces are genuine and constant for

the person subjected to them? The language of that struggle itself describes those limitations, just as acrobatics has something to say about gravity and about the movement characteristics of objects subjected to it.

As a viewer I learn most from those who practice the kind of self-effacement required to achieve virtuosity, and whose performance language is complicated by their attempts to get it right. Recently I've found myself learning from Cori Olinghouse, who is looking at clowning as despair-navigation, through an alternately exquisite, posed and decayed eccentric dance; Wally

**WHEN I THINK OF FATAL CHARADES,
I THINK OF CLOWNS. FOR ME THERE'S
NOT ENOUGH CLOWNING IN THE CIRCUS.
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POROUS – EVEN WHILE THE ACROBATICS
AND ITS RISKS ARE REAL.**

Cardona, who explores the personal relevance of a foreign movement language for a perspective on the sympathy and alienation inherent in learning it; Jennifer Monson, who is mining physical empathy in order to renew fast-closing channels of human connection; and Angie Pittman, who examines the nobility of privacy in a presentational context.

I learn from these contemporary artists, and others, just as I learn from the evolving traditions of dance, mask and circus, which are central to my work. I've tried to extend my understanding of circus dramaturgy by considering the relationship between clown and acrobatics, and reframing this relationship in actorly terms using performance personas and the movement styles within historical theatrical forms, including melodrama, commedia and tragedy. Can the circus framework, with its virtuosic handling of "gravity" and boundary-denial of "clowning," be pivoted away from circus itself and made to frame instead the way people seek to know their own virtuosity, gravity, clowning and sense of history — circus as one's private historicity?



CHARACTER STUDY "STRONG SMELL" CIRCA 1770-1781 BY FRANZ XAVER MESSERSCHMIDT. THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 4.0

Teach me to say I love you

In your language
I have forgotten how to speak
like something caught in my throat
a fish bone broken splintering me
into something quiet

muted and starlike
lost in a sky
the word for sky
is šəqulɡ^wədɪ^w

teach me to say
just stay stay put stay here
because I have forgotten
how to be inside my own body

whatever my body has become
beneath your tongue
conquered and ugly
malformed and mispronounced

teach me a word better than survivor
like watching my grandmother
pour black coffee in the kitchen
and the stacks of legal pads
filled up with her words
and I tried to listen

the word for language
is g^wədɡ^wadad

teach me to say I love you
because everytime I walk into
a restaurant to meet a date
I hesitate I remember
the trees along Portland Avenue

in their red bows
like gift packages
on christmas morning

to honor assault survivors

how my mother tied each one
hugging their bark in ribbon

and I think of this
as he pulls the chair out
takes my jacket and pours the wine
red into the glass
and asks if I am hungry

red is what I remember when I think
of how he will take me home
and have to learn how to unwrap me

teach me to say I love you
because what good is a ribbon
if it cannot hold us together
where we have been broken

teach me to speak
in a language older than words
something beyond the words of white men
whose tongues touch everything

quiet yourself and listen

?u?ušəbɪcɪd ʧəd

ohh-ohh-sha-beet-see-chud

like a sigh I would make
as a child comfortable and safe
then the thud of my heart
as it beats in my chest
its thrum as it drums
inside my rib cage

Sasha LaPointe

THE MAP OF FORM

My scores are highly notated and carefully structured; the musicians work from a nuanced, specific text. Yet I like my music to feel organic, self-propelled — as if we listeners are overhearing (*capturing*) an un-notated, spontaneously embodied *improvisation*. Music must be alive; it has to jump off the page and out of the instrument as if something big is at stake.

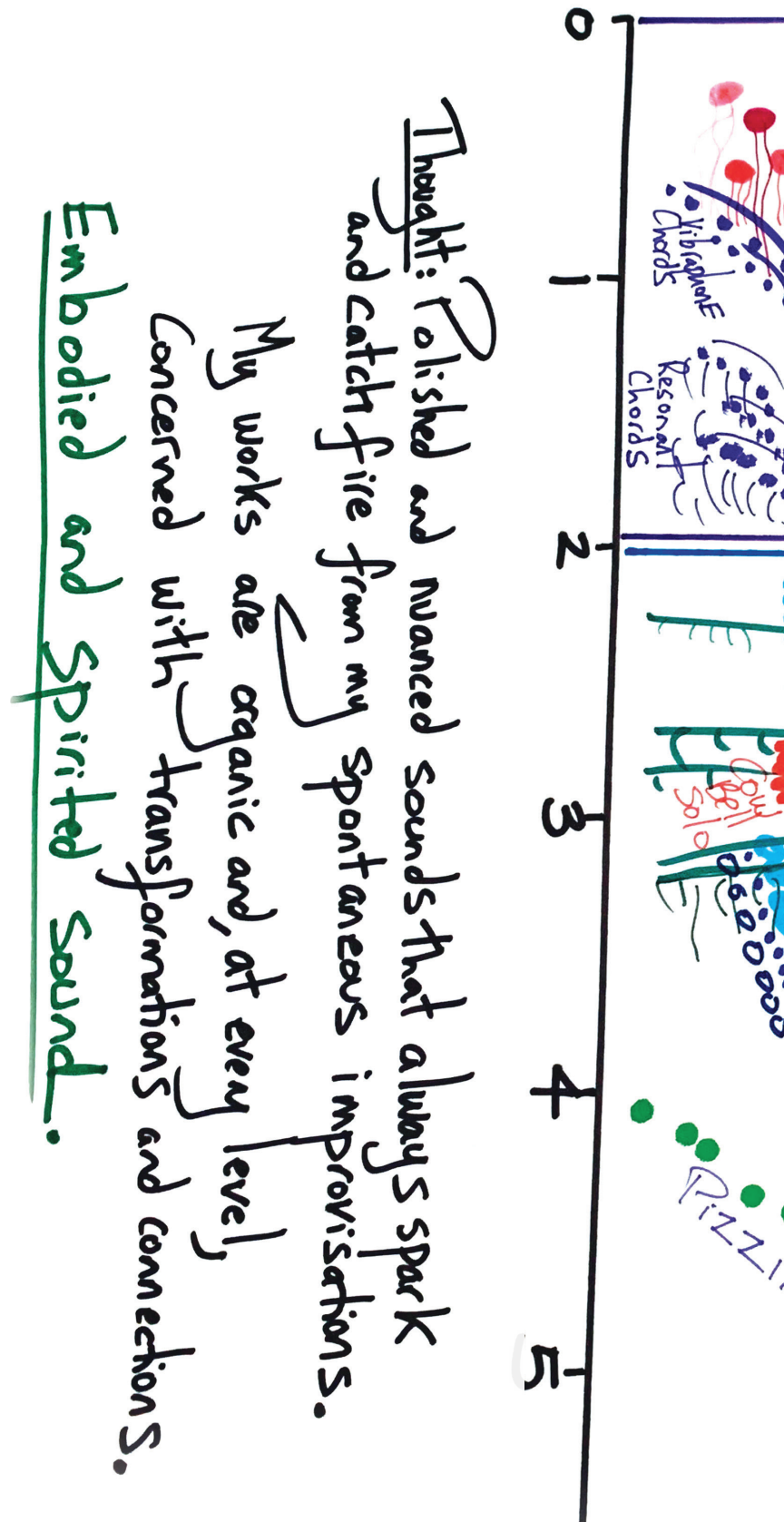
At every level, I'm concerned with transformations and connections. And so it is with "The Auditions," a 26-minute score that grew out of my collaboration with the choreographer Troy Schumacher. I wanted to make something agile and energized, a composition whose flexibility would allow for a continually evolving braid of harmonic, rhythmic and contrapuntal elements.

The ballet takes place in two imaginative worlds, one ethereal, one grounded, closely following a cyclical musical framework. Troy and I have been referring to these sonic and dramatic worlds as *ethereal landscape* or *landscape paradise*, and *the audition room* or *waiting room for the audition*. And we've been playing with the image of dancers as beads on an abacus — starting on the bottom frame and sliding upward to the top ... and beyond.

In order to communicate to my collaborators some of the many layers at work in my scores, I have gotten into the habit of creating illuminated manuscripts like "The Map of Form." The map's central element is an illustrated timeline, accompanied by annotations in brightly colored inks relating to various elements of the work, including instrumentation, dynamics, tempi and harmonic concepts.

These ideas are developed through written instructions, including such idiosyncratic directives as "Resonant, elegant, spacious," "Fanfare-like; blazing," "Various characters and materials are kaleidoscopically blending." Bands of color extend along the timeline, paralleling specific tempo markings and performance directives; additional graphic elements include wavy lines, dots and dashes, and a text block containing the autograph notation "Formal Concerns: Slow, Fast, Slow, Fast, Slow, Fast, Slow."

—AUGUSTA READ THOMAS



Arc 1

Resonant, Elegant,
Spacious

Clean +
Crystalline

Harmonic framework for ballet
is introduced

Clarinet Solo is parallel/corresponding to Flute
Solo in Arc 7 at very end of Ballet.
High clock-like bells that thread + weave
through Ballet are introduced.

E + F# crotches ring as diad: OPTIMISTIC!



Arc 2

Majestic + Energized

Fanfare-like, Relentless Trombone Solo

Willed-punctuations are introduced.

Heroic; Iconoclastic Character
of Cowbell blazes into the drama.

Flute Solo enters as a "third" character
Cantabile and playful.

Punchy; Shostakovich-like
Intentional; Mobile

Crotches and triangle (and later Pizz.)
Continue an upper-register clock-like motive.

Trills are further introduced and
transformed.

It becomes clear that the Pizzicato
color is going to be
a "character" all of its own.



Buffalo Evening News
GALLERY AUDITORIUM

Eastman's 'Mad King': Mighty Work of Theater

By JOHN DWYER
The dramatic sensation of this town over many seasons was the portrayal of mad King George III by singing actor Julius Eastman, Sunday evening in Albright-Knox Art Gallery auditorium, hailed by a standing crowd with noisy applause and bravos.

This was the opening for New Impromptu for human understanding of the King's straining for reason. The series by the U.K. Opera, Sunday evening in Albright-Knox Art Gallery auditorium, hailed by a standing crowd with noisy applause and bravos.

APPEARING IN total three... Mr. Eastman was... the pitiable... playing the piano... as he seems... spent his... entered... including... the... a marvelous... a respon... to...

Handwritten musical score on aged paper. The title "Colors" is written in cursive at the top right. The score includes musical notation with notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The name "J. Eastman" is written in the top right corner. There are some annotations and markings throughout the score, including circled numbers and arrows.

INTERCESSION

BY JESSICA LYNNE

HOW DO WE LEARN HOW TO PRAY? IS A PRAYER A MURMUR A SHOUT, A HUM? IS IT DISSONANCE, THE A NOTE, A REPEATING QUAVER? PERHAPS A PRAYER IS AN ENERGY THAT MOVES US FORWARD, SHIFTING AS WE SHIFT EVEN AS ITS ESSENCE REMAINS IMMUTABLE.

Handwritten musical score on aged paper. The title "GAY GUERRILLA" is written in cursive at the top. The score includes musical notation with notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The name "Julius Eastman" and the date "Sept 17, 67" are written in the top right corner. There are some annotations and markings throughout the score, including circled numbers and arrows.

SOMETIMES, A PRAYER REMINDS ME OF A BROOK FLOWING DOWNSTREAM: IT CONTAINS ITS OWN RHYTHM AND PURPOSE. THIS, TO ME, IS A KIND OF THEOLOGY.

Julius Eastman knew how to pray. You know, the way old folks will exclaim “that’s a praying somebody!” A declaration of profundity. You know, the way they would tell you to go sit with somebody’s big mama if you really wanted to be healed. An intercession.

I am thinking about this black-and-white photograph of Eastman that I love, taken during a 1974 rehearsal of the S.E.M. Ensemble in Buffalo, New York. His eyes are closed and his head is tilted back ever so, his mouth slightly open as his right hand touches the right side of his face, gently. The sweater he is wearing hugs his neck. The collar of another shirt peeks through. By this time, Buffalo had been his home for several years, the city he embraced after studying at The Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. The photograph depicts Eastman before New York City. Before John Cage failed to understand his brilliance. Before “Evil Nigger,” “Crazy Nigger,” and “Gay Guerilla.” Before his death. It is difficult to think about this image and not imagine Eastman in a moment of prayer.

Maybe he was praying to keep his rhythm—a Black, gay man in the lily-white world of classical music who understood his soundness in spite of a world that refused it. Cage was famously enraged after witnessing Eastman’s performance of “Song Books”; he declared it too “closed in on homosexuality.” As if the sin was Eastman’s assertion, insistence, proclamation that one can be Black and gay and whole. An incongruence amongst his avant-garde peers who preferred *silence*. Perhaps, in that moment of pause, Eastman was praying to be steadied. Or maybe, he was praying for an unbridled-ness to engulf his work. For a troubling of the waters. For an urgency that would outlast his body.

WHAT IF HE WAS PRAYING FOR US?

I have always understood this as the power of the intercessor: theirs are the invocations that wrestle with the tensions of this human realm. From them, we learn new vocabularies. We peer at the fragility of our flesh. We see our theologies anew. A prayer, then, is an offering.

If you listen to “Gay Guerilla,” for example, you’ll hear a sonic dissonance as the intervals between the notes shrink and the composition progresses. Dissonance, a discomfort. A type of illegibility that stretches itself. An unbridled-ness. A troubling of the waters. A grappling. Dissonance, then, can be a prayer. Are not guerilla tactics shrouded in a pleasurable ingenuity? A sweet transgression: Black and gay and alive and *whole*.

When Eastman died of cardiac arrest in 1990, he was 49 years old. It would be another nine months before any formal obituary was published, and we are still reckoning with all that he was, all that remains.

We know that our spirits never die. (What was his final earthly prayer I wonder.) Last winter, I watched as a dear friend gave Eastman back to us, in her own way, with “That Which Is Fundamental,” an exhibition about him that pulled back the veil. This is, in fact, how I came to Eastman. And so I am forever indebted to this friend: I have begun to understand better all of the ways in which Black people love and continue to love as we transcend realms. This, too, is a theology.

It might not do us any good to wonder “what if?” As in, how could someone so talented, so bright, fade away so unceremoniously? The (White) world rarely knows how to love Black people until it is time to mourn our passings, and even then, it isn’t sufficient to account for the harm we encounter while living on this side. You know, the way the old folks will tell you that though this life is hard, joy is coming in the morning.

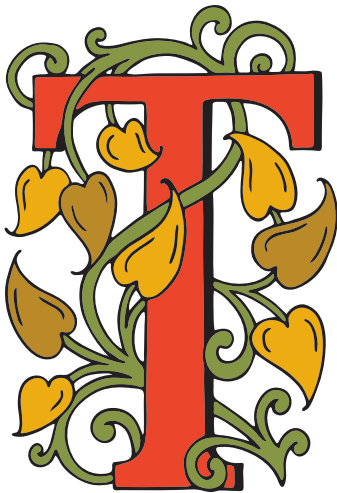
I know, though, that prayer is also communion. Who can define its boundaries? I ask many questions about faith, not because I am losing mine, but because I am trying to see underneath it and around it and through it. I would like to find it in all of the places in which I have found myself. I listen to Eastman’s music and it is almost as if he answers me: it can be found here and here and here and here. So I come to Eastman — a Black, Gay man with an offering — in the best way I know how — as a Black, Queer woman, learning how to pray again. My intercession.

I am thinking about that black-and-white photograph of him and I wonder if the better question might be: what if Eastman is praying *with* us?

Across time and space and place? With those of us, like him, who are trying to grasp onto our truths at the root.

PUBLICATION SOLITUDE PERFORMANCE

By **KARINNE KEITHLEY SYERS**



HIS IS A MEDITATION ON THE TRAFFIC BETWEEN BOOKS AND STAGES. IT MOVES IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.

As a publisher of performance texts, I spent a long time asking how I could make a book more like a performance. In addition to publishing texts, my little treehouse of a press, 53rd State, runs a series of expanded documentations

of intergenre, hybrid performance works whose larger scores could be said to exceed whatever we might call a script (and so present a problem for publication, because what is said or sung is only a portion of the event's skeleton: the unspoken parts, including all the choices about embodiment and voicing, developed in the rehearsal room, are rarely notated — living, as performance does, in layers of physical memory and idiomatic shorthand). A script, after all, is a technical document, a conveyor of information for fellow tradespeople. It can't account for a show any more than a blueprint can account for the experience of inhabiting a building. What typographical interventions might happen during the experience of reading so that some amount of a performance's sonic and spatial amplitude remains?

I imagined these books as offerings to a reading stranger. I was interested in making books that gave this imagined stranger a private, speculative theatrical experience. I wanted to create an invitational page that authorized the reader to augment their solitude with the spectral nearness of a hypothetical room. How could I make reading a book feel more like being at a performance?

As a performance-maker I realized recently that I have also been asking this inverse question: How can I make a performance more like a book? Performance can be defined in part by its status as group experience, but isn't there also group experience in a book? I think of the philosopher Stanley Cavell, who described the gesture of writing as pitched toward the unknown future reader. However much a text might be embedded in a moment or scene, it is also — on behalf of the way any one human belongs to the human in general, however impossible that is to define or delimit — addressed to a future "we." We don't gather in a single room; we don't turn the house lights off at 8. But nonetheless, when we read, we do in some way gather: our micro-solititudes of reading constellate into the unfixable, uncloseable cloud of the book's reception and effect. Distant, spectral community.

So to make a performance grow out of a book, especially one with a long history of readers (for example "The Romance of the Rose"), is, in a way, to make a gathering of one kind from a gathering of another. At the same time, the invocation of the book makes an opening for a memory of solitude.

Besides the blooming mood of reading's quietude that attends a book's migration into the theater, another species of solitude can be interpolated into the live event when the language spoken by the performance is transferred from the social space of speech to the silent space of reading. When I've made performances out of old books, a process not so much of adaptation as of transplantation, I've used the delicate room generated by image, sound and movement composed within the alembic of group attention to prime a space for silent reading.

As a performer I make myself public, offering myself to be seen or heard. But I am also a performer with a habit of performing in

silence, or speaking in the hush of late-night microphone tones. I have dwelt in the very different vows of silence entailed by writing and by dancing; they are the finest, richest forms of thinking I have access to. I've also trafficked in the silences of periodically turning away from performing; I understand this impulse in relation to navigations of ambition, vanity, the privacy of home and the question of how best to spend the hours of my one and only life. But maybe this habitual pivot to and from making myself public also might illuminate the weird conjunctions of publicity and privacy at the heart of my theater of reading, a room that aspires to hold, for both performing and observing participants, an Orphic crossing from having our being in public to having our being in private and back again.

A book, transplanted to the soil of theater, grows a new form. It is not simply a question of retelling; it is no longer a literary body. To take something very old and unfamiliar to most and reanimate it onstage without losing its spectral textual nature requires something different from dramatic form. (Not that a book can't be dramatized, but dramatizing wants to remove the aura of the print book and replace it with immediacy.) If drama in the classic Aristotelian formulation arrives at pity and awe, I think the animated book delivers us to a clearing made up of both text and action. The knowledge of the book as a book fringes the experience, ports its long history into the room. The unrepeatable, time-space-limited group experience of the live event intersects the book's long, radiant vectors of reception.

**A BOOK, TRANSPLANTED
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TEXTUAL NATURE REQUIRES SOMETHING
DIFFERENT FROM DRAMATIC FORM.**

Maybe? Anyway, what I came to think, as I wrote this meditation, is that the reason I both make a performance of reading and publish these performing books, and the reason why the room of performance for me constantly yields the pivot toward solitude and silence, is that a book, printed and multiplied, distributed and cataloged, brought into existence in order to be available to an unknown future reader, is both an act of publication, of making public, and a channel of intimacy — temporary domestic space, even. A book is a publication and also a privacy. And I love both things; I treasure both things. So I learned to mine these two venues of the theater and the book for their counter-tendencies: for the privacy latent in group experience, a privacy heightened and held by the group's shared attention; and for the speculative, imagined, public co-presence latent in the page, its love for its future, its stranger, its listener, its reader, its audience.



ILLUSTRATION FOR "ROMAN DE LA ROSE" 1475

CODA

I shared this writing with the composer, performer and writer Kate Soper and asked what she thought about this traffic between reading and performance making, how she sensed the presence of the source text in her "Romance." Here's what she wrote in response:

"Transforming 'The Romance of the Rose,' the epic, multi-authored, medieval French poem, into 'The Romance of the Rose,' the contemporary opera for seven voices, ensemble and electronics, has presented some unique challenges. Some of the usual problems of adapting a work of literature to the stage are muted: there is not much interiority in the original poem. Others persist: there is also not much action. What there is is a dazzling display of extroverted thought and an explosion of multidimensional allegory. And the best way to perform thought and allegory is through music. To abuse Karinne Keithley Syers' opening metaphor, I travelled the two-way street between the source material and the opera with the car radio blaring. Music makes connections across galaxies of abstraction: like reading, it places thought in time and therefore turns it into action. Of course, there is actual action in the opera too, as well as funny jokes, and dramatic irony, and vocoders and torch songs and people from our world who go on transformative journeys. But I've tried, in writing a new story from the bones of this old poem, to preserve the feeling I had reading it for the first time: the feeling of stumbling into an outlandishly strange yet oddly, profoundly familiar world and accepting it automatically — like reading a book, like watching an opera, like falling in love."

GORGEOUSLY COMBATIVE

ANNE BOGART, CHARLES MEE
AND ELIZABETH STREB

IN CONVERSATION WITH
SORAYA NADIA McDONALD



ELIZABETH STREB:

Well, they're a breed apart in terms of action heroes. They have an appetite for this close encounter, and they understand timing in a physical way.

STREB EXTREME ACTION. "AIR." PHOTO: RALPH ALSWANG

One gray, rainy morning in April, I sat down with director Anne Bogart, playwright Charles Mee and choreographer Elizabeth Streb in the lobby of STREB LAB for ACTION MECHANICS (SLAM) in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Over coffee, we discussed the first collaboration among three of the most interesting, boundary-pushing artists working in New York theater.

Bogart is directing a production that will marry Mee's plays with the separate dance and action choreography that Streb is known for, to create a cacophony of movement and emotion centering around the idea of love — in all its exciting, complicated messiness. Streb showed me the sketches she was using to map out the stage positions of the dancers in relation to the actors, along with ideas for stage rigs that would dump "guck" — a collection of sticky, messy substances — onto the performers.

The conversation was both an interview about the work and a meeting in which Streb, Bogart and Mee could discuss details that were still very much in flux — at one point, Bogart even had her own phone sidebar as the main conversation was still proceeding. In the background, dancers from SLAM could be heard rehearsing on equipment that combines the laws of physics with human daring and imagination.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.

SORAYA NADIA McDONALD: What is this that you have laid out before you?

ELIZABETH STREB: These are some of my drawings that I did — for understanding my STREB part of this amazing project with Anne Bogart and Chuck Mee. And this is what my dancers are going to be doing in the floor area. Of course, this will all be amended when the actors start coming in, and etc., etc.

ANNE BOGART: What stage of development is this?

ES: Well, the set is designed, and it's being built right now, as we speak, up at Hudson Scenic. I have choreographed my structure, physically. And that's going to be expanded when the language comes in, and the actors come in.

AB: You have to understand that she's created a "Guck Machine."

SM: A Guck Machine?

AB: It's a big machine, so that guck falls constantly from way above, onto the performers. Buckets will drop things onto the ground. And I love the part about the buckets coming down and getting refilled. I love that so much.

ES: I've had to fight for that a little.

CHARLES MEE: OK, but I have to tell my story.

ES: Please, please.

CM: I want to tell you where this came from, which is Elizabeth and I met at a dinner party and had a really nice conversation. We thought, "Oh, we should have lunch sometime." Just for the fun of it. So at lunch we were just talking and having a nice time, and then I said, "Oh, Elizabeth, you know what would be really great is all your acrobat dancers flying through the air. It would be amazingly beautiful and thrilling and scary and awful. And then there would be a few actors standing around, talking about love." She said, "Oh, I'd love to do that. But you know, I don't work with actors. I only work with my dancers, so we'd need a director." I said, "Oh, how about Anne Bogart?" She said, "Oh, I've always wanted to work with Anne Bogart."

AB: Who hasn't, right?

CM: So I took my cell phone out of my pocket and called Anne and told her I was having lunch with Elizabeth and about the conversation we had just had and that Elizabeth had said she's always wanted to work with Anne, and Anne said, "Oh, I'd love to do that." So that's how easy it was to put together.

AB: And here we are.

CHARLES MEE:

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ANNE BOGART: And here we are.

CM: Here we are. But when I look at this, and there's guck falling and all kinds of stuff that's really complicated and stuff that's beautiful and horrible, I think, "Oh, love. Yeah, love." [laughter] There's bad and awful and wonderful and horrible and —

ES: And all of the above. I'm not a literalist, but you know, Chuck's a playwright and Anne is a director, so all of us together is this beautiful idea of square pegs in round holes and square holes with round pegs. It's a gorgeously combative set of aesthetics, I think.

AB: And the trick is to arrange all of it in such a way that it creates this experience for an audience. In other words, you have the dancers flying through the guck, doing all kinds of amazing things. You have the actors, who are talking to each other, talking to

the audience, talking to the dancers about love, who are moving through something. And you have to arrange it in such a way so that this thing swings. Somebody goes under it. This line happens. You know, it's got to be arranged in a way that's not chaos, but actually a lucid journey for the audience through an experience. That's the trick. That you can't plan on paper. You can plan on paper to a certain extent, like we've created a script together from Chuck's writing. We've created this plan. But it's only when the actors and the dancers come together and we're going, "Oh, stop them," that that will get built.

ES: And we have a show going on now, and it has the cement block piece in it. It's very nerve-racking, watching the dancers avoid the blocks; each one is a different distance from the ground, so the timing of the swing is slightly different and there are free areas, like if they dive downstage and their head lands here, they know this block can clear their head. And upstage, a block is slightly higher, so they know they can lie there and it can go over their butt. But then they have to get out. So it's this inherent timing that completely is tagged to those swinging blocks.

AB: Hey, I have a question for you. When you rehearse that, do you do one bit at a time and keep adding more of the swings, or do you plan it out all in advance and say, "This is what you've got to do"?

ES: It's all together at the same time.

AB: All together at the same time. So it's really strategy, right?

ES: It's strategy. Because also they're running inside this 20-by-20-foot circle. But they have to time their run — like if they get here too soon and that has to swing by, I don't want them to change their rate.

CM: You can see it in the other room. It's really scary.

AB: No, I'm imagining!

ES: It's scarier than I remember it being, too. And it's very hard to watch. As time goes on they absorb the timing of the swings. It fits in with the choreography exactly. The downstage block, when it's here, at ground zero, straight down, doesn't allow passage. Not even for your head underneath. I'm imagining your actors will just be walking. They have to aim it, but not keep traveling when they land, or the block will hit them.

AB: Bam!

ES: Yes.

CM: Do you want the actors to stay out of the square so they don't get their skulls bashed?

ES: No, that's not what I'm thinking. Because they have to get guck on them too. But they're so deeply physical and brilliant, they will totally be able to see where those swinging blocks are, and also where are the empty lanes that my dancers aren't. Now this is maybe an eight-minute dance. So we're not going to do this, you know, five times over, eight times over. We're going to have it interrupted with the walking sometimes, and I'm going to create other scenarios. This is our baseline.

SM: And as this is happening, they're also being subjected to guck.

ES: People are pulling these cords, and stuff is falling constantly. My idea is *constantly*. And then we'd have a fill-up section a couple times, ideally.

CM: Just like normal daily life, yeah.

SM: Sure. Wait, so what made you think of love?

CM: Just — that's what I thought of when we were there having lunch.

SM: In relation to this, though?

ES: Well, this wasn't here yet.

ELIZABETH STREB:

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ANNE BOGART:
Bam!

ELIZABETH STREB:
Yes!

AB: But your understanding of her work, which is in that area of physicality.

CM: Yeah, her work is amazing and beautiful and scary and horrible — and these are the aspects of love.

AB: Well, that's true.

SM: And I imagine there's a fair amount of trust involved among the three of you, but also with the performers! Trusting in that you won't kill them.

CM: Yeah.

ES: Well, they're a breed apart in terms of action heroes. They have an appetite for this close encounter, and they understand timing in a physical way. Also we use lots of different kinds of equipment. We invent action instruments, and this is a scenario I think that's so apropos for what Anne and Chuck and I are doing.

AB: And as I understand it, Elizabeth starts with the design, and then she really starts with what are the obstacles of creating what you want to create, right?

ES: Yeah, and what rhythms will emit from the scenarios, or where can you go in space because of these instruments? I mean, we think of them as instruments, but they're pieces of equipment. And each one provides a certain rigorous tempo and physical scenario. And with this we're also trying to figure out how we can hear the actors' words and — I mean, how it goes

together, you know?
Anne is such a master of that.

AB: The actors have body mics, so they are able to speak intimately and be heard above the din. But it has to be visually clear too, so you can see it all.

SM: Are you the glue that marries these two elements together?

AB: No, I'm one of three elements. I don't think I'm

necessarily the glue, although I think my job is to take what Elizabeth has done in terms of her structure, and then arrange our work through, among, and change the timing a little bit — in terms of things that happen physically.

ES: But yeah, it could be that they're swinging with no people in there, just your actors, right?

AB: Yeah, so in that sense maybe I'm the glue, because I'm maybe the last element, so.

ES: I can only imagine how the whole mixture of the three ideas: words and direction and the way words get said and when they get said and when these things drop their stuff. We're all familiar with how things fall based on the viscosity, their own particular adhesion or how they deal with air pressure — what do you call that when

things fall at a different rate, not because of their weight, but because of their nature? Styrofoam and gravel don't fall in the same manner. And I think that will be an added set of vocabularies.

AB: I mentioned to you before, we found this paper which we used for the piece we did with Ann Hamilton. It's rolled-up little bits of paper; you could hold it in your hand and it's like little tiny pebbles, but thousands of them, and they fall. The actors made a floor of it.

SM: So you were telling me a little bit about your process of cribbing from multiple sources. What are the actors doing?

CM: Among other things, they're speaking bits of a text. I stole all these pieces of text from plays of mine and got together with Anne and the acting company and arranged them, put them together, threw stuff out. Some of the actors had new stuff to add; her company had done a bunch of my plays, so some of the actors said, "Oh, you know, there was this piece of the text, we could put that here." The collaborative process of reducing a script — I never do that. I hate to do that. I only want to write what I write. And nobody can say, "I like it, I don't like it, you should do this, you should do that." No. I don't like any of that. But this time it's a totally collaborative process. I loved it like crazy. And so the script we have now is just a bunch of random pieces of text, except they're not random because we organized them in chunks titled "Spring," "Summer," "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring."

SM: I can't help but think of "Seasons of Love" — that's what's popped into my head now. Elizabeth said something that really struck my attention, about thinking about the obstacles that we create for ourselves. And



ELIZABETH STREB:

So all of us together is this beautiful idea of square pegs in round holes and square holes with round pegs. It's a gorgeously combative set of aesthetics, I think.

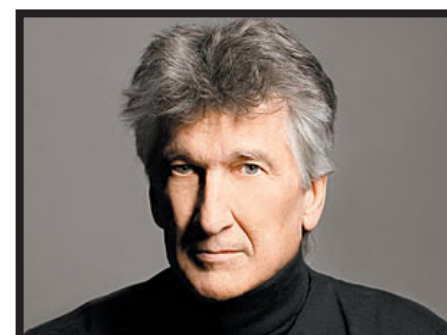
Photo: Tom Caravaglia



ANNE BOGART:

Yeah, so in that sense maybe I'm the glue, because I'm maybe the last element, so.

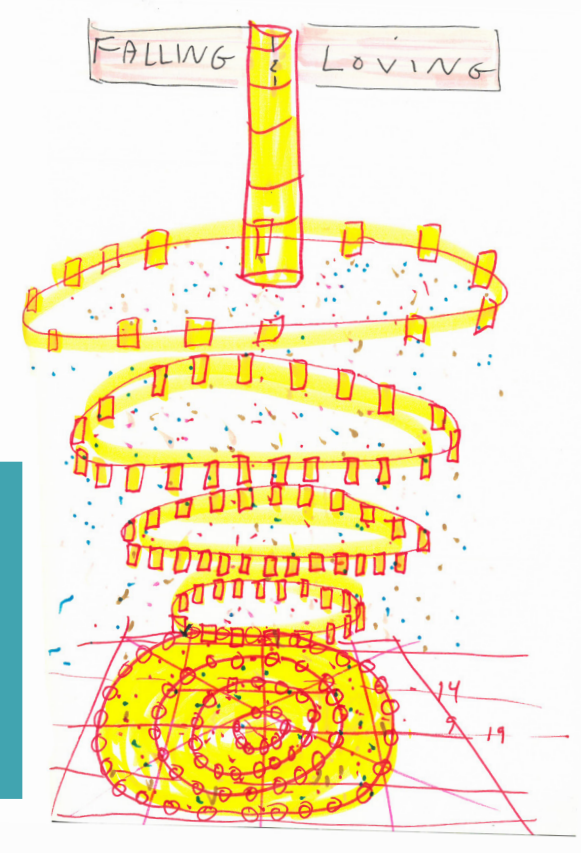
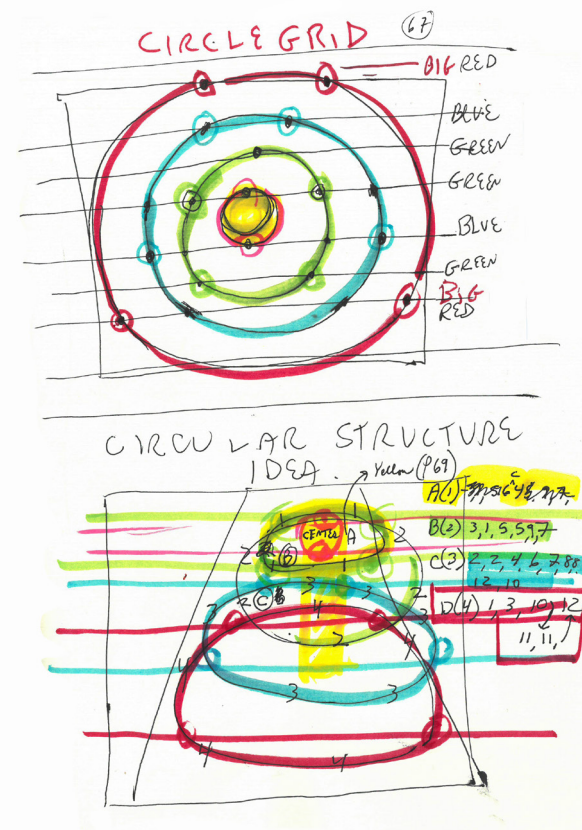
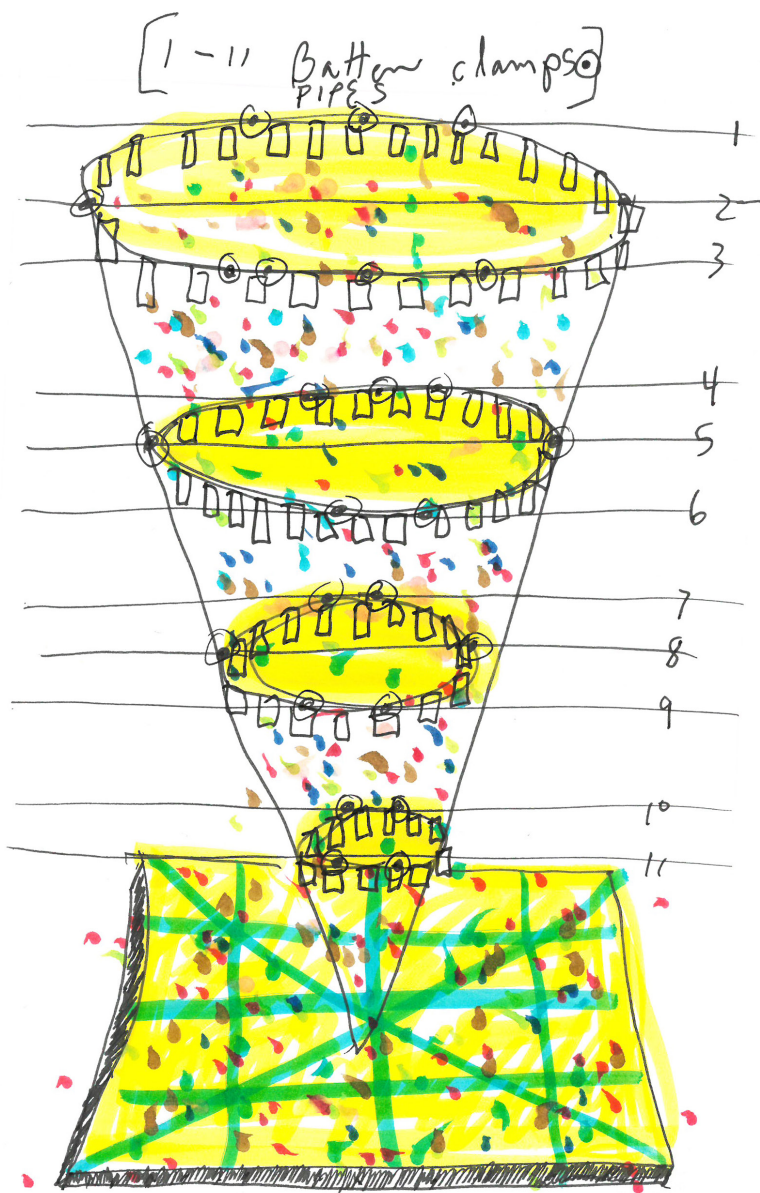
Photo: Craig Schwartz



CHARLES MEE:

Among other things, they're speaking bits of a text. I stole all these pieces of text from plays of mine and got together with Anne and the acting company and arranged them, put them together, threw stuff out.

Photo Provided



SORAYA NADIA MCDONALD:
 What is this that you have laid out before you?

ELIZABETH STREB:
 These are some of my drawings that I did — for understanding my STREB part of this amazing project with Anne Bogart and Chuck Mee. And this is what my dancers are going to be doing in the floor area. Of course, this will all be amended when the actors start coming in, and etc., etc.

maybe this is too nosy, but what do you think those obstacles are from your vantage point? Especially when we're talking about love.

CM: They're 978 obstacles, I think. And some of those will be in the design. Some of them are in the words that the actors speak. There are not just monologues — there are some solo pieces of text, there's some dialogue. You see people making obstacles through each other.

SM: Obstacles through each other. Right. For example, I tend to vastly underestimate what I deserve. And so I approach things with lowered expectations to avoid disappointment.

CM: Oh yeah, there's some of that in there. [laughs]

SM: I had no idea how I would render that physically, but —

CM: Me neither.

SM: — that's not my job! [laughs]

CM: Not my job either.

AB: I have to find out where this paper comes from. You can talk, I think I'm going to be leaving a message

SM: I see. Everything's a working meeting with you three —

AB: [leaving a phone message] Hey Hamilton, it's Bogart here. I'm sitting here with Elizabeth Streb, and I think we want to look at using the rolled-up paper that you used in "Blank Page" for this piece we're working on, and we wonder how you made it? Anyway, that's what I'm calling about. Let me know. Love you wherever you are. I hear you're coming to Columbia, and I'm not going to be there. Bye.

CM: Whoa, that was a good message.

SM: That's a good way to get the disappointing news out of the way.

AB: Just at the end of a conversation.

SM: Of a non-associated conversation.

AB: Anyway. Sorry. You were trying to do your job.

SM: So were you!

AB: Yeah, it's kind of like that, right?

SM: I was asking Chuck about this idea of the obstacles that we put in front of ourselves and the ways we self-sabotage when it comes to love. It just feels so uncomfortable to talk about.

AB: It made you uncomfortable, man.

SM: It did! Because I hate talking about myself. That's why I write about everybody else. But I'm curious — you know, when you think about that in your own mind, what are the obstacles that you feel like you put in front of yourself when it comes to giving or receiving love? I think that's the question for the whole group.

AB: Wow. Well, I mean this project is a great example. I love Elizabeth. We've never worked together. I know I love Chuck; I've worked with him a lot. But the obstacle is that we have this huge obstacle, which is these ideas that are so disparate. It's a hybrid! And there's no dangling signifiers!

ANNE BOGART:

Wow. Well, I mean this project is a great example. I love Elizabeth. We've never worked together. I know I love Chuck; I've worked with him a lot. But the obstacle is that we have this huge obstacle, which is these ideas that are so disparate. It's a hybrid! And there's no dangling signifiers!

SORAYA NADIA MCDONALD:

Or there might be.

ELIZABETH STREB:

Oh, I hope not. I mean, who knows, right?

ANNE BOGART:

If you work from the state of fear, your search, what you're looking for, is safety. If you work from trust, your search is for freedom. It's profound, isn't it?

SORAYA NADIA MCDONALD:

Very. That's the struggle, isn't it — we are stuck between these two priorities. Just at large. Which I understand a little bit more now, because freedom is — when you think of it that way — it's scary. Trusting people is scary.

SM: Or there might be.

ES: Oh, I hope not. I mean, who knows, right?

AB: I think you've used the word trust before. So the biggest obstacle is one's fear and the solution to that is trust. There's something that somebody said once, which is, if you work from fear, your search is for safety. If you work from trust, your search is for freedom. It's a completely different process.

SM: Will you say that again?

AB: If you work from the state of fear, your search, what you're looking for, is safety. If you work from trust, your search is for freedom. It's profound, isn't it?

SM: Very. That's the struggle, isn't it — we are stuck between these two priorities. Just at large. Which I understand a little bit more now, because freedom is — when you think of it that way — it's scary. Trusting people is scary.

AB: Right. So the obstacle is not to work from fear. I mean, the actors in my company are terrified, they really are. But they also trust me.

SM: Right. They'd have to, in the face of all these swinging blocks and falling guck.

ES: Those are the materials. And you know, I can certainly amend my agenda —

SM: Nobody has peanut allergies, right?

ES: Well, that's a first draft. Of course, we'd have to double check about stuff like that.

SM: Molasses!

ES: Yeah, and the honey thing is too expensive, so it won't be honey.

SM: Honey is too expensive?

ES: Yeah, when you're dumping it from massive vats multiple times. You know, I went out last weekend to Montclair to see Ann Carlson's show.

AB: Oh, what was she doing?

ES: She was doing a show with the Ririe-Woodbury Company from Salt Lake City, a piece called "Elizabeth, the dance," going through the history of dance, the pioneers of dance, like Martha Graham.

AB: How was that?

ES: Great! They were putting popcorn all over the stage at the end, and Jed [Wheeler, Arts + Cultural Programming's Executive Director] was talking about how much guck he's had. He said, "This whole stage was covered with olive oil once." I go, "Well, you're bragging. Just wait 'til we come."

AB: I remember [director Romeo] Castellucci there, who swept the floor with a liver, a cow's liver.

ES: That sounds dangerous.

AB: [laughs] That's what most people say about your work.

ES: But I mean, biologically dangerous. Like, you could get microbes or — something you could catch that wouldn't be good.

CM: Oh, he's going to be there again this spring.

AB: Oh, is he? He is the most extreme director on the planet right now. And Jed is the only one who will do him, too. Because —

ES: Jed's the only one who will do anything.

CM: He's one of the most famous directors in Europe — but the only place he is produced in the United States is Montclair State University.

ES: Unbelievable. And the only place I'm produced in the United States is SLAM, Williamsburg. [laughs]

ELIZABETH STREB:

Great! They were putting popcorn all over the stage at the end, and Jed [Wheeler, Arts + Cultural Programming's Executive Director] was talking about how much guck he's had. He said, "This whole stage was covered with olive oil once." I go, "Well, you're bragging. Just wait 'til we come."

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Oh, is he? He is the most extreme director on the planet right now. And Jed is the only one who will do him, too. Because —

ELIZABETH STREB:
Jed's the only one who will do anything.

AB: Are these too big?

[Editor's Note: What exactly "these" refers to is lost to history, as none of the participants can recall what exactly they were discussing at that moment. We leave it to you, dear reader, to imagine the possibilities ...]

ES: They better not be, that's all I have to say. Someone's going to be very sorry if they aren't measured correctly. Some people think it doesn't matter, it's close enough. Don't even get me started.

SM: Oh no, start!

ES: It's just when you're building something — every step my performers take, they do it hundreds of times, and it's exact.

AB: Don't mess with it.

ES: You know how you're on stage for what, three days loading in? You don't have time to change everything. It will fall apart. Anyways. I'm getting emotional — I'm just going to let them put them on and hope they are perfect for their sake. Hope they are perfect.

CM: I'll call the police.

ES: Call the police. There's a special squad for when Elizabeth Streb is disappointed with measurement freaks, and I call that particular department. Anyway. Don't record that. This may not be repeated! No, because our vocabulary is exactly based on the anatomy of the person, the structure we're on, and it's so clumsy, this work. And that's why we do it hundreds of times. To get to the essence of the rhythm. That's what the subject is. If the rhythm is bad, nothing makes any sense. It only makes sense because of the number of repetitions and the invention of the pathways and the force that you need in that particular moment, you know. Like, if for some reason we pull that string and the thing wobbles — off with their heads. Right? Anyway, aren't we getting a little bit off topic?

SM: Well, I think that might have been the point. The idea was not to so much have a conversation that was just about the work, but that would go into all these various offshoots that are related.

AB: Well, you got that!

SM: Yeah.

ES: Right. What's an offshoot?

CM: You just went on an offshoot! That was an offshoot!

ES: Oh, you mean a topical offshoot?

SM: Yes!

ES: I guess that's my nature. My work is about an experience with no filter, and I think language-based performance has the capacity and the asset of a grammar that's understandable; it's a sentence,

usually. It's not just a bunch of scattered words. It has inherent content, based on trying to provide content. And mine is also attempting to get at the nugget of content in action terms and forced terms, and spatial terms. So when you mix those things together, how will they align? I always think this is concrete as an idea, and I can get the physicality and the material and the size of the floor based on the size of the humans, and there's six humans for Streb and six humans for Bogart and Chuck. That's 12, and maybe two will always be outside, because we usually have 10 in the center. Anyway.

SM: Interesting. Maybe this seems silly, but what are these 12 people going to wear?

ES: That I don't know, because I'm not the costume person.

AB: Well, I have a feeling about it, but I don't think James [Schuette, Set and Costume Designer] is going to go for it. James thinks — and it's true — it should be material that actually can be thrown away after every performance.

CM: Because it's going to be full of guck.

ES: They're making costumes for an upcoming show of mine, and they're more like Mad Max, which I really like, because I'm tired of unitards. But it really doesn't stretch, and the dancers wouldn't be able to do any of the moves.

AB: James will make sure they can move. He's really good that way. He just always disagrees with me, which is why I work with him all the time. I had a meeting with him yesterday, and every idea I told him he goes, "No, no." I have to put my ego to the side, because —

ES: Do you really get your feelings hurt?

AB: A little bit. But the thing is, over the 20 years I've worked with him or more, he comes up with a better idea. I mean, I sort of upload everything. He looks at me disapprovingly and then he comes up with something better. When we did "bobrauschenbergamerica," which is a play that Chuck wrote, what did I say? —

ES: Such a great show.

AB: James was doing sets and costumes. I said, "You know, I think it should just be industrial, like whatever theater we're in, the walls, whatever: gray." He comes in with a model the next time we meet and it's an American flag. A big-ass American flag. And I said, "Yeah, that's great."

ES: Oh my gosh. I think that's spectacular — I mean, I guess I don't collaborate with anyone but my dancers, really, and my set designers. I mean, my tech guys.

SM: Do they tell you no?

ES: Sometimes. But I argue with them.

B I O G R A P H I E S



SARAH CARGILL (she/her/they/them) is a performing artist, cultural worker and freelance curator whose work articulates (and is a consequence of) the relationship between intimacy, sonic memory/imagination, and interiority. Exploring these relationships through spectrum of sound and silence is central to their practice. Sarah is one of the San Francisco Queer Cultural Center's 2015-16 grantees and was the inaugural fellow of SOMArts Cultural Center's Curatorial Residency Program (2018). She is a former fellow of San Francisco Bay Area Emerging Arts Professionals (2017) and the Gardarev Center (2016). Sarah has appeared as a soloist in numerous productions, including "Queer Rebels" (2013), "Stories of Queer Diaspora" (2014) and SOMArts Cultural Center's "The News" (2016), and she has served as a member of the board of directors for Bay Area Girls Rock Camp in Oakland, CA (2015-17). She currently resides on unceded Ohlone land, in her hometown of San Francisco.



EMILY COATES is a dancer, choreographer and writer. She has performed internationally with New York City Ballet (1992-98), Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project (1998-2002), Twyla Tharp Dance (2001-03) and Yvonne Rainer and Group (2005-present). Her choreographic work has been commissioned and presented by Danspace Project, Performa, Baryshnikov Arts Center, Works & Process at the Guggenheim, Ballet Memphis, Wadsworth Atheneum, University of Chicago and Yale Art Gallery. Awards include the School of American Ballet's Mae L. Wein Award for Outstanding Promise; the Martha Duffy Memorial Fellowship at the Baryshnikov Arts Center; Yale's Poorvu Family Award for Interdisciplinary Teaching; the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation grant for Public Understanding of Science, Technology and Economics; and a 2016 Fellowship at New York University's Center for Ballet and the Arts. She is associate professor and director of dance studies at Yale University and co-author, with particle physicist Sarah Demers, of "Physics and Dance" (Yale University Press 2019).



DAVID DEWITT (managing editor) spent almost 20 years as an editor at The New York Times, including many years working on its Arts desk handling articles in dance, theater, music and other forms. He also wrote film, theater and television reviews for the paper. David is a member of SAG-AFTRA and Equity.



COLIN GEE trained as an actor at École Jacques Lecoq in Paris and the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theater in California. He began dancing in 1999 with the Irène Hultman Dance Company, performed as a clown with Cirque du Soleil from 2001 to 2004, and in 2009 was named the founding Whitney Live artist in residence at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship (2019), a Rome Prize (2012), and an EMPAC Dance Movies Commission (2011), he has received commissions from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. He often collaborates with the composer Erin Gee (his sister), providing libretto, performance, choreography and video for opera and concert works, with recent performances at Zurich Opera House, Carnegie Hall and Vienna Konzerthaus.



SASHA LAPOINTE is from the Upper Skagit and Nooksack Indian Tribe. Native to the Pacific Northwest, she draws inspiration from her coastal heritage as well as from her life in the city of Seattle. She writes with a focus on trauma and resilience, with topics ranging from PTSD, sexual violence and the work her great-grandmother did for the Coast Salish language revitalization, to loud basement punk shows and what it means to grow up mixed heritage. Her work has appeared in Hunger Mountain, The Rumpus Literary Journal, Indian Country Today, Luna Luna Magazine, The Yellow Medicine Review, The Portland Review, As/Us Journal, THE Magazine and Aborted Society Online Zine. She recently graduated with an M.F.A. through the Institute of American Indian Arts with a focus on creative nonfiction and poetry.



CLAUDIA LA ROCCO (editor) is the author of the selected writings "The Best Most Useless Dress" (Badlands Unlimited), the chapbook "I am trying to do the assignment" ([2nd Floor Projects]) and the sf trilogy "The Olivias" (published in performance, print and interdisciplinary editions by the Chocolate Factory Theater, Man Pant Publishing and the Lab). animals & giraffes, her duo with musician-composer Phillip Greenlief, has released two albums: "July" (with various musicians, Edgetone Records) and "Landlocked Beach" (with Wobbly; Creative Sources). Her poetry and prose have been widely anthologized, and she has bylines in numerous publications, including Artforum, Bomb and The New York Times, where she was a critic from 2005 to 2015. La Rocco has received grants and residencies from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation and Headlands Center for the Arts, among others. She is editor in chief of Open Space, the San Francisco Museum of Art's digital and live interdisciplinary platform for diverse voices within contemporary arts and culture.



JESSICA LYNNE is a writer and art critic. She is co-founder and editor of ARTS.BLACK, a journal of art criticism from Black perspectives.



SORAYA NADIA McDONALD is the culture critic for “The Undeclared,” ESPN’s premier platform covering race, sports and culture. She writes about film, television, arts, fashion and literature. Previously, she was a pop culture writer for The Washington Post, where she focused on issues surrounding race, gender and sexuality. She will happily obsess about anything from themes of imperialism in “Black Panther,” to why Noma Dumezweni should be the next Doctor Who, to the best episodes of “Bob’s Burgers.” She graduated from Howard University with a degree in journalism in 2006 and spent six years covering sports before turning her focus to culture writing. She grew up in North Carolina and currently lives in Brooklyn.



KARINNE KEITHLEY SYERS is a teacher and artist who works across text, audio, song, movement, image and printed matter. Her work has been seen in New York at the Chocolate Factory Theater (“A Tunnel Year,” 2016; “Another Tree Dance,” 2013), Incubator Arts Project (“Montgomery Park, or Opulence,” 2010, Bessie Award for outstanding production), the Ohio (“Do Not Do This Ever Again,” 2008), Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church (“Tenderenda,” 2005), and Surf Reality (“Four Fruits,” 2000). An enthusiast-agitator of community-led projects, she is the founding editor of 53rd State Press, co-instigated the writing posses Joyce Cho and Machiqq, co-founded the dance palace Ur and co-hosted the Acousmatic Theater Hour on WFMU. She has collaborated as a performer, librettist, sound and video designer and choreographer with artists including Big Dance Theater, David Neumann, Young Jean Lee, Sibyl Kempson, Chris Yon, Sara Smith, Theater of a Two-Headed Calf, the Civilians and Talking Band.



AUGUSTA READ THOMAS’ music is nuanced, majestic, elegant, capricious and colorful — “it is boldly considered music that celebrates the sound of instruments and reaffirms the vitality of orchestral music” (Philadelphia Inquirer). A Grammy winner, her impressive works embody unbridled passion and fierce poetry. The New Yorker called her “a true virtuoso composer.” The critic Edward Reichel wrote, “Thomas has secured for herself a permanent place in the pantheon of American composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. She is without question one of the best and most important composers that this country has today. Her music has substance, depth and a sense of purpose. She has a lot to say and knows how to say it — and in a way that is intelligent yet appealing and sophisticated.” A 2015 New York Times article states her distinction of having her work performed more in 2013-14 than any other living ASCAP composer. Founder and director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Composition and the Grossman Ensemble, she is also a former American Music Center board chair. She serves on many boards and is a very generous citizen.

ARTS + CULTURAL PROGRAMMING ACP’s overarching premise is to sustain its role as a leader in the advocacy of contemporary artists in this country by producing and presenting their works at Montclair State University, and in doing so to ensure that work of exemplary artists is seen at venues worldwide.

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- JEDEDIAH WHEELER