Hiking the Horizontal

Field Notes from a Choreographer

Liz Lerman

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Fueling the Imagination

I was visiting with my friend, the biologist Bonnie Bassler at Princeton, when she took me down the hall to meet her colleague Eric Wieschaus, a Nobel laureate who works with fruit flies. By that time, my dance *Ferocious Beauty: Genome* had already premiered, and I was eagerly fixing it. I was particularly interested in the part we called the fugue because of its complex relationship between video, text, and movement. The subject of this particular section was the myriad ways in which science and artistic research overlap. It starts with the scientist Aaron Terkowitz from the University of Chicago saying, "How do I ask myself a question?" followed by five minutes of dance and media that address just that query.

So I asked Dr. Wieschaus how he asks himself a question. And he responded, "I am fueled by my ignorance."

The precision of his answer thrilled me. "Nobel Laureate Fueled by His Ignorance" would make a great headline, I told him. Artists and scientists have a keen understanding that not knowing is fuel for the imagination rather than fuel for humiliation. There is nothing to hide.

Asking Questions as a Way of Life

Twice when I was growing up I asked questions so stupid that they brought the class to an absolute standstill. The first time I realized what I had done almost instantly. The second time I was clueless until the laughing started. You would think that after experiences like that I would never ask another question. But no. It seems that asking dumb questions paved the way for asking better ones. Or maybe at a very early age I just got over the embarrassment of not knowing.

"I wonder if this is the only way it has to be. Maybe it is changeable. In fact, Liz, you could change it." That would be my father talking passionately at dinner about almost anything political, but most especially about civil rights. Or it could be my mother, whispering about self-knowledge while she drove me to dance lessons. They both had their methods for making me think about my responsibilities and role in the world, as well as about the nature of change. But either way, to make change at all, you first have to notice what is going on around you or inside you. If you are a child or a young adult, noticing frequently takes the form of complaining. It took me a while to see the connection between that infernal crankiness and a method of inquiry.

So in the sacred space of the ballet-school dressing rooms with young dancers bemoaning the fat that will forge their fate, crying as they measure the full circumference of their waist with their own two hands, I am watching and thinking: Isn't there a better way for us to be sharing our precious time before class? Or an even more radical question: Is that skinny frame actually so beautiful? And by the way: Why are my feet bleeding just so I can stand up on my toes? Whose idea was that?

In the chaos of Hebrew school with little learning, less nurturing, and confirmation as our only goal, I am thinking: Can't the adults see that we are wasting our time here and some of us actually might like to speak this language? Do they even care what we think? Why don't they?

Or standing at an anti-war demonstration at the Vermont state capitol in the winter, freezing and wondering, Is this really helping anything?

The questions trip over each other. They never stop.

It took a while to understand that this could be a way of life, a way of

making art, a way of making space for others to engage in the conversation, of naming things to encourage dialogue, of reordering ideas, or of making something useful or beautiful or both.

It can be destabilizing to think like this. The constant questioning implies a lack of knowledge. And the ambiguity of so many of the kinds of answers I could come up with didn't always serve as an antidote. I tried to make a virtue of "not knowing," which often proved difficult—in part because in our culture, in the media, and in many educational establishments, smartness is defined by the ability to have answers in a hurry, stated well and without complication.

Oddly though, this "not knowing" has become a bridge to good conversation and friendship not just with artists but with clergy and scientists too. There is kind of a shared delight, and sometimes misery, in the recognition that this source of inquiry can be an engine. And besides, I eventually learned that I can pull myself out of most disasters through methods that emerged long ago in processes of endless repetitions and trial and error. I can count on various means of discovery so that moments of not knowing are more like guideposts than endings.

Slowly I began to recognize many kinds of questions, reasons to question, and even ways to harness the act of questioning. I developed my capacity to distinguish between questions that required research as opposed to action or rehearsal or conversation, and to see how these modes overlap and lead into each other. The easygoing relationship between needing to know and then discovering answers based on reading, searching the Internet, trying an idea in rehearsal, and gaining insight through dialogue makes for a lively intersection of mind and body.

An Early Teacher

It was Rush Welter, a history teacher at Bennington College, who taught me how to be utterly absorbed by asking something and who gave me the overarching tool of inquiry as a way to address my ignorance. His course consisted of a set of six questions and a list of primary sources. At the end of every six weeks, we had to turn in a paper answering one of the questions. The questions themselves were based on historical dilemmas from pre-revolutionary America. One was about the colonial-era civil-liberties maverick Anne Hutchinson, and another asked which colony had led the revolution and why.

What was unique about the course was that the "textbook" consisted only of the list of primary sources and that the instructor didn't lecture. Instead, he would meet us twice a week to answer any of our own queries, and he let those questions determine what he actually talked about with us. Over the course of the year I learned to choose among contrasting positions of thought as expressed in the primary sources. I found my way around different versions of truth as I sought to both discover agreement with and establish my individual voice among the various directions my classmates were taking in their own quests to solve problems our teacher raised. It was exhilarating. Looking back, I think his methods were transformational and helped me to see how to choreograph, especially if I were to make the kind of dance that interested me: the open-ended, trying-to-understand-something kind.

Getting Help

Early on I learned that people like to be asked to help make a dance. Dance seems such a romantic and exotic activity that when I ask for help, especially help from a conceptual sphere, folks really step in. This became clear to me when I met Gordon Adams while we were both fellows at the Blue Mountain Center. He was director of the Defense Budget Project and author of *The Iron Triangle*. We actually began talking about the piece I was working on at the time, *Nine Short Dances About the Defense Budget and Other Military Matters*, while sitting on the swimming dock. Gordon gave me lots of help during my research, and he stayed engaged throughout the making of the dance. He introduced me to others in his field and provided me with facts and information that would underpin the rigor of the piece.

This is an important dynamic to understand. When you ask people for help with some special questions in mind, they in turn take an interest in your activity. They will of course come to see the concert. More importantly, they will become a partner in shaping the work. What might be considered a solo act of making a dance emerges as something quite different because of the dialogue. It is not that the advisors come into the studio embodied, but more that they are present in my mind as I work. It's as if I have a team of shadow champions in the rehearsal hall, encouraging me to continue even when I feel tired, or scared, or just plain dumb.

Turning Discomfort into Inquiry and the Beginnings of the Critical Response Process

The recognition that inquiry allows for better communication, better feelings, and even better outcomes became clear to me with increasing force as I began teaching and using the principles of the Critical Response Process that I developed in the early nineties. I discovered that this multistep process for work-in-progress dialogue also held some practical tools for pursuing the inquiry itself and some guideposts for intuition. This began with my awareness of the lengthy apologies from artists that preceded a showing of any unfinished work. I noticed that I too often had a litany of issues disguised as nervous excuses before I showed something. And when I thought more about them, I realized that these excuses were often the problems I myself was having with what I was making. At first I didn't realize they could be posed in question form. It wasn't until I started talking with loved ones (first my husband, Jon Spelman, and then others in a small orbit of very trusted friends) that I realized that what I said in introducing a showing was often the first thing that came up in the discussion as soon as it was over. So I began to wonder whether, rather than apologize, I could ask a question—ask it with dignity and want to hear the answer, whether useful or not. The principle of "turn discomfort into inquiry" begins with the things we make.

More Questions

I know my incessant restlessness started young, but I think some critical junctures along the way helped to guide it. Thankfully I found respite in choreography, in partnering with others with similar questions, and with a group of people who were willing to help figure out what is interesting in all of this.

I think it was my mother's death that forced the questioning to become a way of making art, because I really did wonder why she had to die so young, and why she had to have that ignorant rabbi she had never met come into her hospital room and rub her in all the wrong ways, and how I had the courage to give her the daily morphine shot and walk her to the bathroom and back in the middle of those last nights, and where my own strength came from—and so the questions flowed.

I think it was the dogma of the contemporary art world that made asking questions the stance of a gentle rebel.

I think the act of putting old people onstage constituted a series of questions all on its own. Did they really even belong up there? Would the audience look at them? I remember one woman who was half blind and couldn't see or hear her cues as I watched in awe of her teetering around in what seemed a very interesting little dance. I wondered if it could be art.

I think it was the political work that forced the questioning to become a way of making art, because to tell the whole story from my perspective was just plain too simplistic, too narrow, too yesterday.

But none of these realizations started as questions. They all started as complaints, opinions, awareness of discomfort, internal monologues looping around in an obsessive brain. It took a while to figure out that by changing the tone and letting my sentence end with an upward tilt, I could actually get back to the material at hand and go to work. Inquiry became liberating.

Justice and Genetics: Two Program Notes

Preparing a program note is a particular kind of challenge. It is an art to design ideas and data in a way that satisfies people's curiosity and increases their appreciation without being redundant to the actual experience. It's not just that some audience members crave more information than others; it's also that different people like to get the knowledge at different times. Some get to performances early to read everything they can in the program, whereas others might just check it out when they get home or days later before they throw the playbill away. In addition to their job supporting the audience member's experience, program notes serve as a kind of documentation beyond the realm of performance, because in the long run they may be all that remains of these works.

The following notes appeared in the inaugural programs for two large projects. The first, for *Small Dances About Big Ideas*, was read by an audience gathered for an international conference on human rights convened at Harvard Law School. We decided to include some of the correspondence between the commissioner, Martha Minow, and myself to give people insight into the research process. Later, when we were asked to bring this work to the U.N.-sponsored EARTH: The World Urban Festival in Vancouver, I decided to include this dialogue in the piece itself. I think that using the program note to highlight my exchange with Martha made me more aware of its significance.

Avenues of Inspiration: A Program Note for *Small Dances About Big Ideas*

Commissions are magical business. Someone points you in the direction of an idea and gives you some resources. Suddenly you are challenged to make an abrupt turn in your life to discover something new. If you are lucky, you may start this process because someone asked, but you bring it to completion because you have become passionate and absorbed by the subject. So it has been with *Small Dances About Big Ideas*, commissioned by the Seevak Fund for the Harvard Law School/Facing History and Ourselves conference Pursuing Human Dignity: The Legacies of Nuremberg for International Law, Human Rights, and Education which took place in November, 2005. I am grateful to the individual behind the commission,

Harvard Law Professor Martha Minow, for her wisdom in seeing that art in general, and dance specifically, could bring something unique to this gathering. Her commission charged us not to draw solely on the history of the Nuremberg Trials, but to observe the evolution of international law and the traditions of both western courts and the tribunals of other cultures. I thank Martha for putting her trust in me and my colleagues, and I deeply appreciate her probing and incisive mind; she is indeed a visionary partner.

One of the pleasures of beginning a piece is the opportunity to be porous to many avenues of inspiration. A conversation with Martha Minow would suggest a structure to pursue in rehearsal. A report on an International Criminal Court investigation in Uganda might supply an image. But a major source of ideas came from a relatively small list of books. These provided the strongest source for the characters that appear in the piece.

Reading Samantha Power's book *A Problem From Hell: America in the Age of Genocide*, I was moved to learn about Raphael Lemkin. This Polish-born lawyer and activist worked ceaselessly for international legislation to oppose genocide (a term that he, in fact, coined). Power's appraisal of such "mavericks" brought to mind the annoying persistence of certain artists and provided ample inspiration for building a character that never stops moving.

I had already listened, with fascination, to an interview with Clea Koff when another conversation with Martha Minow convinced me to read her book, *The Bone Woman*. Koff's language of dreams and her great capacity to describe the Rwandan landscape gave us many avenues of entry to create the role of the forensic anthropologist. And as an example of the power of detail, a passing mention in the book about the slashing of Achilles tendons in Rwanda provided the point of departure for the scene in the dance using crutches.

For much of my life, I have pushed at the boundaries of the definition of a professional artist, and I have sometimes questioned the assumptions that dictate the codes of that profession. Thus, I found the role of journalists covering genocide to be stimulating as they made the choice to move beyond neutrality. Reading Philip Gourevitch's narrative of the Rwandan genocide, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, I was moved at how they didn't let the discipline of their professions impede a larger calling. To read Gourevitch or Power is to understand events through the account of a disciplined reporter, but to also hear from an individual voice trying to understand, trying to convey the impossible. That journey, which in the end demands involvement and not professional distance, stood as an inspiration to us as we developed *Small Dances About Big Ideas*.

CHOREOGRAPHER TO COMMISSIONER

From Liz Lerman:

Can you tell me once more, why you think a dance, or a theatrical moment will help at your conference? What will bring the people who attend to a different place in their own process or journey? That will help me as I prepare for our first serious rehearsal period.

. . . I myself continue to be moved, in part, by my own incredulousness; that I have lived on the same planet with this going on and done nothing. So [the] idea of becoming an upstander is very vivid for me. But that does not exactly address the needs of the professional, i.e., the person who thinks about [these issues] all the time.

From Martha Minow:

These are my hopes: that a dance would reach people who seldom think about mass atrocities—students, lawyers—with the chance to be drawn in emotionally and intellectually, with the pacing that can allow people to absorb or begin to absorb the incomprehensible scales of atrocity, the limits of legal responses but also the dignity in the effort to frame and respond to atrocities through law. For those who think about these matters often . . . the chance to imagine images and voices about these things, and to have a shared experience with others who seldom attend to these issues, would be a gift. The central problematics rather than more information would be a valuable focus. And rather than the typical academic discussion that implies the capacity of logic, empiricism, and argument to contain, resolve or manage an issue, the dance might give people experience dwelling with the problematics. What are the problematics?

1) How could a trial be the right response to mass violence? How can the scale of the Holocaust fit within a courtroom, how can a few individuals be responsible, how can soldiers be to blame for what generals and politicians demanded and how can big guys be responsible for mass murders and rapes requiring the willing participation or passivity of hundreds, thousands of others?

BUT Also

2) How could a trial NOT be the right response—if the alternative is doing nothing, holding no one responsible, repeating the passivity during the atrocity with passivity afterward, leaving silence as the rejoinder?

From Liz Lerman:

I wonder . . . how Nuremberg was honored at each decade . . . and then when we get to 60, [if] that might be the way to see our country . . . through anniversaries . . . I was at an official ceremony in Warsaw during the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto [uprising]. The ceremony was both awesome and disgusting to me.

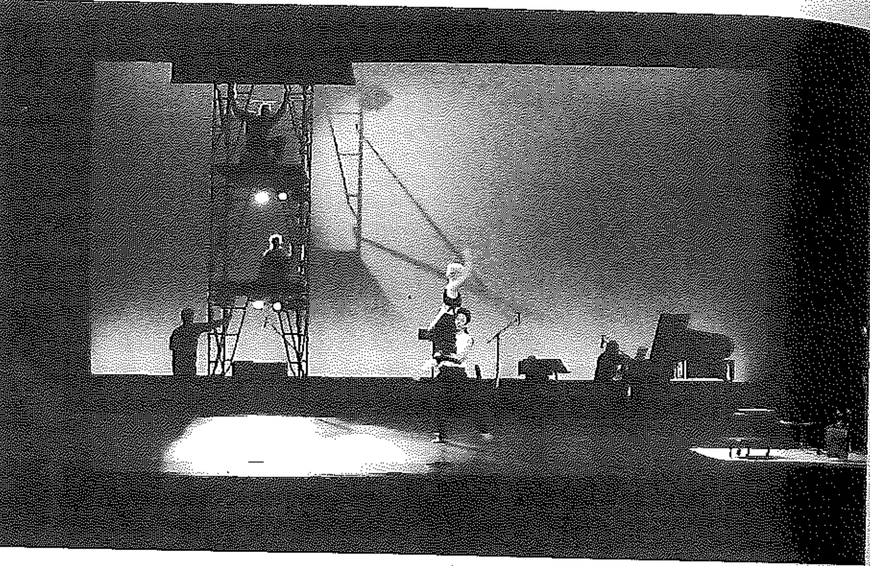
From Martha Minow:

At the time of the 50th anniversary of the Nuremberg trials, the U.S. commemorations understandably focused on the emerging use of trials in response to situations in Bosnia and Rwanda. The U.S. was not imagined as the source of aggression or violations of human rights. Now we cannot avoid that image even as people divide politically over whether the analogy to Nuremberg has any purchase after 9–11, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib . . . and whether we should be treated like other nations (this [George W. Bush] White House thinks not because we stand for freedom? We are the only superpower and thus unfairly judged?)

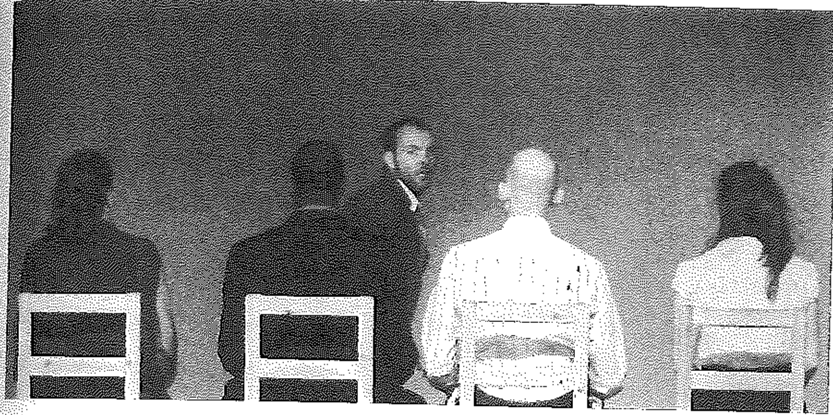
Since [the Nuremberg trials], finding rape a war crime is an accomplishment of the Rwanda and Bosnia tribunals. [Subsequent events] also revived the Nuremberg model so that it is taken for granted that trials should occur to [Saddam] Hussein, and in Cambodia, and elsewhere, with truth commissions and reparations as potential alternatives or additions. But preventing atrocities: that we don't know how to do. But we hope that teaching, talking, remembering, provoking will make a difference.

Some program notes need to make audiences aware of the behind-the-scenes work that went into making an event possible. This was certainly the case when we premiered *Ferocious Beauty: Genome* at Wesleyan University because the Center for Fine Arts was essential in the success of this very complicated piece.

Pamela Tatge, director of the center, brought the piece to the campus as part of meeting the university's goal to connect art and science. Pam is an exemplar of her kind, a visionary deeply committed to artists and to the generation of new work. She linked departments, people, and ideas from opposite ends of the campus, bringing tremendous benefits to the project. We rehearsed in beautiful studios where the dance department's Susan Lourie made us welcome, and we foraged in the sciences with some brilliant minds. Foremost was Laura Grabel, former dean of natural sciences and mathematics. A scientist with a dance background, Laura afforded us an elegant and generous entrée into the lives and the labs of scientists on campus. She and her co-teacher, Lori Gruen, brought us into their classes where we could test and advance ideas about the value of linking these fields. In addition, Laurel Ap-



Dances at a Cocktail Party was created for the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center's American Music Festival 2002: "Bernstein, Broadway, the Bomb—The Age of Anxiety." Intermittently, we've had opportunities to perform with live musicians. Here the collaboration enlivened not only the dancing but the stage set as well. Photo: MJMazzola.



Small Dances About Big Ideas (2005) with Martha Wittman, Kevin Malone, Matt Mahaney, Ted Johnson, and Cassie Meador (top); Lesole Maine and Cassie Meador (bottom). Commissioned for the 60th anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials, *Small Dances* was a character-driven piece featuring such figures as Raphael Lemkin, the relentless activist who fought for recognition of genocide as a war crime. One of the requests in our commission from Harvard law professor Martha Minow was to return to the body as an aspect of genocide. This led to the "autopsy duet," portraying a forensic anthropologist and an ethnic-cleansing victim. Photos: Chris Randle (top), Enoch Chan (bottom).

In Defense of Creative Research

When I Do This Movement, It Means This Word That I Am Saying

Once I had made the dance *Journey* in 1980, I had acquired at least one choreographic method that aided my interest in subject matter choreography. I hadn't yet codified it, but I knew that if I took one word at a time and found one movement or a series of movements to represent or simply parallel it, I could actually convey ideas and give an audience an experience of movement literacy at the same time. This was important to me as I felt that the generation of choreographers that I belonged to had left the general audience behind as we pursued the interesting movement vocabulary that was to become our hallmark. The sense of discovery that these innovative ways of moving made possible was worthwhile, but the familiarity and comfort that comes from recognition had been lost.

I would subject this "equivalents" approach to movements and words to many variations and a lot more rigor in the years to come. But even at the start, this technique gave me confidence to proceed in my investigations of ideas and subject matter. It meant I could be even more fearless with research. With the research came discovery, and with discovery came the realization that the dances were a focal point for my own lifelong learning project. Now I had a reason for going to bookstores, talking at parties to anyone who knew anything, and seeking in conversations a link to whatever my current interest happened to be. Now I found a place to put my ongoing relationship to current events, as well as a place to connect the community stories I was hearing with larger narratives or smaller details. And because the stage demanded rigor, the expressive outcomes of the research had to evolve both in form and substance.

The nature of artistic research is unique to the researcher, the subject, and the ultimate artistic entity that will contain the result. It is true that you can say that one things leads to another, but it is really more accurate to say that one things leads the artist to choose another. Oddly enough, as I observed my own expanding set of methods, I began to notice that once again my artistic tools and temperament were helping me forge a way of researching that was broad, mysterious, rigorous, synchronistic, circular, and playful.

I Am Going to Consider Research as a Form of Rehearsal

A project can begin with something as small as an image, a passing statement, or a moment of curiosity shown by a commissioning partner. Anything beyond that is a void eventually to be filled with bodies, text, music, narrative, lights, costumes, and so much context.

My research began to demand its own time frame, which I found easier to maintain if I thought of the research like I thought about rehearsals. What made me start to see it within the light of art-making was the way my mind accompanied the research. If I allowed myself to be an artist researching, rather than attempting to be the scholar of my college years, I discovered a freedom, an agility, and an appreciable increase in the activity of my imagination. It was and is akin to a split-screen computer: on one side, images and abstractions of color or shape, and on the other side, words, stories, facts, statistics, concrete details.

At our first performance of *Docudance: Nine Short Dances About the Defense Budget and Other Military Matters* in 1983, we actually published a bibliography in the program. That drew numerous comments from the press, audience, and friends. I was surprised that it sparked so much attention. Without research, how did anyone think we could make the dances? People seemed to assume that if it is art, it must be exclusively personal expression based entirely on feelings or intuition—and therefore no research would be necessary. I suspect, too, that the stereotype of people who work with their bodies being all body and no mind led our audiences to think that we somehow just made it all up. It might be hard to comprehend that these stage creatures with their practiced bodies might also have a keen interest in the intellectual side of our subjects. It was a stretch to imagine that we might hold two ideas in our heads at the same time—and ask our audiences to do the same.

The Research Doesn't Show, But Sometimes Can Be Felt

I would also discover that audiences don't notice the research. That's because by the time a piece comes to the stage, all the variations and iterations of abstraction and translation have made the research much less obvious. The performance (usually) doesn't contain footnotes or source acknowledgements, and as makers we often can't remember how the material morphed as it led

us down the rabbit hole of discovery. And if our audiences can't repeat the particular fact, idea, or sentence that made them think or feel while in the theater, then perhaps they have no way to absorb the notion of research behind the experience.

It was during the *Docudances* period that I began to really track my methods of working with ideas. The first of these current-events-inspired pieces, made in 1980, was about politics and art. In it I said: "How are we supposed to know how to make dances that are *about* anything after decades of avoiding it?" Two years later, while making *Nine Short Dances About the Defense Budget and Other Military Matters*, I noticed that I was beginning to answer myself.

I had a kind of brainstorming-for-the-body approach in which I made a long list of ideas on one side of a piece of paper and a long list of research opportunities on the other. Then I went to work, back and forth between ideas that included not just information but also music, costumes, images, poems. All kinds of things went into those lists because I didn't have to fulfill someone else's ideas about what constitutes real research. The research itself was different too: wandering in the stacks, talking at dinner parties, fingering fabric, looking at other artistic treatments of the same subject, finding and making weird associations with the morning news—it all counted. Eventually I put all of it under the improvisational microscope of rehearsal. The studio became the great analyzing and synthesizing element.

Like all brainstorms, some of it worked and some of it didn't. The editing was partly dictated by what ideas I could make stageworthy and what ideas remained obstinately unavailable to the structure I had established. Now, as I work under the construct of multiple outcomes for the same research, I am able to keep certain ideas around longer because they don't have to fit onstage. They may instead show up in a panel discussion, a workshop, an article, or online. But in my early work, it was the stage or nothing. Sometimes I loved an idea so much that I kept it on the stage well past its worthiness. Other times I could recognize that there was no making a good relationship between idea and subject, and despite all my attempts it was doomed.

Research Might Happen over the Dinner Table: A Look at the Personal

After the political pieces, I went through a very long period of making dances that addressed the complexities of identity, sometimes as the sole focus of a work and sometimes embedded in larger contexts. I conducted research by reading and studying historical periods, with all that that can entail for an artist, and also by asking the dancers to investigate their own lives and experiences. The content resulting from these two approaches may have differed, but the artistic methods fed each other.

One particularly fertile period included our examination of the *senninbari*, which were belts given to Japanese soldiers during World War II as protective charms during combat. Each belt consisted of a thousand stitches, with each stitch made by a different woman. I was initially drawn to the idea by the communal sensation it aroused in me and because I wondered how the task of making the belts was accomplished.

The most I could learn from available sources was that sometimes women stood on the corner and collected stitches from pedestrians passing by. So when we went to Japan to create a community-based intergenerational project, I expressed my interest—and walked right into a very big controversy that crossed generations, nationalities, and aesthetic styles. Our questions brought up painful memories for the older women in the group. The younger women were careful, but nonetheless expressed their deep disgust about the war, the emperor, and the stupidity of anyone who would think a belt like this could save anyone.

Such intergenerational tension stringently tests this broader notion of research and points toward an even deeper value. Beyond providing information and artistic content, the act of asking, listening, and talking builds a framework in which disagreements can be held with respect and eventually with fresh eyes and ears. I asked if people would be willing to go home and talk within their families about this period and especially about the *senninbari*. I made time in the next day's rehearsal to listen to the stories—many, many stories. It was difficult for me to understand all the nuances as I listened through our brave interpreters. It seemed however, that the women did not just stitch. Sometimes they stitched in defiance. They pricked their fingers and put the blood into the belts. They wove their hair into the belts. Storytelling

within families was ignited by the research for the dance, and the information changed the way we made the piece and the way it was danced.

Back on Campus, I Notice That There Is a Difference with This Research

Making both *Ferocious Beauty: Genome* and *Small Dances About Big Ideas* within the same period made me finally notice the amount of research in which I was engaged and to take note of how the research affected rehearsal, process, and product. The fact that we were on so many college campuses as we made these works also provided a useful context for comparing creative research to more academic pursuits, and pressed the question of how these two modes might learn from each other.

If the medium is the message, and if form and content reflect on each other, then one other aspect of Dance Exchange methodology has a big impact on the nature of research. This is the dictum that research yields multiple outcomes. This is a key contributing factor to the nimbleness we feel with the subject matter by the time we are finished, and why, I think, we have a certain improvisatory alacrity in expressing what we have come to learn. Our subject matter gets a thorough going over by virtue of the fact that we have a rigorous process for bringing ideas to the stage, a planning process for workshops, a writing-and-speaking process for program notes and panel discussions, and a reevaluation process for all of the above as we tour. And as we tour we discover even more by observing what actually catches people's attention. Since we have multiple forms of expression to choose from, we begin to see the particular advantages of all the possibilities, whether talking or dancing or video or participation or fast-paced discussion or writing.

Our constant immersion and shape-shifting through all these possibilities leaves me generally dissatisfied when I witness Powerpoint presentations, lectures, or Q&A panels. It is not that these formats are bad. It is just that alone they cannot do justice to the years of research undertaken by the person reporting, and they cannot convey the fullness of any topic to a younger, hungrier generation. How could they? But as long as we accord greater respect to certain academic orthodoxies than we do to other ways of sharing and disseminating knowledge, researchers and their audiences will pay a price in narrowness of impact and sheer boredom.

It was also during this period that I was asked to join a group of eleven choreographers called the Center for Creative Research, which was funded by the Mellon Foundation. It was convened by Sam Miller, long a leader and visionary in the dance field, who challenged us to think about our work beyond the performances and to notice the many ways we could engage with institutions of higher learning. As we thrashed out ideas at each gathering, and occasionally gave witness to each other's processes, the conversation of this group helped me to recognize that we were all doing research and doing it in ways that were both similar and unique. Knowledge about the practices of these colleagues has emboldened my own.

At the first meeting of this group, we agreed to each take ten minutes to share something about our artistic process. Some showed video, some talked, some read. But Eiko Otake moved the coffee table a few inches, then simply slipped to the floor and settled her body between some chairs and those of us close by. Then, over the next few minutes, she let us see the subtle shifts and changes in her body that only she can make. Slowly moving in parts and then as a whole, she rearranged herself among the furniture, which now loomed as large as continents in my mind as I observed her. I had seen Eiko and her husband, Koma, perform before, but always at a distance. The proximity here was truly breathtaking, and I learned and relearned in those moments what more I could ask of myself and the dancers I work with. I wasn't researching, but this was a field study.

I had a chance to meet other colleagues during two trips that I made to Europe taken within thirteen months or each other. On both occasions I met choreographers from several continents. I was intrigued to hear the term "research" come up occasionally on the first trip, then appear in almost everyone's conversation by the second. As I listened, I noticed many different meanings behind the word. On the one hand, some choreographers used the term to denote what they did in the studio, a way of asserting that the physical exploration of rehearsals constitutes a form of research. Others were using research to describe their study of other fields, motivated by the quest for knowledge that would aid in both choreographing and contextualizing the work they were making. And still others were using the word as a way to describe an investigation of the methods they were using to make dances. These choreographers were borrowing from other fields of study to see if it might affect their way of working.

Everything Counts while You Research and Make Something

I had my most recent encounter with this research business at the University of Maryland, College Park, by testing and teaching a three-week intersession course designed to connect history, dance, and physics. Connected to my developing work, *The Matter of Origins*, my subject was Edith Warner, a woman who ran a little teahouse near Los Alamos, New Mexico, and the ripple effect of Robert Oppenheimer's requisition of her services to feed the physicists who were there during the war years.

The problems started right at the planning stage. How was I to convince the various departments of the course's value for their students? Each wanted more of their own discipline represented. I was trying to get them to see that more of a less-familiar discipline might be of greater use to the students in the long run. I am bothered by still having to make this case, but I am almost always sharpened by having to argue.

In this situation I found myself talking about how to use the personal to both notice and engage, as well as to harvest methods of investigation. For example, I wanted the faculty to understand how navigating the personal, rather than avoiding it, could lead to interesting research methods. As an example, I wanted my students to understand the relationship between how they get to know a person in real life and how they might get to know a historical character. In addition, if they really noticed the way they discover their interest in another person—the steps, the different ways they communicate in texting, phoning, or e-mailing—then they might be able to harness these modes to a structure for a work of art that also requires an audience to get to know the subject, and sometimes the artist as well.

So on the first day the students were given some writings by Edith Warner. On the second day they were asked to think of questions they wish they could ask her if she were in the room. I tried to get them to not censor themselves. How do you get to know someone? Where do you start? Do you ask for family or personal history or what they had for breakfast or where they went to school? And what do these questions tell us about ourselves, about our subject, about the way we contextualize? I wanted students to see that they are constantly engaged in research in their own lives. We just don't call it that. And if we could figure out what we are doing, think how our studying might change!

The students were asked to make a project that had to have performative elements that communicated in some way what they had done during their research process. I wanted them to be able to make the research evident either in the performance itself or in some other means of their choosing. But they couldn't just assume that I would know what it was. They could use footnotes if they wanted to, but I expected more because I, too, was doing research and was curious about what new approaches might unfold.

Here are some of my notes from the first week of the course, with a few annotations:

Projects are mediation between your own interests and the research. The making of something eventually moves from the personal to the consideration of audience. This battleground between public and private is a very interesting landscape for learning about oneself, the subject, and ultimately structure and meaning. There are definite advantages to each side of this dilemma, and the compromise that ensues is very tricky, but very compelling.

It is useful to form categories as we listen to both questions and answers. This exercise of "naming" helps us evolve into our next step both for the subject at hand, but also if we want to be able to repeat any of the process we have begun.

So often the process itself is sparked so fast that unless we take the time to name it, the path is obscured later by forgetfulness or at least a lack of nuance.

In the same way of noticing how you might categorize, it is also useful to notice the images forming in your mind/imagination as you listen or talk. If I pay attention to this space, sometimes I am led to just the right image, and if I play with the image I can also extrapolate a metaphor, a structure, or an idea for rehearsal. (As one example, I asked the students to notice how Edith Warner noticed. The only way we could know this was to read her Christmas letters and short essays with that question in mind. There was a one sentence in which she says that she got the news about the atomic bomb and Hiroshima from Kitty Oppenheimer, who had come to visit her kitchen to get vegetables. This led to a discussion about the many ways that we get the news. That in turn led to a new set of research questions as

well as a possible structure for a performance piece that could be based on a variety of news outlets, even gossip over a kitchen counter.)

Where Is All This Going?

All this thinking about research is offering me one more chance to claim the power of artistic practice and the role that artistically driven research processes can play in life beyond the art world. To me this is no longer an experiment. Using artistic methods makes learning natural, a discovery, an engine for getting up in the morning or staying up all night. Using artistic process makes knowledge a combination of the known and unknown and makes the researcher an individual with vision, as well as a synthesizer of what has come before. So when my rabbi asked me recently what I thought we might do with the educational environment of the synagogue. I said, "Make stuff." Everything—the learning, the discipline, the research—follows from that.

In the end I have come to see research as an act of conversation. It is a companion. It is a refuge. It is a source of inspiration of all kinds. I do sometimes end up in an eddy, off to the side of the important stream I thought I was on. But that is where an artist is lucky. Because I can move the whole stream over to the little tributary if I think it worthy, and if I have enough will, I can bring my collaborators and audiences with me.

Onward with Petichta

I love my postmodernism. I don't like the word for it, but I love what it is. For me it means to take things apart and put them back together in new ways, bring unlikely things together and see what you get. And when you do bring them together, put them next to each other in odd ways at random, sequence them out of rhythm or just plain guess, sit back and make meaning.

So I gaily move about the world of shipyards and science labs, schools and synagogues. At times I feel like Johnny Appleseed, bringing my little postmodern basket of tools that I hope plant seeds for new kinds of methods in old places.

At one of these, Temple Israel in Boston, I was working with the wonderful rabbi Elaine Zecher. As we watched some improvisation taking place in front of us, we whispered to each other on the side. I said something like, "I just love postmodernism." Elaine smiled slyly and said, "Fine, Liz, but actually you are doing petichta."

I asked her what that was, by now used to my own ignorance of Jewish tradition and looking forward to one of the many mini-lessons I get along the way of collaboration. But I was unprepared for what followed.

Elaine explained to me that there was a special form of Talmudic scholarship called *petichta*. This approach involved the usual Saturday morning Torah study but with a twist. Someone would bring in a story that had nothing to do with that week's Torah portion. The task of the students (probably many very learned men) was to link the story in the Torah to the off-hand story that had been brought to the table. Though I have since learned that petichta has a more scholarly and narrow definition, the spirit remains the same. It is postmodernism at its best, for sure.

I was reminded of how much that is lost through time can be resurrected, reused, reconstituted and thereby feel as fresh as the newest breakthrough in creative thought. That is why, when I teach people tools for creative practice, one of them is about reviving ancient traditions in new ways. Onward with petichta.

Coda

It is difficult to spend time reflecting on relationship and not talk about my husband. I have maintained over the years that my partnership with Jon Spelman is private. It is also a bit of a mystery. Sometimes we look at each other and say in agreement: "Who are you?" He is a terrific sleeper, and I am not. So when we vowed on our wedding day to pay attention to each other, I know that on the worst of my sleepless nights I can wake him up. His quiet listening and gentle words make entering the next day possible. And he's funny.

Seven Paths to Creativity

I had been asked to speak about creativity at the American Bankers Association's big conference, but I had also been placed on the "spouse" track. So everyone was surprised when over fifty bankers showed up for the session. We covered a lot of ground that day, including making a dance that was performed by the bankers, first to music and then to the mission statement of the organization. Here is the rest of what we did.

First I asked them when they had been creative in their work lives. Since I think all things begin with our understanding of our own experience, I wondered how they thought about creativity. It was clear from their answers that their own view of creativity was so narrow that there was little that they could do as bankers that would fit into a creative framework. It was also clear that their concept of creativity was freewheeling, structureless, and indulgent. In other words, it lacked the rigor that they themselves prize so highly in their own world. By the end of the session we had come to this point of awareness.

Creativity is about:

1. Rattling around in other people's universes. It is done through unexpected partnerships, unexpected connections, unexpected juxtapositions.
2. Embracing paradox and allowing two ideas in your head at the same time. Either/or thinking limits our ability to shift positions, change points of view, see other solutions.
3. Recognizing that creativity and originality are not the same thing. Creativity is in abundance when we understand evolution, diversity, and theme and variation.
4. Framing larger to get out of the personal. And nothing is too small to notice.
5 Turning discomfort to inquiry. Saying no is a wonderful moment of learning, if we understand how to mine our uncomfortableness.
6. Making or adding meaning. Creativity is exercised this way, but we also know that we can subtract meaning to move the parts around.

Toward the end of our session, one of the bankers raised his hand and said omewhat belligerently, "Okay, Liz, I see what you are saying, but at the end of ne day, all the numbers have to add up." And I said, "Right, and on some days, ll the dancers' arms have to end up going in the same direction at the same ime." And so we come to one more item in our list.

. Creativity means hard work, discipline, hours of sifting, sorting, rejecting, and being embarrassed for thinking such ridiculous thoughts that finally precede the really good idea. And sometimes that really good idea is about everyone being the same every time we perform.

Docudance: Nine Short Dances About the Defense Budget and Other Military Matters (1983). Photo: Robert Sugar/AURAS Design.

Politics

Two Assertions

It may look as if the artist is behaving like an activist, when actually all she is doing is building a world in which she can live and work.

It may be useful to reflect on the difference between tradition and convention.

A Return to Inquiry

What do we mean by "social" and what do we mean by "action"? If we change those words to "art in the world," does it change the outcome? What do we mean by art that values being part of the world, or in the world, or affecting the world? Does the meaning of art change if being social and being active are part of art's reason for being? How does moving from purity to subject affect the art and the artist? Why do people think that as soon as there is subject matter there must be a message? Why do people think that art with a message is didactic? What is didactic, and how is calling something that a tactic to silence others? Why do we think that art with a message is only art with a social message? Why do we confuse message with subject matter? Looking at the subject matter of art in your lifetime, why do you have trouble with the oppression stories? Isn't anger a useful byproduct of the theatrical experience? In what role do you put the audience when you tell sad stories, or scary stories, or victim stories? Isn't empathy the major outcome of any art? Without empathy, how can people actually change? What do we mean by change? How does change happen? What is the rehearsal for change? Do we consider the moment of change to be the only moment of value? Who is doing the changing? Why is change valued? What is wrong with contentment? Does merely pointing out a problem make art useful? Is usefulness actually useful? Isn't art useful for itself? Is the problem not with art but with our own patterns around it? And is the problem with patterns not within the pattern but within our unwillingness to rethink? What is wrong with taking refuge in an unthinking approach to whatever we are doing? Could you be confusing unthinking with intuition? Is intuition good in your mind and unthinking bad? Are bad and good constructs that can help us in these situations? Why is making stuff the answer to everything? How come saving the world through art is still something worth believing in? Do you really think that art matters as much as food? And why do I still love the theater?