From Neil Baldwin to Lori Katterhenry, December 09 – April 10

Letters from a Danceaturg **No.1** – December 14, 2009

Dear Lori: You and I decided that I would start writing to you as close to weekly as possible, and that you would then forward my brief letters to the dance majors and student danceaturgs, MSU dance faculty, colleagues working on the African-American Choreography project, and other interested friends -- within and beyond the University.

The goal of these occasional letters – beyond keeping a clear record of teaching and scholarship, documenting workshops by our wonderful visitors, and shining a necessarily-brighter light upon the Dance program – is to move slowly and surely toward a definition of the new "discipline" [and my job description!] you have named "*Danceaturgy*." I am hopeful that by the time of the *Informance* at the end of March, and then the culminating extravaganza of *Dance Works,* we will have collectively accomplished these lofty goals, and had a lot of fun doing it.

I also fervently hope that anybody "out there" in the email world who receives these letters as we go along, and feels moved to respond, will do so -- either to you, or me, or both of us -- and that we can then send their additional comments out to the larger group, and get a huge, "frothy" conversation going. That would please me immeasurably.

Just before sending this letter to you, I emailed our ten student danceaturgs and asked them to take some time over the holiday break to meditate upon the meaning of the dances in the African-American Choreography repertory – Bushache, Stomp, Negro Spirituals, Arbitrary Intersection, Games, and Thin Line. I specified that they think about "meaning" in two ways – from the *inside out*, and from the *outside in*.

It's the second way that (I intuit) may be the first tentative step in our danceaturgy journey. I have sat in on countless rehearsals, workshops, "setting" sessions, and so on, during the past two years that it has been my great privilege to be a "newbie" member of our Department. I have listened to you and Linda and Beth and Nancy and Maxine and Kim and so many of your talented and dedicated faculty, as well as to the visiting choreographers who have worked with our students. I have had many conversations, formal and informal, with people in the Dance program and affiliated with it.

And I have always come away with a renewed and revivified sense of "vocabulary," and what that means both to the dancer, and to me -- the writer. *My* "vocabulary" is expressed in the written language, like this letter I am writing now. This is the language I have been using in everyday life, and also in my publishing life as an author spanning more than three decades. *My* language has passed through many phases and many iterations, depending upon the complexity of the experience I am attempting to convey, the demands of the subject matter, the real or imagined receptivity of the audiences I want to reach, and so on…and on. *My* language is of the mind, the intellect…

…But -- so is the "vocabulary" of dance, with the crucial and essential extension *of and through the body*. I intentionally used a metaphor of the body when I asked the student danceaturgs to look at the dances in which they are performing "at arm's length," as if they were in the audience, gazing up at themselves from a distance, for the first time, without any background information.

What would they see, what would they hear, what would they learn, what would they take away? What happens across that space between the real-time enactment of the dance and the viewer? How is the meaning of the dance communicated, in the fullest sense? What if the audience does not possess the full knowledge of the vocabulary being expressed on stage?

Can they still appreciate and enjoy what they see? Of course, we already know that they can, and they will. But how? How would the dancer him or herself describe that appreciation? How would the dancer combine his/her language of the body with the language of words?

You and I agreed that over the course of the next few months I would write about my research into the **African-American Themes and Choreographers** in our repertory and share that research with everyone. In this way, I want to help all of us, myself included, come to a deeper understanding of the dances to which we are committed with so much time, energy and concentration.

Next week I am going start by transcribing and elaborating upon my notes from observing rehearsal and performance of *Arbitrary Intersection*, my conversations with Erika Pujik, and Robert Battle's exhilarating master class on campus.

Until then, best wishes, and thanks for this great opportunity and adventure!

Yrs., Neil Baldwin
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Letters from a Danceaturg No.2 – January 19, 2010

Dear Lori: Welcome back! Part of the inherent and imperative character of danceaturgy, I am finding, is its immediacy, which should not be surprising, when you consider the art form upon which it is predicated.

Some thoughts on *Arbitrary Intersection* now that it had a chance to shine so luminously at *Works-a-Foot*. It was 'way back on September 25 when you asked me if I would like to meet and talk with Erika Pujic, rehearsal director and founding member of Battleworks Dance Company. While she was on campus rehearsing the Battle piece, Erika stopped by my office, and we had a lovely chat. A little about her background, with which some of our readers might not be familiar: Erika received a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from The Juilliard School where she was the recipient of the Martha Hill Award. Upon graduation, she danced with Gloria Marina's Spanish Dance Ensemble, performing in New Jersey Opera's *Carmen* and she was rehearsal director and principal dancer with Henning Rubsam's

SENSEDANCE for seven years. For the past seventeen years, she has worked closely with Robert Battle, assisting him in the creation of many works; and she has staged his works on schools and companies across the United States.

I asked Erika what major characteristics of Robert's choreography attracted her. Without hesitation, she mentioned "theatricality, intensity, and nonstop physicality…With Robert, you need to be willing to work really hard," Erika told me. She admired the fact that although he sets themes, he then expects variations and differences to come out of them, never the same way twice: "He has a short attention-span! He will show you what he wants, but then it will be up to you, as a dancer, to interpret." When Erika sets or rehearses a composition, she focuses at first on (as she put it), "getting the piece out…then we go through the details, one by one."

We talked discursively about some of the dance excerpts I had watched on YouTube – *Strange Humors*, *The Hunt*, *Takademe*, *Unfold*, and *Battlefields*, among them. To me, at first viewing experience, they possessed the common denominator of finding a rhythm first and foremost, whether through breathing in and out, through willowy arm-wavings, or slapping feet. Erika agreed with that observation.

Indeed, her attitude as a teacher was immediately apparent when I watched her with our students rehearsing *Arbitrary Intersection*. David Lang's haunting score struck me as Philip Glass-like in its fugue-ish nuances, but with a percussive rhythm and quickly-emerging musicality. "No splayed fingers!" Erika called out to our dancers, always looking for the unique combination of precision and sharpness built upon "groundedness." And there's concision in Battle's spare aesthetic. Erika told me he believed "you could say more in twelve minutes than you can in thirty."

On the late afternoon of November 9, it was my privilege (thanks to your kind invitation, Lori) to sit in on an on-campus rehearsal of *Arbitrary Intersection* conducted by Robert assisted by Erika. As I wrote to you the next day, some of which bears repeating, "Robert opened yet another door into the dance realm. He must have asked our students at least twenty times in the hour I was there what they *feel* when they are doing the work. The translation of feeling into action, such that the feeling can be conveyed to the observer – that is the greatest challenge. It requires self-awareness, inwardly; as well as the ability to understand the structure of the work outwardly. The fact is that the language of the body and the language of the page have limited analogies. That is why we need to develop new ways of seeing and describing: danceaturgy."

Isn't it always so that, upon reflection, we tend to intellectualize what we see? Perhaps this cannot be helped. The mind has its intransigent ways. While the rehearsal was in process, I had noticed Robert's repetition of the command that the students "go to that moment" – a moment developed out of, or specific to, a *count* said aloud; and within that firmly-enunciated count, there existed further gradations, somewhat akin to a metric figure in verse. The students were "doing it" (the *moves*…?) over and over, as a way to ingrain the movement vocabulary into their bones and muscles and nerve-endings; as they did so, Robert pushed them again -- to envision a negative space into which they gestured; from that thought, he asked them to carry through the inquiry even further, to seek, and to discern, the *meaning* of repetition.

He spoke, with relation to these repetitive movements, of the "symbolic" (I use those quotes intentionally) relationship of the individual *vis a vis* the group as a whole. The dancer in and of him or herself is a naturally-singular being, but often enveloped by an ensemble, against which, or in *relation* to which, he/she is also moving. That relationship tells its own story of interdependency. I noticed in that respect that Robert did not *proscribe* as much as ask the students: "How are you redefining space?" and "What is the thing you are making [as a craft]?" and, as I indicated before, "What are you feeling about getting

from one place to another?" and then concomitantly, "When you arrive, *are you really there?*" To which he quickly added – to lots of laughs – "I'm not trying to make you crazy!"

With everyone seated and gathered around him and Erika, Robert spoke further to the matter of structure in dance as "meant to frustrate you, so that you can rebel against it." I appreciated the dynamic of that image – as if one were pressing space, not only making one's way, but also breaking down an imaginary barrier. Whatever it takes to get you from A to B is worth the attempt if it is understood and internalized with consideration, not gratuitously. The same principle might equally apply to a given score for a dance, i.e. one would "subvert it by going outside or not 'with' it."

We wanted Robert to address the overriding rubric of this year's repertory, **the African-American theme**. Robert responded in several discrete but related ways: with respect for the tradition "of Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham and Martha Graham *as well as* Alvin Ailey…the more you know, the more you know." He quoted Sarah Vaughan, "I'm not a jazz singer…I am a singer." Then Robert went on in elaboration, as per Maya Angelou who, citing the Roman playwright, Terence, declared, "I am a human being and therefore nothing human can be alien to me." So it was "liberating, rather than defining," to be a black man, Robert said; and, in the end, no matter what form of expression he might have chosen, "Art is always ahead of the game." By that last statement I would like to think that Robert meant the "cultural" game, the game of "identity," wherein a game is not just a mode, it is also a strategy, a place where you make considered moves in a competitive tempo if necessary.

I would further extrapolate from Robert's remarks that – to use his words – "getting to the core of the dance" means the ability to make feelings into movement, to quite literally *embody feelings*. This is the capacious humanity of dance, as Robert Battle sees and lives and thinks it, and whether one is black or white makes no difference.

Happy New Year, NB

Letters from a Danceaturg -- No.3 – January 25, 2010

Dear Lori: Wasn't it wonderful to finally meet with our young danceaturgs as a group last Friday afternoon?

As I looked around the table at Tiana, Kris, Julian, Sharrod, Elaine, Kaitlin, Melissa, and Lauren, and listened to their enthusiastic discussion, I found myself thinking once again about how important it is for dancers *to keep in motion mentally as well as physically*. I hope that will be another benefit of our fledgling program this semester. Once I have a conversation with Linda and Beth about the structure and content of the *Informance*, we will be able to move ahead with the assignments for the danceaturgs. I realize this has all taken quite some time to lift off, but that is always the case with ambitious, new, & dare I say uncharted ideas.

As a matter of fact, the genesis for this whole **African-American choreography project** can be traced to your various statements about the MSU Dance Program having become a place for young people "to learn more than just how to be dancers." You reiterated this point when we had that roundtable in the Dean's Conference Room last October with Maxine, Karen, Sharron, Francine, Beth, and Linda. I distinctly remember when you spoke of dance as being "more than movement in space and time, although that is quite a concept in itself.

The major takeaway for me from the faculty roundtable - beyond that quantum leap - was captured by Sharron's statement about the human experience of dance as overarching any categorizing theme...although we all agree that such themes are necessary when planning a season or a repertory or a curriculum; let us not forget, we *are* functioning within an institution. Sharron said that even if "to define something is to limit it," there is no way around such efforts at definition, as long as we all share the assumptions, i.e., again from Sharron, that "the art form is bigger than our color...excellence has no color."

I was also heartened that day by the many references to "relevance for our community." *Community* means many things to many people, but the motivating drive toward achievning it is essential outreach, beyond the conventions and the confines of the University. Outreach can be as simple as a talkback where the performers exchange ideas with the audience.

Francine talked about "creating critical thinkers" and about the evolution in this dimension of dance here at MSU since her student days here. This, too, is a key concept in the nascent Danceaturgy program - the development of an awareness of dance from the *inside out*, of performers being able to step outside their roles and critique their own actions from an historical perspective.

I tried to articulate that principle last Friday to our students – and how meaningful it can when translated to a non-dancer schooled in other expressive arts. Following that path - as you had said in October - we also had a couple of long conversations about the need for our students to "dig into their artistry," to come to grips with the *how and the why* of performance; that this encounter needs to include contextual knowledge. This spirit inquiry will add to the substance of what is being performed.

Karen pointed out as well at another point in our October meeting that *commitment to the movement* is a useful imperative in both senses of that phrase -- awareness of one's own body; and, further, insights into the intellectual "movement" of the lineage and derivation of a dance.

The word "*choices*" also came up many times last fall, as well as last week - it appears like a constant mantra as I scan my notes from these two meetings...the choice that the dance program has made to present the present African-American repertory determines what we collectively want to say publicly about it. We will have formal public statements (printed and edited program verbiage) and we will also have informal, derived statements (panels, discussions, talkbacks) that will be moderated to encourage our audiences to chime in.

Jay T. was unable to attend that October round table, so we set up a conversation in my office a few weeks later, on November 12th, which I want to tell you about here as part of the "living record." Jay T. and I started out by talking about his piece, *Thin Line*...which, at that point, I had not yet seen; and in response to my questions about how he choreographed such a sprawling work, Jay T. made a tantalizing reference to the "right and left sides of the brain," and the ways in which the stage setup would mirror those biological opposites. Once more - as I have found with so many dancers in the past few years - we discussed *narrative* and the imperative of telling

a story that – to be successful, he said – "has to make sense to the *dancers* in order to make sense to the *audience*."

Jay T. then took that *narrative* idea one more step, offering the comparison of a well-made dance being like a well-made book, wherein "every comma and dash and paragraph has to be in the right place at the right time." In retrospect, a comment that Keith Wiggs made to me after seeing *Thin Line*… in performance now makes a lot more sense. Keith mentioned that even though the vocabulary of the dance was strongly hip-hop based, its unfurling, story line, and shape came across as quite classical in nature to him.

After our enjoyable talk, Jay T. and I walked across the hall for the precious opportunity to watch Dr. Thais Berry, an alumna of the Tamiris Company in the early 1950s, sit in on a rehearsal of *Negro Spirituals* under the guidance of Beth and Linda. To prepare the students in advance, Linda had alerted them, in part, "to warm up [their] feet. Do the ankle exercise I gave you to strengthen the *demi plie* and practice slow motion, mindful walking, where you feel each part of your foot touch the ground and you are aware of transitioning through the foot. In performing the dances, remember to engage the *core* so the whole body is engaged. Practice the weightedness of some of the movements. Practice the transitions – the dynamics, the timing, the change in emotional state in some cases."

I sat next to Dr. Berry, a gracious, warm, stylish lady with – as quickly became evident – a forthright way of offering commentary. What really affected me was the way she naturally referred to things that "Helen" did: "*She* took weight from the floor, took weight from the space," Thais said. "*She* [Helen Tamiris] used to talk about this all the time when we danced…take the floor into the body, keep your internal and external focus!...You must *be* the character before you enter the stage," she went on, "you must *think* about *who you are* and then *carve* the space in front of you!...You must *oppose* the space, as if it were *thick*, not just air…" Demonstrating steps and movements to the students, Beth echoed these sentiments in her own way; as she did so, I instantly felt the same historic resonance as when I had watched Nancy Lushington rehearsing May O'Donnell's *Pursuit of Happiness* last spring. The tradition of *The Modern Dance* (as the great critic John Martin used to call it) stands or falls on the degree to which it is embodied in the current generation. In that regard Beth, like Thais, expressed many ground*ing* and ground*ed* metaphors, figures of speech having to do with the torque of the body. Beth spoke to the students of trying to "imagine carrying logs" and "carrying boulders" and "reaching for your life…for all of humanity" in leading them through *Go Down Moses* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and *Get on Board* and *Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho* and *Little David*.

The earth…the *ground*…gravity… These guiding words and concepts weighted the dance studio on that special afternoon -- in utter counterpoint to ballet.

'Till next time, and thanks for listening, NB
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Letters from a Danceaturg No.4 – February 1, 2010

Dear Lori: All I can say is…*What a week!*

I have just about recovered from the whirlwind visit of the Lula Washington Dance Company to the Kasser Theater and the very special rehearsal of Donald McKayle's 1951 classic, *Games,* in Life Hall last Tuesday afternoon thanks to the inspiring guidance of Tamica Washington-Miller, ably and energetically assisted by Micah Moch and Bernard Brown from the Company.

Tamica put our student dancers through their paces under the watchful eyes of our own Beth McPherson and ACP's Carrie Urbanic. I sat dutifully on the sidelines scribbling in my ever-present black notebook. It soon became evident there was no way I was going to be able to keep up with Tamica's rapid-fire notes: "You need to show more *intention* behind your movements. When Mr. McKayle gets here," she said, "he is going to tell you to 'eat the whole sandwich' right now!" Translation: there can be no holding back; the energy level of the dance has to start at full-throttle and never let go.

Echoing Thais Berry's advice to the *Negro Spirituals* dancers I wrote about last time, Tamica likewise urged our dancers to "find the character – dancers need to be actors, too…you need to bring those children to *life!*" It's a tough challenge. In this instance, we are supposed to be watching five- and six-year-old kids at play on a brownstone-lined city street more than half a century in the past: *Sissy in the bond*; *Pullin' the skiff*; *All's hid*; *Down the Mississippi where the cocoa push*; *Little girl, little girl*; *Short'ning bread*; *I saw a cop* – and so much more.

For the current generation, these street-games and mini-dramas are ancient history. Personal confession: I myself can barely remember a few of them; if I close my eyes right now, I can vaguely hear *Double-dutch* being chanted outside the window of my family's four-room apartment on West 68th Street off Columbus Avenue in NYC all those decades ago…and can remember the girls yelling at me not to *dare* to jump in…but that is another story…

Tamica was clear about where our dancers had to go, theatrically, to "find" these characters. They needed to dig down deep, let the vocalizing pick up on body-movements, allow the accustomed source for their message – their bodies – help make the sing-song/recited words as forthright as possible. "We've got to *hear* it," she said. And that's yet another challenge to young people who are used to letting their bodies speak.

There was one illustrative moment when the dancers were *Kickin the stick* and Tamica recalled a movement that Mr. McKayle had taught her in 1988, a movement that seemed, now, to be different than what was indicated in Beth's notation book. Over time -- it has been six decades since the dance was created -- Mr. McKayle has occasionally ceded to the groups and companies with which he has worked, allowing them to make minor adjustments if suited to time and place. [This is something we can look forward to discussing with him in a couple of weeks when he is here on our campus.]

After both casts had performed to Tamica's constructive critique and measured praise, I took a few minutes to chat with her about all of the McKayle videos I had been watching at the Jerome Robbins Collection of Music and Dance at The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center in NYC, and how I had found one tape of exquisite beauty: A 2002 Dance Pioneers Production for PBS Hawaii called *Heartbeats of a Dancemaker,* containing a great range of McKayle's work including the original *Games*, *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, *Saturday's Child*, *District Storyville*, and many others.

The most compelling excerpt from the hourlong DVD, I told Tamica, was a seven-minute rendition of the attenuated, melancholy *Angelitos Negros*, a solo performed by Marceline Freeman interposed with another superb dancer…"That's me!" Tamica said. Well, Lori, you can imagine my embarrassment. Much to her credit, Tamica laughed and patted me on the shoulder, "Don't worry, I looked a lot different then." I said that *Angelitos Negros* had been edited such that the two distinct solo versions were seamlessly intercut with each other; you watched both unfold simultaneously. Marceline and Tamica had different styles but *Angelitos Negros* was not disjunctive. It came across as an organic, whole work.

I said to Tamica that while I was watching the video and taking notes, I had written a line to remind myself, "Discuss this experiment with McK. - how different interpretations are OK." On the one hand, the choreographer is strictly looking for the right mode faithful to his vision and intent. Yet, on the other hand, he takes personal expressive style into consideration. "He has so much compassion and respect for the artist interpreting his work," I said to Tamica. She agreed.

See you next week, NB

P.S. I just re-read this letter before hitting "send," and notice that today is the first day of African-American History Month. "The Negro in Our History," a chapter in my most recent book, *The American Revelation: Ten Ideals That Shaped Our Country from the Puritans to the Cold War*, is an anecdotal biography of Carter Godwin Woodson (1875-1950), the first child of slaves to receive a PhD from Harvard, and the man who single-handedly and boldly invented Negro History Week in 1926; it was changed to "African-American History Month" in 1976 by President Jimmy Carter during the nation's Bicentennial.

How apt – remembering the overall theme of our dance repertory this spring -- that in 1936, at the annual meeting of the Association of Negro Life and History, Carter Woodson told the then twenty-one year-old John Hope Franklin that he "looked forward to the time when it would not be necessary to set aside a week [or a month] to call attention to the contributions of Negroes. [Woodson] fervently hoped," Dr. Franklin recalled, "that soon, the history of African-Americans would be an integral part of American history."

"…'What we need,'" Carter Woodson declared, "'is not a history of *selected* races or nations, but a history of the *world*, void of national bias, race hate and religious prejudice.'"

http://www.neilbaldwinbooks.com/book-related-information/critical-acclaim

Letters from a Danceaturg No. 5 - February 8, 2010

Dear Lori:

I'll say it right upfront – everybody who reads this letter needs to head over to the Montclair Art Museum immediately to see the gorgeous new exhibition *A Force for Change: African American Art and the Julius Rosenwald Fund* http://www.montclairartmuseum.org/exhibitions_on/ -- more than sixty paintings, sculptures and works on paper by twenty-two Rosenwald Fellows on view until July 25th.

I went to the opening Saturday night and was enthralled for so many reasons. First and foremost, of course, because the art on view dovetails so perfectly with the theme of this year's MSU Dance repertory, *A Celebration of African American Themes and Choreogaphers.* In the culminating room of the MAM exhibition is a tantalizing, 50-second black and white silent video of Pearl Primus, whose *Buschache Etudes* we are presenting at MAM's Family Day on Sunday, March 28th as well as in Dance Works here on campus April 7-11 in Kasser Theater.

Primus was one of hundreds of African American artists and writers who received stipends from the Julius Rosenwald Fund from 1928-1948. Her fellowship enabled Primus to travel to West Africa and study at first-hand the dances of the Watusi, who renamed her "Omowale," which means "child returned home." Here's a link to Beth McPherson's excellent biographical essay on Primus in *Dance Teacher Magazine* http://www.dance-teacher.com/sections/teaching/427.

I commend MAM for the way the curatorial staff have structured the show. Entering from the South Mountain Avenue side, you are immediately and, I would say, *essentially* greeted by a selection of African American works from the Museum's impeccable collection, including unusually self-reflexive photographic offerings by Willie Cole, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems; as well as a compelling array of woodblock prints by Martin Puryear in the Shelby Family Gallery -- limited-edition illustrations for the 1923 Jean Toomer masterpiece, *Cane*, http://www.arionpress.com/catalog/059.htm on loan from JP Morgan Chase.

The tone for the entire Rosenwald show is set by a wall-panel statement by Chief Curator Gail Stavitsky meditating on the subject of "identity."

Gail's essay got me thinking about some of the formal and informal conversations we have been having since last spring here in the Department when we decided upon our African American theme. For me, personally, the theme goes back many decades in my work as an historian of the tapestry that is modern American culture.

For Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932) – Chicago philanthropist and CEO of Sears, Roebuck – consciousness of the severe plight of African Americans began when he read Booker T. Washington's autobiography and mandate for black self-betterment, *Up from Slavery*, published in 1901.

Inspired and urged onward by Washington himself, and driven by the fervent philosophy to (as he put it) "Give while you live," Rosenwald extended his generosity far beyond direct subsidy of African American artists. During the "Great Migration" after World War I, Rosenwald quietly bought up huge plots of real estate along Grand and Prairie Avenues in Chicago and sold them at bargain prices to Southern blacks relocating northward.

And by the late 1920's, one in three rural black students in fifteen Southern states were attending a new school built with Rosenwald money – all in all, more than five thousand schools were eventually constructed.

Identity and *education*: a powerful link that informed my meanderings through the exhibition past the sinuous *Blackberry Woman* bronze by Richmond Barthe; the dreamlike, bluish-hazed *Harriet Tubman* oil by Aaron Douglas; the vibrant Jacob Lawrence suite of lithographs on *The Legend of John Brown;* Lamar Baker's fanciful study of black angels in workers' overalls, *Ezekiel Saw the Wheel;* the crowded study of *Penn Station at War Time* by Joseph Delaney with its familiar, undulating echoes of his great teacher, Thomas Hart Benton; the stark linoleum cuts by Elizabeth Catlett of *The Negro Woman* laboring in the fields; Gilbert Olmstead's gripping vernacular black and white photographic prints of anonymous citizens caught in the midst of daily life – and so much more.

Although we can, and should, become mindful of the historical story and *identity* of others through studying the visual arts and dance, we must also be careful to avoid limiting identity to a *category*. I have tried in this short letter to give you a hint of the subject-matter and the basic social context of the exhibition, as my primary goal is to encourage everyone to visit MAM.

Transcending what the pictures and photographs and sculptures were *about,* I was sensually stimulated by the sheer force of their dynamism. I moved through and viewed the art at leisure, and my personal knowledge helped me appreciate it all the more. However, now, in reflection, what I am grateful for is the creative energy the artworks engendered within me.

It does not matter if I cannot ever come to terms with the heart of African American identity. I agree now, even more, with what our choreographical colleagues have been saying about "The Modern Dance" as applied similarly to the modern visual arts and literature: You must make as honest and direct an effort as you possibly can to understand *why* the work was made, and also try to internalize *what* it is trying to say, in your own words. These are the first steps toward appreciating the inextricable connection between *identity and education*.

'Till next time, and looking forward to meeting **Donald McKayle** this coming **Friday, February 12, at noon, in LI 123 Dance Studio** – everyone's invited – come early – seating is limited.

Yours, NB

Letters from a Danceaturg No.6 - February 15, 2010

Dear Lori:

I was sitting in the bleachers of Life Hall Room 123 Dance Studio watching Donald McKayle setting his masterpiece *Games* on our students this past weekend when a line from a 1904 poem by W.B.Yeats, *Adam's Curse,* leaped unsolicited into my head: "We must labor to be beautiful." A minute later, McKayle slowly arose from his chair and ambled out among the perspiring students who were breathing heavily with their hands on their hips. He peered over his tinted glasses, stared at them, and said, "I am going to make you do this until you get it right, so don't waste my time."

I could not help chuckling to myself. Although his message was tough, his voice was low and kindly. "You *get* me? You understand what I'm *saying* to you?" he asked the gathered crowd. "Yes, sir" they responded meekly. "*What?* I can't *hear* you!" "*Yes!*" they called out as one – to which McKayle said, "Well. *Thank* you," and returned to his seat.

McKayle told me several times over the past three days that he "didn't dance any more," but that depends upon one's definition of "dance." McKayle danced -- with his lovely, melodious voice and his superbly gestural arms and hands, and his swaying torso – hardly able to remain on the sidelines dispensing words of wisdom for hours and hours at a time, his unquenchable metabolism on one unfaltering level.

We had in hand the Labanotated score from the 1970s; we had access to videos of this six-decades old work (McKayle was twenty when began assembling childrens' street songs from research in the Library of Congress archives); we had Lula and Tamica Washington's ideas and input; we had Beth McPherson's constant scholarly and practical guidance; and Robin Hoffman from the DNB feverishly writing nonstop (with three extra sharpened pencils stuck into her swept-up hair).

When the Master himself arrived at MSU and took charge, it wasn't long before the choreographic ground began to shift. Not half an hour into the first session, McKayle called out "*Zero* contractions!" whereas the Graham technique was assumed to be integral to the piece, based upon past observations. Here was a man who honed in on each and every nuance, every beat (as well as the silences between beats, the omnipresent rhythm under everything), and every extension. Walking among the students, he cajoled and coaxed and revealed his true dance captain mentality.

"What's *happening* with you?" McKayle asked Josh. "Why did you *do* that?" he asked Tiana. "Try to remember everything I have just told you," he said to Carlos. "I never watched you but *now* I'm watching you," he warned Lisa. "What are you *thinking*? Let me see some *attitude!*" he demanded of Julian. "You can't riff it without getting it," he said to Nick. "Don't tell me it's hard – I know it!" he admonished Greg. "Scream like you're in terror," he told Arielle. "I have to hear *every word*," he told Sandy and Jackie, the singers.

And on many occasions McKayle would turn to the cast who were not rehearsing, and sharply remind them to pay attention to those who were: "You are part of an *ensemble*," McKayle said. "You have to realize that you are a *group*! Everybody has an action that is concurrent. I have to *see this dance in your bodies* otherwise the audience will not understand."

I had another epiphany while watching him rehearse a very intricate Double-Dutch jump-rope sequence. There was no *actual* rope, of course; it needed to be a "rope of the imagination." This placed additional responsibility upon two of the girls; their pantomime had to be exactly accurate: which hand they were holding the rope and how they switched the two interweaving ropes when the swirling reached its height. The jumper had to keep up her pace against the increasing velocity of the invisible rope at her feet, or they would become entangled – well, not *really* entangled…but it had to appear that way.

Over and over and over again, McKayle asked the students to go through the motions with an extreme sense of the reality of it all. "You need to act!" he said, "*A – C – T*! I need to believe what I'm seeing. Look sassy!"

This imposition extended to the street songs. He broke them down into phrases and single words and interrogated the kids about their meanings, many of which were archaic and alien; but McKayle expected them to know what they were singing about, otherwise, how could they enact the narrative?

"Dance is my medium and theatre is my home," he wrote in a 1965 essay, *The Act of Theatre.* Bearing witness to this statement so many decades later, it comes vibrantly to life. Through dance, McKayle tells a story, and in the case of *Games,* it has a beginning, middle and end, parts I, II and III: *Play, Hunger, Terror.* The medium of dance possesses its vocabulary suited to the personality of the inventor/choreographer. Our students have been studying this system of communication, preparing to the best of their ability to convey it to an audience.

When the choreographer intervenes, he brings with him, in his DNA, the historical record built up since youth in East Harlem and the Bronx, and memories of those brownstone-lined streets. He observes the new generation portraying his remembered language and then – despite so-called "notations" and "interpretations" of bygone years, begins anew. That's the theatre of it all with McKayle's work, and I see it, now that I have literally *seen* it: He is at most at home emotionally when he is out there, quite literally in action.

The theatricality of theatre – the element that requires an audience for it to come alive – that's what Donald McKayle thrives upon. In this respect he himself is ageless and this work possesses a timeless quality, propelled forward into the future, not only by momentum of the accretions of the past, but also by the sheer fact that our dancers are the same age as McKayle was when he made *Games*.

All of the italicized words in this short letter do not do justice to the stratospheric energy that filled our dance studio for the past three days. What a thrill…and we have it *all* on tape!

Yours, Neil

Letters from a Danceaturg No.7 – February 22, 2010

Dear Lori: Lisa and Carlos had been asking me to watch them rehearse their duet for ACDF. I told them I would be happy to do so but that, of course, I am not a dance teacher. Oh yes, they said, they wanted "another pair of eyes" and "another perspective" on their work.

With that understanding, I met them in Room 125 last Wednesday at 5:30. There were a few other students sitting against the mirrored wall – and, lo and behold! -- Ruth Clark was there, too.

Their dance was focused, erotic, narrative, structurally well-thought out, tracing what (to me) was the course of a romantic relationship, ups and downs and emotional vicissitudes, in the course of about six minutes.

When it was over, Lisa and Carlos and Ruth went out into the lobby to debrief, and I followed along, resolving to keep quiet and let Ruth speak first, as the professional dancer who has taught here at MSU for so many years.

Ruth immediately zeroed in to critique two moments in the dance I had particularly enjoyed. The first was a loud, wordless shout that burst forth about halfway through the piece and startled me; the second was the deliberately down to earth manner in which Lisa and Carlos walked off the "stage" at the end, arm in arm, as if no longer dancing.

"Critique" is not quite the right word to describe what Ruth did. Better to say she pointed out these moments interrogatively, wondering if the dancers were fully aware of the implications of their "choices" (her word); these were two dramatic and deliberate aspects of the dance that temporarily jolted the viewer outside the more comprehensible range of the piece. The shout she found disjunctive; the walk-off she found "pedestrian" (also her word), by which Ruth meant, in the literal sense, devoid of dance movement – was that what they really wanted to do or say?

I felt it was my turn to chime in, and came right out and said I *liked* both instances. From a narrative – storytelling -- point of view they worked for me and were not incongruous or overly-mannered. I said that I had seen the dance as the progressive story of two people going through a succession of conflicting feelings, then ultimately finding resolution.

I was impressed at the way Lisa and Carlos took in and responded to commentary by Ruth and me. They looked us in the eyes as we spoke and nodded appreciatively, taking our ideas under advisement. Ruth insisted she was not telling them to make any changes, merely indicating the "choices" as noteworthy.

They believed the shout was integral to the piece. For the walk-off, they got up from their chairs and reworked it before our eyes; it still marked the end of the drama but in a graceful, less mundane manner. They made it seem as if they were walking down the proverbial aisle, and they looked at each other while walking – both touches advised by Ruth to great advantage.

Two days later, on Friday, I sat down with Linda Roberts to talk about kinesthetic awareness – at my request. This concept had been preoccupying me for some time, ever since Linda first

brought it up with regard to her primary pedagogical goals in working with dancers over many decades.

I wanted to be certain that I understood this most fundamental principle of the dance in my own way. I remarked to Linda upon the two different responses that Ruth Clark and I had had – she was watching Lisa and Carlos as a dancer herself, and therefore her observations had to do with expressive movements being utilized, and to what effect; whereas, I looked for the "story," and was satisfied I had found it: the narrative property of the duet made it beautiful in my eyes.

Linda told me to think about kinesthetic awareness as embodied cogitation, to visualize the body in and of itself as a medium through which feelings are intimated, understood, then externalized by the dancer. In Laban-based instruction, which is one of Ruth's specialties as well, the "core" is the physical wellspring for these emanating feelings.

We spoke of technique as distinguished from style in this regard. I recalled my conversations with Nancy Lushington last year about how she internalized May O'Donnell's technique and demonstratively transferred what she had learned directly from May over to the students – as Denise Vale had done the prior year, when she took Martha Graham's imperatives and passed them along during *Steps in the Street*.

This kind of analogy, I can understand, translates well into the medium of writing, where I am conversant. Linda assured me this was a valid analogy -- up to a point. The difficulty and challenge for the emerging dancer is to be able to ascertain that her *emotional* goal has been reached via a physical *motion*. To me, upon reflection, this would be the most difficult step, because to avoid tipping over into self-consciousness, the dancer wants to avoid thinking about meaning.

Perhaps that is why dancers rehearse so long and so repetititively. It helps explain why confusion comes in when a dancer has learned a dance in a certain fashion and then a different scheme of motion "not in her body" is superimposed.

Dances that (ostensibly) do not "tell a story" – like *Arbitrary Intersection* -- still possess inherent continuity because there is a beginning, middle and end to every dramatic presentation regardless of medium.

The discipline of learning a dance enlists all the faculties of mind *and* body – mind *with* body, one should say; and the intellect. For example, as Linda and I discussed, knowing Martha Graham's political attitude toward the Spanish Civil War, and her professed ambivalence when it came to using "Art" as a platform for "politics," will result in putting across a more powerful, cognizant version of *Steps.*

Dance history must likewise become embodied. Dance history, in its most fulfilling application, should be kinesthetic.

Till next time, Yours, NB

Letters from a Danceaturg No.8 – March 1, 2010

Dear Lori: I would imagine that everyone -- especially Maxine Steinman, Nicole Smith, and our student dancers and choreographers -- is in a state of heightened awareness right now, as the Department gears up for *Dance Collage*, opening this Wednesday night at 7:30 in Memorial Auditorium and continuing through the weekend http://www.peakperfs.org/. I certainly am eager to attend this extravaganza, and, with all of the excitement swirling around the Dance program this spring, I am sure you will have full houses.

While you were away last week at ACDF – *congratulations again* on all of the successes; and I look forward to watching Lisa and Carlos perform *Marino* at Dance Collage – I finally had an opportunity to sit down with Karen Love http://www.umojadance.com/index1.shtml and talk with her about Pearl Primus http://www.dance-teacher.com/sections/teaching/427 and the *Buschasche Etudes*. [I am in a "linking mood" today, only because I want all of our readers to find out more about Karen's Umoja Dance Company; and to read Beth McPherson's fine essay on Pearl Primus.]

I knew that Karen was a Montclair High School and MSU graduate, class of '93, that she founded Umoja the same year, and the company is still going strong. What I didn't know was that, thanks to a scholarship while she was an undergraduate in the MSU dance program, Karen was able to study with Pearl Primus herself for two summers. At that time, in the early '90's, Primus had just been named the first ADF recipient of the Balasaraswati/Joy Ann Dewey Beinecke Chair for Distinguished Teaching.

I asked Karen to tell me about the major principles of dance she had learned from her intensive time with Primus. Her unhesitating first answer was, "knowing the power of the second position." Indeed, so much of Primus' athletic dynamism comes from her stratospheric leaps, and so much of the essential in African dance emanates from the springing thighs, muscles pressing the feet planted into the ground, the earth, in preparation for what Primus called "climbing into the air," the ascent.

What would be the second principle? Karen said it was "to be mindful of your presence on stage." This is rooted 'way back in time, to the earliest reviews of Primus' performances. A correspondent for *Time Magazine* who saw her at Jacob's Pillow in the summer of 1947, when she was twenty-eight years old, raved about Primus' "stomping dignity" and her "pantherlike power and grace…With muscled shoulders hunched over bended knees, her powerful arms pounding, her whole body dynamically dramatic, everything about her was directed downward with terrible force."

Four decades later, Primus returned to Jacob's Pillow and gave a pre-show interview to Spider Kedelsky, where she began by systematically explaining the symbolic importance of every bangle on her wrists, her tribal gown, the tilt and wrap of her headdress, and even the ceremonial fan she languidly waved to and fro – all while remaining seated, backbone straight, eyes wide and liquidly emotional as she spoke of her ancestors and thanked them for allowing her to be there.

As Karen spoke to me of the influence of Pearl Primus upon her own style, just as Donald McKayle also did when he was on campus, I once again had that flash of insight -- an immutable tradition, beginning with the timeless tribal dances of "Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana, Angola, Cameroon, Senegal and Zaire," (as Beth McPherson's essay points out) that Primus joined and learned through her Rosenwald Fellowship; extending that through-line into teaching during the final years of her life; then Karen's biological and intellectual assumption of that spirit; now passing *Buschasche* along to our students with the percussive beat of Glen Fittin.

There was one more point Karen wanted to make with respect to this succession of lessons from Primus, and she did so while hitting her fists against the arms of the chair: "Get it *right*…No matter how many times you have to do it…Dance like your life depends upon it!" To Karen, as it was to Pearl Primus, every dance is meant to be done "full out…I guess I am 'old school' in that way," she said. "The rehearsal process, to me, is all about getting the dance into your body…Just like life-lessons that can *only be learned in one way*."

Now I was no longer sure who was echoing whom. As Karen spoke, the words of Pearl Primus that I had heard and seen in old video and film footage came drifting into my mind. "I am not preaching a 'back to Africa' movement," Primus told the *Time* interviewer. "I am simply trying to show the Negro his African heritage and make him see that his culture has a dignity and a strength."

At the 92nd Street "Y," in February 1953, Primus said to Walter Terry that "meaning is key to the clarity of a dance. You cannot project *beyond* yourself unless you understand what is going on *within* yourself…If you understand what you are doing, then the movement will carry you forward…The heritage will speak through you as an individual."

"Dance is *part of* life," she declared at Jacob's Pillow, "not *apart from* life."

Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad; brought to America as a child; educated at Hunter College with the original goal of becoming a physician; enrolling in Sophie Maslow's and Jane Dudley's Modern Dance classes, and then teaching at the New Dance Group; performing at Café Society Downtown; touring with the musical *Show Boat* and then touring the South as a migrant worker; founding a school of "Primal Dance" with her husband, Percival Borde, in NYC; performing throughout Africa into the 1960s; traveling to Barbados in the summers to research the Spiritual Baptists; completing her doctorate in anthropology at NYU; teaching at, and much-honored by, various universities until her death in 1994…

…"Pearl Primus changed my life. She put everything into perspective at a time I needed it the most," said Karen Love.

'Till next time, NB

Letters from a Danceaturg No.9 – March 8, 2010

Dear Lori: There was a tremendous amount happening onstage at *Dance Collage* this week, and I will get to all of that in a moment. I also learned a lot from what was going on around me in the audience on Wednesday night, since I sat with you, Linda Roberts, Jay T. Jenkins, Lynne Grossman and Nancy Lushington and "eavesdropped" on your conversations.

After each dance in the program, in the brief interval before the lights went down again for the next number, you all talked among yourselves about the performance and the students. You knew each and every student by name – but far more than that. You knew of their trials and tribulations, their strengths and weaknesses, what frustrated you about their abilities and, of course, what amazed and surprised you about their multiplicity of talents. They are blessed to have such intent and caring mentors and teachers.

I'm looking at my pencil notes on the program.
Each dance has one or two words scrawled next to it:
Intricacies by Nancy Lushington - "ruminative"
Mosaic Mind by J.P.Ferreri – "anarchy"
Inner Voice by Kimberly Jackson and Lauren Panzica – "complex"
Without Words by Nicole Smith – "rag dolls"
Decadence and Justice for All by Nicole Sakovsky – "intellectual"
Inside the External by Tiana Taylor – "surprising"
Marino by Carlos Gonzalez and Lisa Greenberg – "genius"
Cycle of Negative Thought Patterns by Maxine Steinman – "dreamlike"
8 by Nora Abdel-Aziz – "poetic"
Strange Fruit by Arielle Taylor – "sinister"
Disambiguation by Alexandra Williamson – "Busby Berkeley"
Judged by Nicole Sakovsky and Tiana Taylor – "sparse"
Juxtaposition by Meghan Gardner and Francesca Perini – "ambitious"

Needless to say, one-word taglines do not do justice to the work…and yet, it is important to note that while each was different in its own way, there was a thread between all; and that can be attributed to Maxine Steinman's artistic direction. Several of the students, when asked, offhandedly told me that she picked the first one and the last one right away and then "just filled in" with the rest. I find that hard to accept even if it is true on a conscious level. I have not discussed this with Maxine, but I am quite familiar by now with her aesthetic, and also with her narrative flow, in the finest sense of the word. She is a choreographer who revels in the individual and collective undulations of the human body and human thought. She likes to develop shapes that reflect body language and its outcomes and traces here and there across the stage. She likes to begin out of semi-chaos and/or fluidity, become immersed in disparate acrobatics, then re-align her dancers for the conclusion.

The succession of *Dance Collage* reflected this mentality and also, as I further discussed with several of the dance instructors recently, their powerful influence. How could this not be the case? I recall, as a young poet in creative writing workshops in college, teachers would constantly be urging me onward to "find my voice," realizing at the same time that in order to do

so, a student must write or dance or paint or play her or his way *through* the stylistic voices of others. You cannot find your own voice by parachuting directly downward into the clearing of distinctiveness. You need to hack your way through the dense, resistant forest until you come across the sun-drenched opening in the foliage.

Another common denominator to *Dance Collage*, in that regard, was that all of the students definitely had *something to say*. There were more ideas *per se* being thrown out and about on the stage of Mem Aud than one could possibly inventory. Many of the ideas were tentative intellectually and bold physically. Others were blatant physically but half-formed mentally. That was fine with me. I was very pleased to see the variety of enacted modes of presentation.

I started leafing through the popular anthology *What Is Dance?* this weekend. I noticed in just randomly flipping the pages how often the word "meaning" comes up. I know it has emerged a lot in my own writing to you these past months. I am grappling with how movement becomes invested with meaning. I understand the consciousness of the dancer that is called upon to find significance in the motion of a limb or the tilt of one's head. I understand the requisite of the choreographer who is looking to evince that movement for a specific reason.

But then what? Again, to regress to my own idiom (where I feel safer), I can be deliberate and methodical in placing one word after another, along the pages, until I feel that my message is down in words. But -- I cannot go into the mind of the reader and vouchsafe what resides there.

And when I am teaching a work of literature in my classes, I never, ever act as if I have the one and only meaning in my head, and am just waiting around for somebody out there to guess what it is, and therefore figure out the "right" answer. We cannot determine the intent of the original author; even if he or she were there in the classroom with us, the problem of "intent" is that it is a moving target with subtexts and nuances. It is not monolithic. It is situational, coming out of an informing mood or disposition that goes away as easily as it came.

Intent by definition demands to be deciphered. It has something to do with what makes us feel satisfied in ourselves – that's the pleasure of witnessing art, performance or otherwise.

Dance would not be as much fun if these issues were clear or these questions were readily-answered!

'Till soon, NB

Letters from a Danceaturg No.10 – March 22, 2010

Dear Lori: Judging from the hesitant crocuses struggling to be recognized along the side of my yard, spring is finally here (it would seem), and the next two weeks will be a veritable surge of dance: Sunday March 28th is Family Day at the Montclair Art Museum, where our students will perform selections from the African-American choreography repertory, and Beth McPherson will speak about Pearl Primus http://showcase.njn.net/EventDetail.aspx?eventID=ae92b5ee-4824-4731-a1cd-7af43100da52; the departmental Informance takes place on Wednesday, March 31st at 2:30 pm in Life Hall, and our student danceaturgs will take front and center; then, starting

on the evening of Wednesday, April 7 and running through Sunday April 11, *Danceworks* presents the *Celebration of African-American Choreographers and Themes* in Kasser Theater, including a panel discussion (4/9) and a special interview on stage with Robert Battle following the 4/10 performance http://www.montclair.edu/news/article.php?ArticleID=5241.

Over the break I had a wonderful opportunity to reflect upon our tumultuous and brilliant year thus far; I will talk about that when we are truly closer to the end of the term. Driven by those thoughts, I turned my attention to a book which I would like to recommend to you and all of our readers -- perhaps it is familiar to some of them. It's called *Feeling and Form,* by the American philosopher Susanne K. Langer (1895-1985), first published in 1953 by Scribner's. Much to my surprise, it is out of print; but can be found in the Library and of course on Amazon and other sites.

Born and raised in NYC of prosperous German-Jewish immigrant parents, Susanne Knauth as a child played the piano and the cello, wrote poems and illustrated her own fairy tales, put on plays with her brothers and sisters for family and friends, learned to speak French, attended private school and went to Radcliffe College, where she came under the influence of her professor, the logician Henry Sheffer. She had a particular affection for taking long walks in the woods during which, over the course of years, she dreamt up and developed complex theories of the unconscious mind and its concoction of symbols.

I mention these details because even though Ms. Langer began her academic training in symbolic logic, she eventually and most productively turned to an immersion in the hows and whys and wherefores of artistic production and perception – including dance.

In *Feeling and Form*, her most accessible work, she addresses the commonalities among all the arts, a subject which -- as you know from our conversations -- is of obsessive interest to me. As I read this book, I got the uncanny feeling that it had been waiting out there for me to discover it; and to give credit where due, if I had not read excerpts from it on pp. 28-45 of *What Is Dance?* which Linda Roberts loaned to me, that discovery never would have happened. Langer quotes Mary Wigman right at the beginning of her essay – "A meaningless gesture is abhorrent to me." [Aha, I thought, so *that's* why Linda likes *What Is Dance?* so much.]

How many times have I sat in on rehearsals this year and heard the dance faculty, as well as our visiting choreographers, stop and challenge our dancers to find the meaning – or even to *define* the meaning, in what they are doing? And yet, as Langer discusses so compellingly in *Feeling and Form* – and as I have often talked about in my drama and writing classes, it's not as if the meaning is buried or concealed inside the work of art and all we have to do is excavate it out. There is a gap between the intention of the original artist and the interpretation of those of us who follow, years and centuries later. And as Langer also states, dance is the most difficult form within which to apply this dynamic, because it is nonverbal and we, as human beings, are acculturated to finding words to describe actions.

"Philosophy of art," she writes, "should begin in the *studio*." How true, and how central to the evolving principles of danceaturgy, wherein we ask our students to generate cogent critique out of the rigors of performance training. We learn by doing and find expression through action. "To

construct a theory," Langer goes on, "we must find *implications*." I love this statement because it says that theories should not dwell in the realm of the abstract. They should, rather, be *drawn from* practice. Practice gives theories life and vitality. Hence the title of her book. Form and feeling are not opposites; no – they are part of an organic continuum.

As you and I have also discussed many times, therefore, "dance history" is joined at the hip (so to speak) with aesthetic style. The more you learn about the context of what you are dancing, the more persuasive and believable and credible your dance will be. "A work of art," Langer writes in Chapter Three, *The Symbol of Feeling*, "expresses…the life of the society from which it stems…And besides all these things, it is sure to express the unconscious wishes of its author [or choreographer]." That's why so much of what we witnessed at *Dance Collage* was so powerful.

Further along, she says that "the space in which we live and act is *not* what is treated in art at all." In contradistinction, she brings up the concept of "virtual space." With reference to dance this is a bit more complex but well worth the effort. Langer tells us that the space defined through dance is a constructed space – the dancer consciously tracing boundaries for herself and then by implication for an audience, guiding the observer in predetermined directions. Once one learns that such a "virtual space" possesses mystical and ineffable properties -- similar to those in a painting by Cezanne, for example -- then the dance truly comes alive.

Follow this link to an essay in the *Dictionary of National Biography* for a lot more information on Susanne K. Langer, a philosopher who has much to teach those of us in the dance universe http://www.huthsteiner.org/Knauth/Susanne.Knath.Langer_Bio_DLB.pdf

'Till next time, NB

Letters from a Danceaturg – No. 11 – April 5th, 2010

Dear Lori:
There has been a flow of emails and congratulatory greetings since our ***Informance*** on Wednesday. We are all so proud of our student danceaturgs. As I said to Melissa Sande in the lobby of Life Hall the other day, "this is just the beginning." In that spirit, I am sending my prepared remarks from the Informance with added commentary – notes taken during the session. In the interest of time during the two-hour event, I was not able to deliver all of my thoughts for each dance; I hope this version will be of interest to you and the faculty and students and our faithful cadre of readers.

With each passing year, watching all of your shows, and sitting in on your rehearsals, I learn more about "The Modern Dance." I am grateful to Lori, Linda, Beth, Nancy, and the entire dance faculty, and all of *you*, the students past, present and future, for welcoming me into this program and teaching me so much about what you do with such passion and dedication. The letters I have written to Lori since last December that are posted on the big bulletin board and the lengthy

research papers I have written for the past two years of Informances represent a fraction of what I have learned.
Before I introduce the African-American choreographic repertory and you hear from our "***danceaturgs***," I want to share a few insights.
First of all, I have learned that movement must have meaning. The dancer must understand her or his *gesture* in much the same way that the poet understands metaphor.
Meaning in dance begins with many sources, like streams leading toward a river, brought to bear *in the dancer's body* – including -- but not exclusively -- social context, that is, history – or "*history history*," as Lori calls it, as distinct from only "dance history"; the choreographer's intent, which is not always consistent, as we learned from Donald McKayle; and finding a personal, emotional connection to the material – which we are going to hear more about in a moment.
I have learned that the successful grasp of meaning in the *audience* member – the *spectator*, happens when the dancer touches a nerve, and there's a spontaneous internal reaction, unlike the deliberate, repetitive rehearsal process. This is an *intuitive and subjective* moment that cannot be predicted or planned.
I have learned that dance is different from the representational modern arts I grew up with and became used to, reading a lot of books and going to a lot of museums -- like poetry and literature, painting and photography -- because the *art work* of the dance itself is traced during a specific period of *time* and *made* in a special *space*, but then concludes by becoming gone from view.
That is why, as you may have noticed in my letters and other writings for the past three seasons, I find myself using familiar terms from literature and art, but sooner or later they fall short.
And *that* is why we invented "***danceaturgy*** " -- out of the conviction that *you* all, as the student performers who already possess the *vocabulary* of dance, should be free to step out of your roles and give voice to the unique words that dance inspires *about itself.*

I came across an email from Linda, when we were formulating our ideas for the Informance, and she wrote this: "I keep trying to look at the Informance as an educationally-enriching experience for the dance majors, not so much for the general public. In this more intimate atmosphere I hope students will feel free to voice their questions and feelings….Can it be that we only have two *hours*, and not two *weeks*?"
On with the show.

Our first performance is an excerpt from ***Negro Spirituals***, by Helen Tamiris, staged by Beth McPherson and rehearsed by Beth and by Linda Roberts. The dances were created over a thirteen-year period beginning in 1928, when Tamiris was 26 years old. She was born Helen Becker of immigrant Jewish parents on the lower east side of NYC, went on to dance for the Metropolitan Opera Ballet, and was, throughout her career, an outspoken rebel and a socially-conscious activist and advocate for the downtrodden. [As a matter of fact, "Tamiris" was actually the name of a powerful Amazon-like Queen of Persia.]
Here is what she wrote in the concert program for the first performance of *Negro Spirituals* – [which include Go Down, Moses; Swing Low, Sweet Chariot; Git on Board; Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and Little David play on your Harp.] Tamiris said, "Art is international, but the artist is a product of a nationality…There are no general rules. Each original work of art creates its own code."

What has impressed me about these poignant dances is the way in which struggle is an integral part of each one, in a variety of ways – especially the long and difficult struggle of a people to be liberated, made dramatically clear in the tensions of the dancers' bodies. And as I said to Lori the other day, there is something very special about listening to the "old-fashioned" words being sung in an old-fashioned way that transports you back in time, so that you feel as if you are living on two separate planes at once.

Our next performance is an excerpt from ***Bushasche Etude*** by Pearl Primus, as rehearsed by Karen Love. The dance was originally performed in 1949 upon Primus' return from her first trip to Africa as a Rosenwald Fellow, which eventually led to her earning a PhD thirty years later at the age of 59. This Etude was excerpted in 2003. You will hear Lauren and Melissa talk in a moment about this collective and very *tribal* dance drawn from Primus' first-hand anthropological experience, which made it even more challenging to "translate" into the bodies of modern students.

As Beth McPherson, in her excellent published essay, quotes Primus, "When I dance, I am dancing as a human being, but a human being who has African roots…My life has been like travelling up a river," Primus told an interviewer, "and when I hear singing around the bend, around the bend I would go."

But – Pearl Primus *also* said -- and I urge you to bear this in mind as you watch the dance, "My body is built for heavy stomping, powerful dignity….Somewhere, some time," she predicted, as a young dancer just starting out, and you all will relate to this, "I hope to be able to say, this is *my expression,* this is what *I* have to say."

Bushasche thus *also* comes to us on many levels: as a study in traditional African rhythms, an authentic expression taken directly from primitive village life, a personal statement by its creator about her future -- *and* a strenuous exercise in group performance.

Our next performance is an excerpt from ***Games*** by the 80-year-old living legend of American dance, Donald McKayle, rehearsed by Beth McPherson and Lonne Moretton. You heard from Mr. McKayle when he visited us in February that he was inspired to become a dancer as a boy growing up in NYC when he saw Pearl Primus perform. That is a great connection to the Primus dance we just witnessed, and another example of how dance tradition is personally constructed over time and generations.

McKayle created and choreographed *GAMES* in 1951, when he was twenty years old. As he also said when he was here, "I didn't know you had to learn how to dance before you could choreograph!" The piece is based upon syncopated rhymes, rhythms and songs from vintage and mid-century childrens' street games. *GAMES* is divided into three parts, reflecting the varying moods of the childrens' lives: *Play*, *Hunger,* and, yes, *Terror.*

While Mr. McKayle was setting this dance here in this very room, second by second, detail by detail, he also expressed his belief in adapting *Games* to the circumstances within which he finds himself, and the specific dancers he is working with. He said, many times, words to the effect of "I made this dance and I know how it is supposed to go," and these momentary opinions often departed from the videos we had watched, as well as from the old Labanotated score Beth and the dancers were working with, while a *new* score for *Games* was written here at MSU during those three memorable days in February.

Our next performance is an excerpt from **Bitter Tongue, *Stomp Dance*,** created in 1989 by Jawole [Ja *WO* lay] Willa Jo Zollar, the artistic director of Urban Bush Women. The dance was set on our students by Christine King, associate artistic director of UBW, assisted by Francine Sheffield and Samantha Speis; and the rehearsal director is Lynne Grossman.
Urban Bush Women was founded in 1984, by Jawole, a Florida State University MFA [just like LK here at MSU], and is headquartered in Brooklyn. Jawole is very forthright about the mission of her company, a group that moves easily from stripped-down modern style, to African ritual, Caribbean, hip hop, street games, club dancing, *a capella* singing [*and yelling]*, on-stage percussion, and improvisation. "What I know," Jawole says, "is my history as an African-American woman…and the African idea is that you celebrate yourself through movement."
It's important to note, as we watch the frustration and verbal anger vented in *Stomp Dance,* that when she hires dancers for her company, Jawole says she looks for "people who are comfortable bringing their *individuality* to the table," but *likewise* she wants to see people who are "vulnerable and vested in the *group*."
Another important theme to keep in mind during *Stomp Dance* is the way the name of the company, *Urban Bush Women*, reflects its motivation: "The *"bush"* represents the deep, tangled forest, like how I grew up, in the inner city," Jawole says, "So as a child, I was also in a rough, thickly-populated place. But people still tried to make gardens out of it. And *when they did, it became something else entirely.*"

Our next performance is an excerpt from ***Arbitrary Intersection*** created in 1989 by Robert Battle. The rehearsal directors were Robert's long-time friend and colleague, Erika Pujik, from Battleworks Dance Company, and Lori Katterhenry. Robert Battle is a graduate of the Juilliard School, where he received the Princess Grace Fellowship and the Martha Hill Prize. He danced with David Parsons' Company for seven years until founding Battleworks in 2002.

Arbitrary Intersection as you all know was selected to perform at the recent ACDF Gala. This is a very different dance from the ones you have seen thus far. In one rehearsal I watched, Lori described the movement as "precise up top and oceanic below…It has to have that feeling of *undertow*," she said by way of further direction.
Mary Pat Henry, dean of the University of Missouri at Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance, recently described Robert Battle's choreography as possessed with "great physicality and a beautiful sense of abandon." Kris Vandeventer, one of our danceaturgs, as you will hear, would agree with both these ideas. Kris writes of "gasping for breath" at the conclusion of a "full out" performance of *Arbitrary Intersection*.
To me, this geometric and rhythmic piece at times seems to go *against* the music, by which I mean -- to adapt Lori's metaphor -- it's as if the dancers are fighting an invisible current. When Robert was here in November for a rehearsal, he spoke of "jarring conflict" as essential to his work. As often as he encouraged our dancers to "go toward the negative space," he also constantly asked them "what they were *feeling* about" that same space.

And now (last, but definitely not least), we will watch an excerpt from ***Thin Line…The journey between creativity and madness*,** created in 2009 by our very own Jay T. Jenkins. Jay T. and I had spoken to each other now and then in passing; but late last fall he stopped by my office for an informative talk, during which he gave me an insight into his "jazz funk" philosophy. Specifically with regard to this piece, Jay T. spoke of his concept of a "story line" in a dance, and

how, first and foremost, its plot – narrative journey -- needs to make sense to the dancers before it can be translated for the audience.
Narrowing and "digging deeper" with reference to the mystical wellsprings of creativity, Jay T. spoke of how this dance is meant to represent the dangerous, risky process of artistic creation in his own life.
Any of us who consider ourselves "artistic" in any way can relate to that "boundary," the times when making an idea and edging up against chaos come perilously close, or maybe even need to cross paths if only for an instant.
A lot of this dance, in my eyes, also has to do with the issue of *control* – control of the movements of one's body, which at times look haphazard, but in dance need to be thought of in advance, even if they are going to appear as "natural."
Even though the concept of *Thin Line* is meant to draw a distinction between the left and right sides of the brain, we all know that in times of extreme inspiration, those boundaries can become threatened and meaningless.
In the end, let's face it, confusion is not always a *bad* thing – we can learn from confusion and perplexity and become stronger on the other side. Maybe *that's* what goes into each individual's swagger.

Reviewing my notes taken during the Informance and reflecting upon the foregoing, I see a number of consistent themes that were raised by our danceaturgs:

- Getting a dance "into your body" – something you are all familiar with – varies tremendously with respect to the individual. During the conversation about *Swing Low*, we heard about the variety of "inputs" from teachers, visitors, etc., and how this occasionally gave rise to confusion. "Steps" and "meaning" were disaggregated. And as Beth pointed out so aptly, "The style is in the details." I made a note to write that down. It applies to *all* of the arts, not only dance.
- With respect to *Games* especially, there was much discussion about the added dimension of learning a character as a dancer; and, as Julian said, how dancers sometimes have to learn to be actors. This is very difficult because it means you have to invest even more significance into your movement.
- I see from my pencil notes all over the page that the Battle piece really got me thinking. Josh and Jackie and Kris and Tiana got into a debate about the so-called "lack of plot" or story line of *Arbitrary*. I decided to keep my mouth shut, so as not to slow down their enthusiasm, but wrote in the margin that "There *is* emotion even in the abstract *form*." By this I mean that, while I realize and accept that there is no obvious "plot" to *AI* as there is in *Games*, one can still derive intense feelings from its journey. The discipline that comes from rigorous objectivity and having each and every movement be perfectly executed will elicit and drive emotion. The insistence upon spatial clarity does not automatically connote that a piece has no "heart." I will continue this conversation with Robert when he is here for our **Danceworks Talk-back** on Saturday night.
- Jay T and Lynne were quite vocal about *Stomp* and *Thin line*. Both spoke of the ways in which they incited our dancers to get their feelings boiling up onto the surface, being "in

their faces" in as many ways as possible. And Jay T. reminded us of how nuanced and complex hip hop truly is. Ever since I began studying *Thin line*, I have developed a deeper respect for hip-hop. As Lynne pointed out, *Thin line* is the only dance in the repertory that was *created* on the students *by* its creator, which makes it special.
- You and Linda concluded the session with your comments about "creating your own voice." Our dancers have had such a range of exposure to styles and mentalities of choreography this year; and yet, as you said, the ultimate goal is to have them find, through such exposure, the rewards of a personal style. This takes a lifetime.

See you soon, and looking forward to **Danceworks** opening this Wednesday night.

Yours, NB

Letter from a Danceaturg – No. 12 – April 11, 2010

Dear Lori – At the risk of being redundant – it has been quite a weekend. [I feel as if I have said that before.] This week I am going to include two essential aspects to my letter. First, for the benefit of those who missed our panel discussion on Friday night, a summary of what we discussed, including (as a special 'bonus') the questions I did *not* get to ask due to constraints of time; and then I will write some immediate thoughts about my talk with Robert Battle last night while still fresh in my mind.

Friday evening talkback: **What *is* "African American Choreography?"**

- Well… you have to be asking yourself, after *Buschache,* is there anything left to say? We will try. And I am going to keep this moving along because we must leave some time for questions from the audience. I am Neil Baldwin – danceaturg and professor in theatre and dance, and I want to jump right into this discussion on What *is* African American choreography by introducing our distinguished panel:
- Jay T. Jenkins – who is trained in piano, trumpet and voice, is the creator of the jazz-funk style. He has taught literally all around the world and has worked with Prince, Chaka Khan, Salt n Pepa and many others. His most recent work is a full-length jazz theatre piece *Dance, Music, Sex, Romance* (quite a combination) set to music by Prince and set to tour in fall 2010.
- Liane McKayle is the vocal director of this production of GAMES which you have just seen – and in which she has also performed with Ballet Hispanico, Lula Washington Dance Company, the Ailey Company and with students of the Ailey School, where she has also taught. She is the daughter of choreographer Donald McKayle, and has had the great fortune to work closely with and learn with him throughout her life.
- Elizabeth McPherson, who just joined our faculty and is my favorite new colleague here at MSU, received her BFA from Juilliard, where she danced in GAMES; her MA from CUNY, and PHD from NYU. She has danced with Avodah Dance Ensemble, Louis Johnson Company, and others, is the author of a critically-acclaimed book on Martha

Hill, and has just received a major grant from the NEA to stage Paul Taylor's *Company B* next academic year.

- And finally, Sharron Miller, founder and director and guiding light of the Sharron Miller Academy of the Performing Arts right here in Montclair, their inspiring mission being… "A delicate balance between dedication, discipline and dance." Sharron is a Juilliard graduate and a veteran of the Ailey Company – as a matter of fact, it was taking a workshop with Ailey when she was a little girl that inspired her to be a dancer -- as well as being a veteran of seven Broadway shows and – like Liane and Beth – has also performed in GAMES.

This question about the definition or the nature of "African-American choreographers and themes" was at the center of our earliest planning for this year's repertory more than a year ago with Lori Katterhenry and Linda Roberts and Beth McPherson and the rest of the MSU Dance faculty and so, with a year of work and experience behind us now, I would like to start tonight by asking each of our panelists in turn – Is this very term, "African-American choreography" a legitimate label, OR is it in some way limiting or even, perhaps, inaccurate?"
Sharron, I came across my notes from a roundtable we had here in the Department last fall when you said at one point, that the human experience of dance transcends any categorizing theme; you said that to define something is to limit it, and that the art form is bigger than our color…"excellence has no color." I am sure Helen Tamiris when she was creating Negro Spirituals would have agreed with you there. Could you elaborate on that observation for us?

Jay T, I would like to ask you directly – as far as hip-hop, jazz-funk, and THIN LINE. You and I have talked somewhat about this. Share with us some of the history of the origins of this form, the roots for its complexity, and, most particularly, what are the major ways in which its *IDENTITY* has evolved over the decades since you were present at the creation. Because with respect to "commitment to the movement" – you do not have to be African-American to "commit" to the movements of hip-hop.

Let's look more closely at GAMES since we have such a wealth of experienced performers who have been in it -- right here on stage. When Mr. McKayle was here, he spoke about his research into the archival resources of the Library of Congress to come up with the vintage street songs and the songs of slave children to combine in the piece. What are we – I am speaking as a representative of the general audience now -- supposed to take away from that aspect – the verbal aspect? And what kind of challenges does that pose to the dancers?

Liane, you and I talked at length when we had dinner -- when you were out here helping with the staging and notation of GAMES -- about your long-term involvement in a multidisciplinary artists' collective/salon, and I wonder if you would address how the dance fits into that aesthetic – do you think perhaps it is easier to identify an 'African-American aesthetic' in the visual and literary arts, rather than dance, or is that an artificial distinction as well? Our timing on this is especially good as there is a major African American writers conference sponsored by CUNY this month, and they are grappling with the same issues of identity and community as we are here tonight.

Picking up on that notion, let's talk about the Robert Battle piece – *Arbitrary Intersection* -- because of all of the dances on the program, we could say that is the one with the least-apparent narrative through-line. And when he was here, Battle specifically referred to Paul Taylor as the ideal for him. Can you-all help us understand how one should watch a piece like that as distinct from following a 'real' story? Or do you think that's another distinction we need to get away from?

Let's conclude with, again, a collective answer where everybody gets to weigh in, because we want to be sure to have time for questions from the audience – and this has to do with tradition in dance, which is often so personal, as perhaps best exemplified by the way Pearl Primus has had such an direct or indirect effect on all of the choreographers on the program, and she was a kind of 'dance anthropologist.' Is there such a thing as an 'African-American dance tradition' feeding into American dance modernism and would it be healthier for us to start to address that question? And how would we begin to define it…perhaps for another time?

* * *

Lori, as you can see, the articulated as well as unasked questions all centered upon points of identity; and, in retrospect, it seems to me that term has become much less consequential now that our 2009-10 curriculum is nearing an end. The general thrust of the panel was, rather, toward *inclusiveness*, not categorization. The transcending values of dance are more lasting.

By way of perfect summation, let me excerpt herewith from two exceptionally eloquent emails I received the very next day, this first one from **Sharron Miller:** Neil: I just wanted to thank you for the opportunity to participate in such a wonderful evening of dance last night. I think the most substantive thing I took away from the performance was how much the students had benefited from the exposure to those themes and those choreographers. I certainly have some fundamental reservations about lumping all African American themes and/or artists together and defining it as such. But, I think in general having the students exposed to different themes and different styles of movement and expression is essential to their development as true artists - not just technicians who execute steps. Much like diversity enhances our lives -- giving us an awareness, tolerance and understanding of other cultures and races -- this evening of dance served to do the same thing for the students. The underlying theme however in my opinion should be the human experience, and perhaps the nuances that evolve within that experience as a result of cultural and racial issues and/or events. The saga continues…

…and this from **Linda Roberts:** Hi Neil, Thank you for moderating last night's talk back. What resonated with me is the comment about the rich diversity of the African American culture. If I examine a culture from different perspectives I begin to understand it in a deeper way. And, if I can embrace the similarities and differences in a culture from that of our own I can better understand that all cultures are, in some way, part of my humanity as acitizen of the this nation and also the world. On Thursday I began my Methods (pedagogy) class with the following excerpt from Partnering Dance in Education by Judith Lynne Hanna: *In the 1980'a an ongoing debate concerned the question of a national dance to represent the United States. The American Square Dance Association lobbied Congress to name the square dance the national dance. But because of the thriving diversity of American's dances and cultures, testimony against such a designation halted Congressional action. Individual groups are examining how to keep their group identity distinct but also identify themselves as full members of the nation in which they reside. The question of cultural diversity is also a concern for dance education (Hanna 1994a).* Although the issue of cultural diversity affects many nations, I focus this discussion on the United States because the issue seems particularly relevant given our changing demography. How do we reconcile what it is to be an American and respect cultural diversity at the same time? "E pluribus unum,"Latin for "out of many one," is the national motto America adopted in 1777. Dance history in the United States reflects this motto. The class also looked at the MSU Center of Pedagogy's *Portrait of a Teacher* . We underlined phrases that referred to democratic practice as well as cultural diversity. It was an interesting discussion. So, those are my morning thoughts which I have elected to share with you.

* * *

Robert Battle was a fine conversationalist. As you could probably tell, and as is my usual practice, I had a list of prepared questions and quotes ready to go. But as soon as we were seated on stage and I asked him the first question, I could see from RB's expression that he was not at ease. He did not like the idea of proscribed interviewing, much as he does not employ the methodology of proscribed instruction when teaching. So I shifted from referring to my text so literally to a more improvisatory way, taking advantage of Robert's intellectual articulateness to talk about the language of dance. As soon as we began to go down that road, his demeanor lightened and I could tell he was more comfortable. RB does not mind answering questions and is very polite and civil, but he still prefers to set the tone and theme. I found him most revealing in speaking of his function as a kind of huge, open absorber of life experiences -- the *bits and pieces,* as he called them – who then assimilates what he has sensed and thought upon, and synthesizes these *stimula* into the frame of an art work, a dance to be "made." For Robert, I think, the act of making is also an act of discovery; and, as he further said, the act of observing "his" dances enacted through the bodies of others is generously part of the work itself. He is remarkably unproprietary even as he maintains a standard for what he wants the work to become. Jackie's question about "meaning" in *Arbitrary Intersection* was the highlight of the talk. When she so delightfully asked the question, so she could tell her friends what the creator himself had said, I thought, "Will RB answer this directly, or will he insist that it is what one wants to make of it?" The fact that he alighted upon the "boxed [in]" metaphor really stuck. It was the perfect answer for him to give because it was not discursive. The metaphor allows us to interpret further than the term. The metaphor is poetic in that way, and I was pleased with his tangential references to poetry, as it relates to dance, since, as you know, poetry is where I originally come from as an author and scholar. In both forms we require the rigor of the craft placing demands upon the imagination; and then the poet/choreographer must respond to her/his inspiration with discipline, which always makes for tension. And then, when the thing itself is enacted, in print or on the stage, it is "emancipated," as Robert said, to the audience, without which it is as if a proverbial tree fell in a proverbial forest and no one was there to hear it.

We are all grateful to Robert Battle for coming to bear witness to *Arbitrary Intersection* and then taking the time to share his responses and his capacious philosophy.

"Till soon, NB

Farewell Letter from a Danceaturg – No. 13 – May 15, 2010

Dear Lori – The Montclair State University Dance Repertory Company made another definitive incursion into modern dance history yesterday in NYC at noon, when our students performed *Negro Spirituals* in Buttenwieser Hall at the 92nd Street Y, in the very same second-floor room, under the very same vaulted ceiling adorned with brightly-colored biblical scenes, where Helen Tamiris herself premiered them in 1936.

With our newfound friend, Thais Berry - a member of the Tamiris-Nagrin Company - Linda Roberts, Beth McPherson, and Maxine Steinman, and more than one hundred others in rapt attendance, I was thrilled to watch Greg Osborne's powerful *Go Down, Moses;* Talia Pelle's sinuous *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*; Morgan Kelly's winsome *Git on Board*, Melissa Fuentes' limber *Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho*; Sharrod Williams, Alexa Dungo and Alex Williamson's sprightly and intricate *L'il David, Play on Your Harp* -- adorned in Jessica Lustig's authentic costumes, accompanied by the ringing vocal tones of Sandy Taylor and Josh Delacruz and the ever-faithful piano of Emiliya Frenklakh.

Gorgeously evocative works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Eleo Pomare, and Krystal Hall-Glass preceded *Negro Spirituals* – but our dancers' grand finale, *When the Saints Go Marchin' In* – which I could finally appreciate from a different perspective almost level with the dancers, (and which I think, in the interest of authenticity, might have made the difference), brought down the house, with spontaneous cries of *bravo*, thunderous applause, and many in the audience springing spontaneously to their feet.

And all during their show, I kept thinking *If the walls could talk, what they would tell me about Alvin Ailey and Anna Sokolow and Jose Limon and Lincoln Kirstein and Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham and Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman…about what creations were born here, what was invented and revised and reiterated and changed and said and done…now that their pioneering spirits are hovering here, as the modern tradition forges ahead in the embodiment of Montclair State's teachers and dancers…*

Catherine Tharin, the Director and Curator of "Fridays at Noon," pertinently stressed these kinds of haunting resonances in her welcoming remarks; they were invoked again in the post-performance "Talk-back," when the point was made with theme and variations: choreography changes with the bodies of the performers at any given time. It can be classic and proscribed, as all of us who worked with and heard Donald McKayle this year can attest; however, the movements morph over time. The challenge is to preserve authenticity. This prepossessing imperative within the dance medium is at odds with the inevitable variants of physicality.

I was lucky to be sitting next to Beth McPherson during the show, and her stillness and focus and piercing gaze and poised demeanor said it all. It was as if she had held her breath throughout the entire run of *Negro Spirituals*, only at the end allowing herself a relieved smile.

It's been that kind of year.
All the best, and *onward* – NB
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