

Danceaturg's Letters from Neil Baldwin to Lori Katterhenry, December 2010 – April 2011.

December 11, 2010 – **No.1**

Dear Lori:

As you so often say, it is time to “dig deeper.”

For the past several months, in preparation for another season of *danceaturgy*, I have been engrossed in a truly fabulous book, *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, by Laurence Louppe (Translated by Sally Gardner), published by Dance Books Ltd.

Ms. Louppe studied art history, literature, and dramaturgy, then trained to become a dancer and began her professional career as a dance teacher. In 1991 she conceived the major exhibition *Traces of Dance*, curated by Bernard Blistène of Musées de Marseille, and authored the accompanying catalogue (published by Edition *Dis Voir*). Louppe teaches in and outside France, most recently at PARTS (Performing Arts Research and Training Studios), a school in Brussels directed by Anne Teresa Keersmaeker. She writes reviews of dance for various art magazines including the English-French *art-press*, to which she contributes regularly. Her new book, *La Suite*, came out in 2007. You can read more about Ms. Louppe and her work, and order *Poetics* here <http://www.amazon.com/Poetics-Contemporary-Dance-Laurence-Louppe/dp/1852731400>.

Heading the chapter on “Memory and Identity” in *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, we find a quote from the French critic Maurice Blanchot, “It is only the work that matters; but, finally, the work is only there to lead us in search of it.”

These profound words leaped to my mind during the intermission this past Thursday evening of *Works-a-Foot* in Memorial Auditorium when I had a few moments to chat with our own Nancy Lushington and Jay T Jenkins and Maxine Steinman about their new works, *Souvenir*, *Stompin'* and *By the Sea*.

Nancy, Jay T and Maxine were in what I would call “distracted” moods. As soon as I sat down next to them, before I could even say how much I liked what I had just seen, they hastened to tell me that their dances needed tweaking and fixing – that the performers needed talking to – that they were still works in progress, would be tightened up, adjusted, clarified, etc etc etc.

How could this be otherwise? Despite hours and days and weeks of labor, dance remains inherently incomplete. No matter what piece are looking it, there is always more to come, right up to, and succeeding, the so-called “final” performance. This enduring ephemerality (not an oxymoron) gives dance its dramatic tension and allure. When I look at dance now – as opposed to three years ago, when you first invited me to participate in your wonderful program – I see more in some ways, yet less in others.

I see more concentration on the dancers' faces, more discipline in their technique, more precision in their movement. And yet, I have come to expect less *narrative* in the accustomed modernist

textual ways. I feel myself being drawn further away from analogous literary terminology, and closer to sensual, intuitive modes.

I watch *Souvenir* and *Stompin'* and see style, attitude, rhythm, fluidity. I do not ask myself quite as much “What are the dances *about*?” as I do “What do the dances make me *feel*?” I spend more time tapping my foot to the beat than racking my brain for significance.

Don't worry, this does not mean that my *danceaturgy* is veering toward the non-intellectual; simply that pleasures of the moment – and dance has so many of these -- are permitted to break through unencumbered.

We have ambitious plans for the next seven months of *danceaturgy*.

In this first letter to you, I can only provide a few examples: Expanding and deepening the social and historical implications and contexts of our ambitious *Americana* repertory theme; knitting connective visual and thematic threads between *Never Sign a Letter Mrs.*, *Lynchtown*, *Folksay*, *Company B* – and from there, to the big dramatic production of *Grapes of Wrath* coming this March in Kasser; interviewing MSU dance faculty on how they do what they do, create what they create, teach what they teach; valuing and spotlighting innovative student work around *Dance Collage*; and, of course, reaching out to Chase Brock, our *New Works Initiative* artist in residence, bearing enthusiastic witness to his multifaceted vision.

It is a testimony to you, Linda, Beth, the dedicated faculty and students, and the MSU Dance Program as a whole that it continues, against all odds, to be able to accommodate ever-new, ever-larger challenges in what surely must be the most arduous economic times.

How I wish I could give you *all* the hundreds of underlined passages from my well-worn copy of *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*! – but let me conclude with this trenchant observation, which does a good job of setting the tone for our *danceaturgy* adventures to come: “A large part of the work of dance,” Laurence Louppe writes, “will not leave the dance studio. There, what will never appear in a public event lives, and is pursued through creating, hesitating, rejecting. Out of this endures a living poetic texture, always a matter of becoming, always unfinished...”

...and so, to be continued,

NB

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January 18, 2011 – No.2

Dear Lori:

Welcome back and happy new year!

I spent many happy hours during the past few weeks in one of my favorite places, The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, where I watched vintage films, newsreels, and documentary videos of Sophie Maslow, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hortense Lieberthal, the Bennington/Mills College sessions of the 1930s – as well as the New Dance Group repertory in celebratory retrospective. My (well-intentioned) plan was to share with you my vivid impressions of different iterations of *Folksay*, *Lynchtown*, and *Never Sign a Letter Mrs....*

...but then, I came across an email from our generous colleague, Dianne Sichel, in which she strongly recommended that I read a book by Ellen Graff called *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997). <http://www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ViewProduct.php?productid=683...>

...and so, truth be told, my report on the NYPL viewings, which also included a revealing documentary on Paul Taylor, will have to wait until my next Danceaturg's Letter. I couldn't put *Stepping Left* aside until I had read it from cover to cover. I'm sure that you and many of our faculty are already familiar with Graff's work. What a fine introduction for our students to the informing roots of the *Americana* repertory!

Graff is strongest, as her title indicates, when she draws parallels and examines paradoxes between the dancers' inner aesthetic motivation and their unavoidable social and political environment. I remembered when our students were learning *Steps in the Street* three years ago, and Denise Vale talked about Martha Graham's resolutely "nonpolitical" stance, even as *Steps* went public at the anguished time of the Spanish Civil War, and Graham's imagery was confrontational and resolute. "The imperative that every movement have a reason for existence was always present," Graff writes of this "pillar [principle] of modern dance."

Indeed, the debate heats up when we try to "read meaning," or determine the message of an *ideological* movement in a *bodily* movement.

This is a constant conversation I've had with you and Linda and Beth and the other dance faculty. I actually sent this question to the student danceaturgs for their consideration over the holidays: **How do you go about absorbing background and historical/contextual information about a dance in which you are performing; and then, how do you assimilate that information into your mind (intellect) -- and body -- in such a way that the information and knowledge contribute to and (ideally) improve and enhance your performance of the dance?**

Let's not forget, as Graff points out, that "Martha Graham was not a proletarian. She could trace her roots to the *Mayflower*, and her family had money." Graham faced a dilemma common to those artists who "lacked the vital experience" to produce "art with vital content."

Such vacillation reminded me of when I was doing research on the Surrealist movement for my biography of *Man Ray*, the American artist and photographer, who flourished in Paris during this very same period of the 1930's. <http://www.neilbaldwinbooks.com/book/man-ray>

I found purportedly dedicated members of that *avant-garde* group insisting they were not part of the crowd – they were simply individual artists. One of the eighty-nine year old survivors of that exhilarating time, Marcel Jean, told me in an interview that it was only “outsiders” and “historians” who came along and liked to place convenient “labels” on him and his cohorts.

You know far better than I that it's more complicated in dance choreography, because the *individual* is so often *in opposition* to or *moving against* or *apart* from the *group*. There's a fantastic photograph in *Stepping Left* of another one of our “old friends,” Helen Tamiris, leading an ensemble performance of *How Long Brethren?* that stunningly illustrates this dynamic. <http://www.indyweek.com/imager/the-independent-reviewwhat-does-how-long-brethren-represent-now/b/big/1278277/4d0b/unknown.jpg>

You and I discussed this crucial counterpoint most recently when I was watching a rehearsal of *Running Spirits*, Earl Mosley's spirited piece that you so wonderfully supervised. *We need* the group/individual opposition in dance to provide the “essential tension” and kinaesthetic beauty...

...which brings us full circle from the personal to the political; because, after all, the latter is always predicated upon the former. In Graff's penetrating analysis of the period up to and into the Depression and World War II, Sophie Maslow emerges to make an effective synthesis: “An America existed,” Graff says, “that was not illustrated in sophisticated documents or educated prose.” *Dust Bowl Ballads* and *Folksay* (and later, *Woody Sez*) sprung from the imagination of a young, urban, Jewish, radical woman who empathized with the hardscrabble, determined, down to earth, wry sensibility of the Great Southwest.

Maslow took Woody Guthrie's melodic, twanging lyrics, and Carl Sandburg's epic heartland poetry (*The People, Yes*) forged from the ordinary tropes of the American idiom, infused the words and music into cowboy-style high-stepping and backcountry clogging, and set her dancers into a space from which they could promenade in circles and gaze out at imaginary plains.

This all came upon me with a vengeance one day last week. I returned home from NYC and a day of immersion in New Dance Group videos and black-and-white silent and sound visions of Sophie Maslow's ebullience. I picked up a copy of John Steinbeck's epic 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. After a few pages, I was transported to impoverished Oklahoma, watching the Joad family loading up their weather-beaten wooden-paneled ancient truck for the perilous migration to the promised land of California – [as Woody Guthrie put it] “busted, dusted, down and out and a lookin' for work.” The MSU Theatre Department is putting up a production of *The Grapes of Wrath* in March. For background information on the show -- including illustrative archival audio and visuals -- here is the link to production dramaturg Kristen Hariton's fascinating blog: <http://grapesatmsu.tumblr.com/>

Yep, it's all coming together, I reckon!
'Till next week, Yours, NB

January 24, 2011 – No.3

Dear Lori:

I must say that considering it's only the start of the second week of classes, things are heating up rather quickly in the *danceaturgy* world.

This past Thursday, Linda and I met for an hour to chat about formative plans for the March 30th *Informance*; there will be more to say about *that* once we meet with the student danceaturgs this coming Wednesday afternoon at 3:15. I also see on my calendar that Wednesday we are having a “meeting of the minds” to talk about next year’s spectacular (as you put it, “crown jewel”) presentation of Jose Limon’s *Missa Brevis*. Meanwhile, this Tuesday, late afternoon, after your departmental auditions, Nancy Lushington and I have made time to discuss *Souvenirs*. I want to conduct a proper interview with Nancy, and find out more about the genesis and development of this fascinating and unique composition; my hope is to sit down with all of the choreographers this spring for one-on-one, in-depth explorations of their current work. Sooner rather than later, I will get in touch with Joao Carvalho and Linda Kent to talk about Paul Taylor. [Joao and Linda, if you are reading this, I will email you soon!] And as I mentioned to you, Ryan Finley and I are going to start developing historic, period-rich visual imagery to serve as a moving backdrop for *Danceworks*. Oh yes – I also received very cordial emails during the past week from *Stepping Left* author Ellen Graff; Deakin University (Australia) dance scholar Sally Gardner, and Siobhan Burke, Education Editor at *Dance Magazine*.

I’m so glad that we are office-neighbors, and very grateful that you reached out to me three years ago to see if I would be “interested” [?!] in participating in the Dance program...little did I know...that I’d be sharing the *obsession* to this extent...

You recall that last week I was only able to make brief mention of my research sessions at the Jerome Robbins Collection at the NYPL at Lincoln Center. I know that you, Linda and Beth always encourage your students to take the (easy) trip into NYC and spend time at this precious resource. I also know there is a lot of dance on YouTube these days; but there is special *archival* footage at the Library, especially earlier and silent film, still in some cases on reel-to-reel and requiring the use of a Steenbeck editing table for viewing. You feel as if you are “present at the creation.”

I mentioned to Beth – and, of course, she already owns a copy – that when at NYPL, I watched with rapt fascination a black-and-white Paramount newsreel, *Young America Dances* [catalog *MGZIA 4-8168] filmed in Oakland, California during the 1939 Bennington/Mills College summer session. Presented as a co-production of *Look Magazine* and Ampix, produced and directed by Ralph Jester, the film covers a huge amount of visual territory in 11 minutes, including footage of Hanya Holm, Martha Graham (with Alwin Nikolais and Merce Cunningham as her technique students), Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Jose Limon, Harriette Ann Gray, William Bales, May O’Donnell, and Louise Kloepper. Most of the energetic and highly-stylized dancing is *en plein air*, at the sun-bleached Greek Theatre, or out on the meadows and lawns of the campus.

But I've saved the best element of this film for last: Suddenly, there she is, lounging on the grass talking with a group of her tidily-coiffed, very presentable, eager young lady-friends... Hortense Lieberthal, sharing her idea for (as she calls it) "a special Brooklyn translation" of a passage from Emily Post's *Etiquette* (1922), *Never Sign a Letter Mrs.* All the girls gathered around Hortense (or, as her friend Beth calls her, "Horty") seem quite intrigued about seeing the performance. The camera moves inside to a packed little theatre, where Horty proceeds to run capably and confidently through the dance, with what I can only try to describe as *blithe discipline*.

For about three seconds, as the camera pans the room, we are given a tantalizing glimpse of a tall, thin, dark-haired young man leaning against a side wall, arms folded across his chest. That is the poet, Ben Belitt (1911-2003). At the time of the *Young America Dances* film, Belitt had been on the Bennington College English Department faculty for two years, and his first book, *Five Fold Mesh*, had just been published. He would remain at the College for another half-century.

When Beth, Keith Wiggs, and I had lunch with (the much older, but gracious and spirited and outspoken as ever) Hortense Lieberthal Zera last spring at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Trustees Dining Room, I tried to encourage her to divulge more about her friendship with Belitt; but, as they say in the current vernacular, she "didn't want to go there," offering only that it was on a visit to the college library with Belitt that the two of them had found the Post *Etiquette* book together and alighted upon the inspiration for her dance.

Horty mentioned several times to us during that same lunch, and you may already know, that Ben Belitt, also a fine translator of Pablo Neruda and Federico Garcia Lorca, was "very close" with Martha Graham. In 1947, he composed a poem called *Dance Piece* "in homage to Martha Graham," with the first line, "Errand into the maze," which became the title of her new work that same year about the mythical journey into the labyrinth.

Then, in 1948, according to a wonderful essay I've just re-read by Jack Anderson called *On the Move: Poetry and Dance*, Graham invited Belitt to sit in on her rehearsals for another new piece she was preparing for the first American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. He showed her a poem in draft form including the lines "humors of innocence, garlands, evangels, Joy on the *Wilderness Stair*, *diversion of angels*." [Italics mine; you see where this was going, more title inspiration for Martha!]

Before I get too carried away, as you can tell, this is what I love about the atmosphere of dance: meandering paths intersect with other cultural worlds to create evocative alliances of time, place and person. I've been a serious student of the literary and visual arts and modernism my whole life; and so, for me, these connections dance makes are endlessly-flowing gifts.

Till next time, NB

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January 30, 2011 – No. 4

Dear Lori:

Last Tuesday evening, I sat down with Nancy Lushington to talk about the debut of her piece [Souvenir](#) set to the 1952 score (*Souvenirs*, Op.28) -- originally for piano/four hands, and subsequently orchestrated -- by American composer Samuel Barber (1910-1981).

You, and all our readers, can follow the link above and watch Rodney Leinberger's beautiful video of the piece from *Works-a-Foot* on a "private" YouTube site.

Nancy and I have met many times over the past several years since I first became involved with danceaturgy. She was the first of your (very patient) dance faculty to explain to me the special qualities of dance vocabulary as opposed to my customary, authorial verbal vocabulary, a concept I am beginning to comprehend.

Nancy explained to me that her long-time affection for Samuel Barber's music was rekindled last May at our Dance faculty retreat when the identification of *Americana* as the theme for this year's repertory first took hold.

During her summer teaching sojourn in Cyprus and Italy (sounds quite romantic, doesn't it...?) two additional classically-American artists and favorites -- painter John Singer Sargent and novelist Edith Wharton -- found their way into Nancy's percolating mind, and *Souvenir* took shape in her imagination.

In Sargent's case, it was the indelible image of his stunning, iconic and erotic 1883 portrait of a young socialite, Virginie Amelie Avegno Gautreau, known as the mysterious [Madame X](#). [Follow this link, recall and revisit the dance, and you will instantly see what Nancy was thinking!]

And in the matter of Wharton, it was her best-selling masterpiece of American fiction, *The House of Mirth* (1905) -- most especially, the luminous and frustrated New York "upper-crust" heroine, Lily Bart, "so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, [Wharton wrote, in a significant passage Nancy pointed out to me] that the links of her bracelets seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate."

Add one more dash of spice to this heady recipe: Nancy had also seen Katja von Garnier's award-winning film, *Iron Jawed Angels*, the remarkable and little-known story of a group of passionate and dynamic young women, led by Alice Paul (Hilary Swank) and her friend Lucy Burns (Frances O'Connor), who put their lives on the line to fight for American women's right to vote during the 1910s.

As Nancy related to me, arriving at the potent confluence of these musical, visual and thematic forces, she began to think about "what it must have been like to have been a woman at that time in history...especially upper middle-class women with time on their hands, and social requirements, and nothing concrete to do with their lives."

You and our readers should hold that thought as a marker, because we can then begin to see the contours of *Souvenir*. I have spent this morning scrutinizing Rodney's video, and took away certain helpful details. In the first, waltz-like segment, deceptive grace and dignity introduce us to superficial social mores and styles. There is discipline and individuality within the ensemble.

However, in the second, shocking and somber "trio," if I may call it that, the three young ladies, bound together back to back, rotate ever so slowly, as if embodying a perverse wind-up ballerina-doll. They are, each in her own way, *Madame X*, with, as Nancy told me, the conflict of their *personae* exemplified through the clearly-constricting dresses and bodices in dramatic contradiction to bare, unencumbered shoulders lit from above so they glow in an other-worldly fashion. We note their "studied mannerisms" and "hesitant gestures" as, "silenced by society," they reach "self-consciously" for an imaginary dressing-table. We feel their discomfort, their thoughts that (all the quotes here are Nancy's words) "my life really is not very good right now..."

The hard-edged, painstaking focus widens and degenerates as the dance expands again, into a Stravinsky-like, spectacular return to an occasionally-triumphant, occasionally-comical ensemble, always replete with "*struggle*" (a big concept for Nancy as a choreographer); the women fade into and out of pairing with the men – there are only four men for the eleven women, which is in itself a commentary on social bias. As at the outset, there are dark undertones to the ostensibly festive and "cheerful" machinations of the group.

Toward the end of my conversation with Nancy, I brought up "ideology" in a tentative manner, because I have come to learn that meaning can only be embodied into a dance up to a certain point. The movement's meaning can -- most often, *will* -- be emanating from the body, not from a manifesto or social doctrine.

The choreographer, in this case, Nancy Lushington, will have attitudes and opinions about the ongoing "struggle" of women finding roles and purposes in society. These mature, lived opinions are going to find a vehicle for expression in the artist's medium – the modern dance and the ballet. Do the dancers have to have their consciousnesses raised and become "radicalized"?

No, I do not think so. We are all hard at work in a university setting, and there are few teachers more dedicated than Nancy in particular and the Dance faculty in general. The personal is going to become blurred with the political – naturally. And yet, below that expressed level, resides the dancing body, trained to absorb and execute specific gestures according to the intent of the choreographer. The dancer is encouraged to bring her or his individual nuance to bear...up to a boundary line beyond which she or he must not step; the boundary set by the devising artist in the studio: watching, waiting, taking notes, responding, reflecting, sleeping on all of it, obsessing, coming back the next day, and the next week, and the next month with more....

'Till next time, *au revoir*, **NB**

[PS – A "*shout-out!*" to the *Souvenir* dancers – Mirela, Assaf, Tracy, Andrea, Sara, Krystal, Lauren, Leanna, Nicholas, Chelsea K., Greg, ChelseaP., Larissa, Jenna, and Jacqueline; and the rehearsal assistants, Irene and Crystal.]

February 6, 2011 – No. 5

Dear Lori: In preparation for writing this letter, I watched Rodney Leinberger's fabulous [YouTube video](#) of our super-adrenaline-ized dancers performing Jay T. Jenkins' *Stompin'* at *Works-a-Foot*. Consequently, it has taken me another two hours to get started on **Letter No.5** because I was distracted into tracking down as many video versions as I could find of [Duke Ellington playing Take the A-Train](#). I tried minimizing the video and just listening to the music but that didn't work; I ended up typing to the music and pretending I was playing the piano. So I finally turned off the internet function completely.

Apologies aside. As planned, I sat down with Jay T. earlier this week in my office to talk with him about the inspiration and genesis and development of *Stompin'*. I began by asking Jay T. to give me his impressionistic image of "The Harlem Renaissance," the thematic context for *Stompin'* and the historical rationale for its inclusion in our **Americana** repertory.

"I see sunrise over the East River flooding across 125th Street," Jay T. said with a smile. "I see Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois blended in with Cab Calloway and the Nicholas Brothers...and folks *tappin'* on the sidewalk with bottle-caps on the bottom of their shoes. I see a cultural explosion!"

The focal point for the *dance*-explosion from the 1920's through the 1950's was the Savoy Ballroom, between 140th and 141st Streets on Lenox Avenue. As Jay T. reminded me, the Savoy possessed a very different vibe from the "whites only" policy of the Cotton Club. At the Savoy, whites and blacks danced *together*, and here could be found the best Lindy Hoppers in town.

How did he introduce the student dancers to this fertile, multi-creative period? "I assigned the kids to do research on their own, as I always do," Jay T. told me, "and then I dug deep into my thirty-plus milk crates of old L.P. records at home, and my reel-to-reel tapes and cassettes, and I selected snippets of vintage music for them that I assembled using Garage Band. I knew from the beginning that the sound-track for our dance was going to be a combination of Duke Ellington – that big-band *swing!* – and Fletcher Henderson – the *stomp* and the shuffle."

Jay T. continued, "I asked the students to imagine themselves going up to 'the Club' on a Friday night, to see and be seen. What was going to be their individual story line? Why did they want to go to the Ballroom? For me," he explained, "dance is driven by character-development from within. That's the starting point when I develop choreography. The students need to know *who* they are and *why* they are doing what they do. That's got to be number one."

"As the dance evolved, there were couples, some of whom were out on a date, others who met at the Ballroom," Jay T. told me. "And there were single guys – 'the guys on their own' -- gathering to check out the women; and there were single girls – 'the good-time girls' – in their finery, out for adventure." Once the group had been successfully indoctrinated into the sights and sounds of the era, Jay T. had them up and moving, according to the distinctive stories they imagined. "From the beginning, this was a *theatre-dance* piece," he said. "in which they found their own voices."

We talked for a good while about the immediately-present image of *the door* to the Club/Ballroom as the quintessential “club” image – because at the door the gatekeeper decided who got in and who was left out. The door was a symbol of specialness, and, in keeping with the liberal atmosphere of the Savoy, the dancers seemed to flood into the portal on a surge of energy.

I also told Jay T. how much I liked the cyclorama shadow-play as transition, the tableau of three couples with the central couple up-lit in such dramatic fashion. This was the ideal stagecraft to act as middle-ground between the outside world and the inner aura of the Club. There was also, I felt, a conscious effort at crowdedness. “Yes,” Jay T agreed, “I was actually thinking of a [Romare Bearden](#) canvas, with the contorted figures jammed together.”

Stompin’ has a dramatic arc that holds up well after repeated viewings. The mass of dancers, excitedly converging in anticipation, gives way to pared-down duets, couples and trios, eventually bringing down the house with a brassy, bold, finger-popping production number that had the cheering audience the night I was there standing and clapping in rhythm. The lindy/jitterbug drive then gave way to a couple enthralled with themselves embracing as night faded into dawn.

“I need to have my dancers feel *invested* in what they are doing,” Jay T. told me, as we reflected upon his philosophy as a choreographer. And what did he mean by “invested”? I asked. He paused to think for a moment: “*Steps* are not worth anything unless they are transformed into *movement*. And movement has to evolve out of motion. And -- your mental concept of who you are as a character has to be revealed through your *body*.”

I reminded Jay T that when I chatted him at intermission at the premiere evening of *Works a Foot* he had seemed somewhat perturbed. What did he say to the *Stompin’* students when he gave notes that night? “I told them, like I always do, that they needed to stop worrying about steps and let themselves go. We have worked on your character, I said, and now I want to see your faith in that character come alive.”

“Dance is about pulling yourself out of yourself,” Jay T. said. “And our kids accomplished that, and I am proud of them.”

Jay T. is also well-aware that a dance is always in process; there is more development and refinement to be done on *Stompin’* between now and *Danceworks*. I, for one, can vouch for its impact. To quote from my handwritten notes, taken while I was watching the video: “Crazy!!!”

This coming week I am interviewing Maxine Steinman on *By the Sea*. What a great “job” I have.

Yours, [NB](#)

PS – On a related subject, everybody please take a few minutes to read this recent New York *Times* article about how [dance is infiltrating the Museum of Modern Art](#) such that many see it as morphing into a “Museum of *Performing Art*”...or is it?! Fascinating...and I will have more to say in a subsequent letter.

February 13, 2011 – No.6

Dear Lori: Happy Valentine's Day (almost).

This week I am writing a two-part letter.

First, my interview with **Maxine Steinman** on her new work, [By the Sea](#). Click on the link to watch Rodney Leinberger's video.

Following the Steinman interview, you will find Beth McPherson's critique of the *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art – with her particular emphasis upon the role of dance in the show. After I referred to the exhibition at the conclusion of my previous letter, Beth sent me an email saying she had seen *On Line* and had some pertinent observations. So, I invited her to join in this letter.

I am intentionally calling my conversation with Maxine *inspiring*, in homage to the etymological root of that word, *breath*, because Maxine made it clear that one of the fundamental tenets of the Limon technique is to “breathe *through* the movement...as a way to remind you that you are *alive!*”

I will return to this Limon lineage in just a moment; but first, some reflections upon the genesis and development of *By the Sea*, a love-letter to Coney Island. When we first began to discuss the *Americana* repertory as a Department last spring, Maxine thought of making a dance around the visual theme of graffiti – as that street-art form took over the NYC cityscape in the 1970s. However, as the repertory became more focused upon the 1930s and '40s, Maxine abandoned that concept, and turned her energies to the Brighton Beach-Coney Island neighborhood of Brooklyn, where she was born and grew up on 8th Street, just three blocks from the ocean.

As a little girl, Maxine told me, she and her best friend would head over to the Boardwalk after school and perform impromptu '50s show tune music and “doo-wop” tunes – her friend singing and Maxine dancing for the gathering crowds. (How I *wish* I had a photo of those moments – we shall have to use our imaginations...). Then, as a teenager, Maxine's friend's grandfather (her “Poppy”) would take the girls on the roller-coaster and carousel rides on weekends.

These magical moments – “escaping from the daily grind,” Maxine told me, “forgetting all your cares and worries” -- stayed in her memory, and became the informing material for *By the Sea*. The connection is perfect; as you and our readers know, Jose Limon's “fall and recovery” technique was meant to emulate [Limon dancer and disciple Daniel Lewis says] “*a wave of water* traveling through the spine...suggested by the movement of the waves of the sea...” Limon's “opposition and succession” was built upon how your *breathing* shaped a phrase.

During last summer, before classes resumed in the fall here at MSU, Maxine engaged in intensive research and practice. She dug up the history of Coney Island on exhaustive web sites. She pored through vintage photographs and YouTube videos. Early on, she knew she would include Yiddish songs by The Barry Sisters, so beloved by her grandmother. Maxine also journeyed to studio space at Marymount Manhattan College, where she spent many hours alone

developing movements and videotaping herself in trying, repetition, editing, and reiteration. And she spent hours “brainstorming,” (her word) making use of arduous commuting time on trains and buses on her way to teaching classes – to close her eyes, let her mind wander, and jot down in a handy notebook the ideas, choreographic intentions, and goals that arose from her inner wanderings.

Maxine was insistent in describing to me the significance of the Limon heritage to her work. “Limon technique is not codified, not rigid,” she said. “The body is not a machine; the body must speak, be human, stand for what is essential to humanity.” That conviction, in turn, came out of Jose Limon’s alliance with the “ineffable power” of his mentors and inspirations, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, the strongest proponents of “[in Deborah Jowitt’s words] pure, thrashing oscillations of movement...forms radiating content...and gesture coming from *within*.”

So it developed that, when Maxine held auditions for *By the Sea* last fall, she told me that she was looking for personalities – not in the sense of superceding movement quality, but rather, as the students’ prevailing asset. “Either they ‘had it,’ or they didn’t,” she said. “We were going to get into a process of collective improvisation, so the students I chose for the piece needed the self-confidence to tell me if my ‘brainstorms’ worked or not.”

Rehearsals became “playtime,” Maxine said, “as I encouraged the dancers to have more fun – to be more crazy – to *give me more* and more.” The entertaining result is at once affectionate tone-poem to a New York childhood, loving recreation of a bygone era, colorful panoply of vintage bathing suits and hairstyles and ebullient smiles – all against the backdrop of a painstakingly-compiled video put together by Maxine herself, edited and calibrated to the rising and falling permutations of the life-affirming dance. *By the Sea* comes out of a modern tradition and has been given Maxine Steinman’s personal *spin* – and I mean that literally.

And now, as promised, I am pleased to present **Beth McPherson**’s reflections, a perceptive and alert dancer on the significance of the [recent MoMA exhibition](#); she also points out some possible curatorial blind spots.

On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

On view from November 10, 2011 through February 7, 2011.

Organized by Connie Butler and Catherine de Zegher

The exhibit “On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City looks at how artists, and not just visual artists, have used and explored “line.” I was thrilled from the first moment I entered the exhibit because my attention immediately was pulled to the film of a woman who may or may not be Loie Fuller performing *Danse Serpentine* (1897-1899). Swirling expanses of fabric are expertly manipulated to provide an infinite number of curves and twists. There is controversy over whether the dancer is truly Fuller, or whether it is her sister or some other dancer who imitated Fuller’s dances. However, no matter who is dancing in the video, the dance is very much about sweeping fluid lines and a wonderful introduction to the exhibit.

In a dancer's world, so much of what we do is about line – the 1st arabesque stretching from the fingers of one hand to the foot of the other, with the torso curving up through the middle. A tilt in Graham technique where the line of the arms should make a parallel line with the line of the gesturing leg. The Graham contraction as well, although it is about oppositional pulls in the body, creates a curved line that is like the arc of an archer's bow. Going across the floor in formations on the diagonal in ballet class, a teacher often describes shapes such as make a diamond or triangle to indicate that dancers should be standing at the points of the shapes to travel with partners in a pleasing formation that also allows them freedom to move without bumping into or impeding each other.

On a wall near the Fuller video is a drawing, “Tänzerin” (1917-1918) by Vaslav Nijinsky, that looks as if he used Loie Fuller as a subject for inspiration. His swirling lines create motion within the 2-dimensional drawing -- a dancer depicting dance on paper, describing the lines one feels when one swirls.

There is a lovely sculpture by Alexander Calder called “Croisiere” (1931) that immediately indicates to me the lines of the *croisé devant* position in ballet. Although it may not be what he intended, I see the *croisé* head, legs, and arms indicated in a curved mass of lines and energy. It is a difficult position to master in terms of line for a young dancer, and Calder catches it with the connectedness and balance that are essential to the position. [Interestingly, Calder later created mobiles for Martha Graham's dance *Panorama* (1935).]

Yvonne Rainer pops up around a corner doing her minimalist dance *Trio A* in the 1970s. This dance says much less to me about line than it does about deconstructed movement – movement taken to the basics of what most human bodies can do.

Trisha Brown and William Forsythe are also represented through video, yet somehow less strikingly than the more prominent displays of Loie Fuller and Yvonne Rainer. There are many choreographers one could choose from to illustrate line in dance, but there were some possibilities that seemed to be glaringly omitted, such as Merce Cunningham and George Balanchine, who both show through their choreography extremes of what a highly trained dancer's body can exhibit in terms of line. And what about the spatial lines in dances for a large corps de ballet? The mere fact of moving 30+bodies around a stage requires expert attention to line and shape in space. Ballet was largely ignored in general although the concept of line is essential in this genre. Attention to line is one of the reasons ballet classes are done in front of a mirror, so that one can “check” the line with one's eyes.

I overheard a mother saying to her child several times while going through the exhibit, “Look, there is a film or drawing of another ballerina,” although there were no “ballerinas” represented. It was humorous to me to think how Yvonne Rainer or Trisha Brown might react to being called ballerinas -- Dismay? Horror? Amusement? Maybe all three? And what would Loie Fuller have thought? Is that how she would have defined herself before modern dance was even called “modern dance?”

The mother's statements pinpointed to me how little the general public knows about dance overall. And the exhibit, in many ways, also pointed out that sad fact. I greatly enjoyed seeing dance put side by side with visual art in a presentation about line; however, the ideas presented about dance in terms of how line is used seem to come from a limited perspective on the use of line in dance -- which I found disappointing.

[I am sure Beth would welcome responses from our readers mcphersone@mail.montclair.edu.]

'Till next time, all the best, NB

February 20, 2011 – No. 7

Dear Lori: Before we were all so thrilled to know that Wayne McGregor/[Random Dance](#) was coming to MSU through the vision of ACP; before I saw their performance in Kasser last spring; and even before I first met Scott deLahunta ([R-Research](#) Director of Random Dance), I had already read, and exhaustively underlined, *Augmenting Choreography: Insights and Inspirations from Science*, the iconoclastic essay by deLahunta, McGregor, and cognitive psychologist Phil Barnard originally published in [Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader](#) (Routledge, 2009), edited by Jo Butterworth and Liesbeth Wildschut. I put a link to the book here because it is worth reading for the vast contextual background it provides.

It makes sense that *Augmenting Choreography* is the final essay in the book, because Random Dance is out there, on the *edge* and/or the *inside* of – as Wayne McGregor calls it – “the interconnection between the mind and the body that exists in movement and in choreography.”

Underpinning that long preoccupation, Scott deLahunta writes that “McGregor has developed an extensive collection of procedures (instructions, scores, games, tasks) to instigate, inspire and perturb [I love that word!] dancers in the generation of unique movement forms. These procedures,” he continues, “are intended to stimulate a certain interior landscape of thinking that brings intentionality to the dancers’ performance of the material.”

And so came about that I was privileged, last Monday afternoon, to sit on the floor of the Dance Studio and watch Scott, and two Random Dance colleagues, Jasmine Wilson, director of RD’s [Creative Learning Department](#), and Antoine Vereecken, a long-time RD performer, work intensively with your Choreography II class, and experiment with some brand-new “[Choreographic Thinking Tools](#).”

I arrived late because I had been teaching a class on the other side of campus. The first thing I saw was our students sprawled in a circle around Scott, Jasmine and Antoine, and sheets of paper scattered everywhere. As I drew near, I realized they were color-xeroxes of details from various [Francis Bacon paintings](#), resplendent in grotesque, torqued shapes and garish, lurid colors.

Jasmine was in the midst of explaining the exercise at hand: Working in partners, to derive ten words from meditating upon the Bacon images – “words that refer to the picture,” she said, “or name things that are in the image.” Once the writing was concluded, she went on to qualify this imperative by saying that the improvisations based upon each word, starting at the top of the list, should be devised through the dancers’ attention to their sounds, not their meanings; or, as she expressed it, “uncouple the meaning of the word so that the property extends into sonic spaces.”

“Have a go,” she said. And so they did...and after a few minutes, Jasmine called out to the dancers to move on to the next word and the next.

“Movement without meaning – is this *possible*?” I jotted in my notebook, my confusion compounded by the subtle introduction of techno/industrial/atonal music running through Antoine’s iPod. “Think about the lineage of this exercise,” I scribbled, “from picture to word to

acoustic.” I gazed out at the swaying, leaping, twisting, prone, standing bodies. I watched the frowning, pensive students struggle to look effortless.

And then, Jasmine called out again, after the first five words were improvisationally-depicted: “OK, now I want you to switch over and base your movements on the *meaning* of the words, not their sounds.” Was it my own feverish imagination on overdrive, or did it now seem that the improvisations came easier, once the “meaning”-switch had been thrown?

Meanwhile, the musical selections grew more definitive, i.e., rhythmic, percussive, throbbing, as if we were all in a club and Antoine was the DJ. “Surely the music will influence the nature of the improvisation!” I thought. “How far away were we drifting from Francis Bacon’s tortuous, gnarled sensibilities...?”

During the debriefing, I felt at first that Elaine Gutierrez and Sharrod Williams spoke for many when they talked about having difficulty “stepping out of [her] comfort zone. I was stuck on what I knew,” she said, “I did not escape from my box.” And yet another student around the circle to their left (I did not catch her name, so sorry), hands clasped, eloquently described her “out-of-body experience.”

The next day I sat down with Scott, and with Carrie Urbanic, in my office, and we had a revelatory though hurried chat about the session. Suffice it to say that the Choreographic Thinking Tools I had witnessed were just as new for Random Dance as they were for everyone else in the room -- boundaries were being pushed in many ways and for the first time.

I wondered aloud to Scott if he could tell me “the bottom line” for these “Tools.” What were they *for*? “We are seeking the investigative origin,” he replied, “to find ‘the moment of getting-going’ for a dancer, within the structure of the compositional mind.”

Getting-going. I “got” that. I really did! That answer gave me, as the interlocutor, the courage to draw distinctions between dance-creativity and other-arts-creativity. I told Scott and Carrie how, as I have admitted in recent Danceatrgy Letters, I am beginning to pull away from juxtaposing and applying literary critical vocabulary onto dance/body actions. It is very important as I continue to pursue dance writing [I originally typed that as one word, “*dancewriting*,” perhaps better suited to the form], to honor the inherent dictates of the art, and refrain from importing descriptive apparatus more familiar to me as a writer.

Another term Scott used which I also liked, was the importance to the Choreographic Thinking enterprise of “**reporting back.**” He said this in affirmative response to my asking him if it would be OK for me to write about my observations in this letter. And now, this letter, by recounting that question, is getting a bit too post-modern and self-reflexive. So...I am going to let Random Dance have the last and best word, concluding with one of the many salient passages from *Augmenting Choreography*, a healthy and worthwhile reminder that “Dance can be performed or experienced,” write Barnard and deLahunta, “without a continuous flow of explicit verbal thoughts.”

Lots to think about – until next time, Yrs., NB. baldwinn@mail.montclair.edu

February 27, 2011 – No. 8

Dear Lori: [I realize that *Dance Collage* opens this week – and I will be there on Wednesday night, front and center.]

However, here's a "Danceaturgy Factoid" to start this week's letter. Did you know that *DanceWorks*, spotlighting Paul Taylor's *Company B*, opening in Kasser Theater on April 6th, will mark the eve of the **65th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day)** -- May 8, 1945, when the Allies formally accepted the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany? Our dance repertory this year is really tuned into the *Zeitgeist*.

This past Wednesday, Linda, Beth and I had our first formal group meeting with the student **Danceaturgs**. There they were around the table in the Dean's Conference Room: Jessie W., Elaine G., Melissa S., Colleen L., Ashley S., Dana B., and Lauren P. Although Julian M., Kaitlin P., Melissa F., Nick H., and Sharrod W. could not make it due to other rehearsals, they were definitely there in spirit and we will see them at our next meeting on March 9th.

The first order of business was to formalize the danceaturgy assignments for the **Informance** the week preceding the *DanceWorks Americana* repertory. I thought our readers would like to know the "ambassadors" for each dance:

Lynchtown - Jessie Whelan and Ashley Schmidt

Never Sign a Letter Mrs. - Dana Balsamo

Company B - Julian Morales, Kaitlin Paul, Colleen Lynch

Folksay - Melissa Fuentes

By the Sea - Lauren Panzica, Melissa Sande

Souvenir - Nicholas Harney

Stompin - Elaine Gutierrez, Sharrod Williams [Elaine will be the "lead Danceaturg" for this piece because Sharrod is also reporting on *Rainbow Etude*]

Rainbow Etude – Sharrod Williams

We had the most fascinating conversation for an hour and a half, propelled, I must admit, by my persistent questions about the language of dance. I began by asking the danceaturgs to help me understand and refine the definition of the dance *moment*. Elaine was quick to relate "moment" to "*movement*," the boundaries defined by how that movement is measured and executed. We talked a little about *improvisation*, as I was still thinking about the recent occurrences at the *Random Dance* workshop. Everyone seemed to concur that improvisational skills come more readily the longer one experiences dance; i.e., the degree to which a dancer is conversant with his and her *vocabulary* conditions the extent to which her improvisation will become more free and flexible. Ashley pointed out how the repertories this year and last year, constructed as more "cultural" in nature, were helping her expand her horizons into differing *techniques*. That led us into some thoughts about the nature of *choreography*. I began to see, as the conversation unfolded, that there was a proscribed sequence to learning a dance, in all its facets – just like the facets of a diamond, they combine to deliver the desired effect when the light (of inspiration) hits the surface in the right way. That's a complicated metaphor that does not do justice to the depth of feeling required, nor does this analogy capture the *linear, narrative* rigor and discipline.

Linear – narrative – well, yes...unless it is a piece like Early Mosley's *Running Spirit*, which (as Dana remarked) is about the group and their process forward, not any literal subject matter. The message of *Running Spirit* is its energy, not what it "stands for." Whereas, as Colleen pointed out, *Company B* takes a series of vignette situations and uses them to comment upon the human condition; Paul Taylor as philosopher. I brought up once again the comment Beth had made to me about the dangers of "over-thinking," because I had been thinking [!] about the irony of *intellectual* danceurgy as being counterintuitive to the necessity of *not* thinking too much during the dance. However, the danceurges reassured me that *overthinking* was imperative while you were learning the dance; you had to be able to impress the muscle-memory into your body, and that was unavoidably time-sensitive. Once the memory was there, you could pull back on the thinking. You had to learn how to do this so that when you were performing, it looked natural. Nobody wants to see a performer thinking, Melissa pointed out; and no performer wants to be trapped in thought when on the stage: "*Performing is not thinking.*" Wow. That summed it up pretty well, so we moved on to the *style* of different choreographers. I talked about how Maxine, when we had talked, made clear her lineage back through Limon. Linda agreed and said that of course one could see the Limon aesthetic in Maxine's work; but that ultimately "Maxine was *very much* Maxine." The choreographer wants to acknowledge the tradition out of which she emanates, because, in dance, the tradition is the wellspring; however, the choreographer also wants to bring her own personal touch, her own "*essence.*" *Dance Collage* was on everyone's minds, because everyone was either choreographing a dance, or was in someone else's dance. I asked Lauren what she hoped the audience would take away from her *Dance Collage* piece. She said simply that she viewed choreography as driven by "having something to say," so therefore, she would like people to see that "This is who I am." Choreography to these young women was, in one way or another, an expression of *identity* embodied. We should look for the expression of self through movement. That is easier said than done; here I think it is OK to talk about *intentionality* and the way it transcends into other art forms. We have been pondering *interpretation* in my creativity/poetry honors seminar this semester. We are reading modernist American poems very closely, trying to find ways to talk about them without "tearing them apart" and "ruining" the experience. There is no way we can vouch for what we conjecture the poet was "putting into" the poem. The literary work, (here the analogy beyond dance is permitted), is not a suitcase packed by the author and unpacked by the reader, who inventories the same contents. What we do want to have is an experience infused with a degree of purity conditioned by the sincere sensibility we bring, as reader or spectator. So...if Lauren approaches her sense of identity with legitimate intent, she has fulfilled her choreographic goal. I realized the hour was coming to an end and people had other things to do...[when do dancers *not* have other things to do...like get up and dance?] So I asked the danceurges who they thought was more *obsessed* – the actor, or the dancer? At first there was some offense at that word, but as they dug in, they smilingly accepted its validity. When dancers are not dancing, Dana said, they are thinking about dance, thinking about how to improve, how to do it better, how to build more upon what they know, and how to figure out what they still do not know. At the end of the day, dancers must dance; there is only so much time to spend at one step removed, talking. The ladies were beginning to fidget, adjust their backpacks, check their phones. So I let them go. Lori, as you and our readers can plainly see, I have *intentionally* let this letter be one long paragraph, one long *stream of consciousness*, because that was how it felt to talk to the danceurges. What a wonderful opportunity for me. I learned so much. Till next time, **NB PS** – Many thanks again to Diann Sichel for [this fascinating article on dance criticism!](#)

March 7, 2011 – No.9

Dear Lori: [As dance continues to take over my life]...I ran into Lynne Grossman in the lobby of Mem Aud after the *Dance Collage* performance last week, and she asked me “Why do you care...?” or words to that effect, “Why us?” to which I replied that in my work as an author over the decades I had delved into every American modernist art form except one -- and now I find myself getting to know dance and realizing it is the transcendent common denominator for a whole new journey.

Enough about me.

This past Wednesday, I had the most enjoyable talk with Lonne Moretton. You all know Lonne, so you therefore understand that I must have been taking notes at supersonic speed, or trying to, because the man’s energy is unbounded; those of you who have squeezed into my little office should visualize the walls exploding outward (metaphorically speaking).

To start things off, I asked Lonne to trace the arc of his relationship with Donald McKayle, because Lonne is directing the rehearsals for *Rainbow Etude* and I recalled that last year, when The Master was here, Lonne was ever-present. They go back four decades, to when Lonne was an undergraduate at San Jose State University (from which he received a BA in *Drama!*) and LA’s Inner City Dance Repertory Company – where McKayle was artistic administrator -- came to the San Jose campus for a residency, and performed *Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder*. After graduation, Young Lonne moved to NYC of course, where he earned his MFA in Dance from NYU. As a result of *not* making it into the Limon company, he ended up – rather fortuitously – receiving a scholarship to Ailey II. Through this connective chain, once again, “the ubiquitous choreographer who worked with everybody” Donald McKayle entered Lonne’s life; and when Lonne joined Joyce Trisler’s Danscompany, lo and behold, they rehearsed on the premises of the New Dance Group on West 47th Street...and when McKayle arrived here at MSU last spring to set *Games* on our students, there was a magical moment when he looked Lonne in the eyes and instantly recognized him. Thus weaves the endlessly-interlocking web of the dance community.

Lonne has been a dancer forever. His parents met at a USO dance, so dance is in his DNA. Growing up in Sonoma, his mother taught him all the ballroom steps, swing, fox-trot and the etiquette that went along with them; his father was in “show biz” and community theatre. From an early age, he told me, Lonne felt as if he did not fit readily into any dance “category,” and, as a matter of fact, was not even aware of such distinctions. There was dance, and *only* dance. As an athlete or as a musical theatre show-guy or whatever opportunity presented itself, Lonne wanted to move in as many ways as possible.

In 1984, Lonne began teaching for the iconic Zena Rommett (who passed away last year), inventor of the floor-barre method, and has not diverged from that single-minded balletic path since. He settled into the study and practice of true alignment, integrating anatomy into the classically-determined layers of the ballet form. “The vocabulary is the same, but the exercises are different,” Lonne explained. “It is all about what your own body will allow you to do while still being true to a tradition that began with the Italians, moved on to the French and the Russians and then migrated to the USA”

“A tendu is still a tendu,” he told me. “You still begin in fifth position, with your hand resting on the barre...But from there, with awareness of the range and requirements of your particular instrument, you build a movement that recognizes *your own anatomy*. The human body moving through space,” he went on, “is the most important and enduring fact of ballet – with rigor, energy and most of all -- enthusiasm.”

Who exemplifies that enthusiasm more than Lonne Moretton?

* * * * *

Let's take that enthusiasm one more *step*, as it were...*Dance Collage* was a revelation this past week. In the pure spirit of documentary criticism, I will give you herewith the exact, unadulterated transcripts scribbled by yours truly directly onto the programs for the dances I witnessed. In my wildest dreams, I would be able to sit down with each and every one of our student choreographers and discuss the conscious and maybe even subconscious derivations of their work...But everybody is so insanely busy that this will never happen, and so....

5013 – hot! hot! hot! primal...with premeditation

Captured – mournful pas de deux – a woman in controlled agony

Case File: #126 – a somnambulist's epic nightmare

Diane and Actaeon Pas de Deux – I see the beautiful huntress and I feel the vision of the stag

Do You See What I Hear? – the genius of Lauren - six strings and six diverse dancers

Don't Cry – Arielle! from the depths of imagination

Existence – first out of the gate – blows me back into my seat

Life Interrupted – limber and tribal – the hands tell it all – Dana's fevered brain

Meanwhile... -- a frenetic (in a good way) exercise video devised by insane automatons

New Colossus – poetic voiceover segueing into dance-theatre at its peak, and at its deepest

Not What It Seems – the convoluted irony of a bride being urged to “go [her] own way”

Overtime – love that red blouse! – the piece is funny, reckless, strong throughline

Parsons Etude – has grown on me – percussive syncopated madness

Running Spirits – how much more calibrated can this finely handmade timepiece become...?

Tres Faces of Amor – fabuloso!! [if there is such a word?] – exuberant to the max

We All Fall – liking it more and more...because they are finding the tragic theme and it works

Words Rarely Heal the Wounded – the embodied, fateful romance of O'Keeffe and Steiglitz

Your Favorite Girl – very very sad and moving, great song and poignant “relationship”

Zetetic – ambitious takes on a new dimension with this one – I am utterly incredulous

Next Sunday, March 13, we will have just begun Spring Break, so my plan is not to write to you then – however, I am thrilled to say that next week I am going to Juilliard to meet with and interview Linda Kent about Paul Taylor's *Company B*, the centerpiece of *Danceworks*.

‘Till next time, NB baldwinn@mail.montclair.edu

PS I urge everybody to read this provocative article from the February 28th Wall Street Journal, [Stepping Toward a More Modern Future](#). Our friend Janet Eilber of the Martha Graham Company asks, “What does modern dance need to be looking at...so it has more to say?”

March 21, 2011 – No.10

Dear Lori: Before I write to you, and everybody else, about my interview with [Linda Kent](#) last week, bear with me as I digress (but, as you will soon see, it is really *not* a digression). Last Thursday afternoon, I went into NYC to visit the [Picasso: Guitars 1912-1914](#) exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Bringing together some 70 closely connected constructions, drawings, mixed-media paintings, and photographs assembled from over 30 public and private collections worldwide, this exhibition offers fresh insight into Picasso's cross-disciplinary process in the years immediately preceding World War I. As I meandered through the show, among many other thoughts was this one -- Picasso's quality and repetition-compulsion awareness of line were pervasive and obsessive. Many of the works were collages or variants thereof, i.e., meticulously-placed and aligned fragments of wallpaper (in some cases literally ripped from the walls of his own studio), newspaper clippings, painted scraps of faux-wood nestled up against thickly-applied charcoal and oil paint mixed with sand into a tangible impasto...yet, in every instance, the borders between the juxtaposed materials were observed assiduously, with just enough space so that the viewer could be aware of the physical work that had gone into the piece. You looked at the intricately-compounded imagery and you saw both the thing being depicted as well as the "stuff" that went into that depiction.

And then, that evening, I walked over from 53rd and Sixth to the Frederick P. Rose Theater at the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle for a spectacular presentation by the [Martha Graham Dance Company](#), an annual ritual for me. I was delighted to run into Denise Vale, Senior Artistic Associate, in the Lobby before the show started, and we reminisced again about her visit to MSU three years ago when we staged *Steps in the Street* under her tutelage. Artistic Director Janet Eilber, replendent in a shimmery shantung jacket that matched the crimson-silver proscenium curtain, delivered illuminating introductory remarks. Of the three pieces we were treated to that evening – *Embattled Garden* (1958), [Cave of the Heart \(1946\)](#), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), it was *Cave* that spoke to me most eloquently; and I realized, coming home late that night on the train, that the reasons were identical to my Picasso experience.

Like the other modern (painterly) master, Martha Graham had a supreme command of line. In *Cave of the Heart*, when Tadej Brdnik as Jason carried Jacquelyn Elder as The Princess on his straining shoulders and paraded to and fro across the stage, their bodies were distinguishable yet melded. Their pale flesh-against-flesh set up angles at one moment and fluid interaction the next, rapidly oscillating within Graham tensions and releases. And as I watched Katherine Crockett as The Chorus spread her arms, extending the black and red fabric of her costume into a strict apex, I could hear her distinctly-measured exhalation of breath. Her effort was conveyed to me in that sound, even as her discipline was preserved in the motion.

Speaking of *discipline*, that makes for a suitable transition to my long talk earlier last week with Linda Kent at The Juilliard School – she graduated in 1968, and has been on the faculty since 1984. Linda met me at the summit of the imposing wooden staircase inside the main entrance to the School on West 65th Street, and we found a quiet spot in the sun-drenched glass promontory overlooking Broadway. Before jumping into Paul Taylor’s epic showpiece, [Company B](#), which Linda – and Joao Carvalho -- have been setting on our students, I asked Linda to reflect upon her earliest days with Taylor, beginning in the spring of 1975, when she had just emerged from seven years as a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. I had recently studied exquisite videos of Linda in Taylor’s signature *Esplanade*; however, she informed me that the Graham-inspired, pathos-infused, ritualistic *Runes* [premiered August 13, 1975] was the first Taylor piece she danced in. “As a matter of fact,” she recalled, “Paul told me that he felt the dancers in the Company needed ‘more Graham immersion,’ and he asked me right away to refresh their awareness of Graham technique.”

Her thoughts on Taylor’s personality and method are naturally vividly reinvigorated by her continued work with him. “He knows what he wants in a dancer,” she said. “From my very first audition in the studio at 550 Broadway, to today, I still feel that way. He sat there for two continuous hours, and the rest of the Company watched as well. Paul does not go easily with trends,” she went on, “He is eclectic. He creates what interests him.” I read Linda a PT quote that had leapt out at me when I watched *Dancemaker*, the 1998 PBS documentary: “I don’t want to see choreography,” Taylor says to a group in rehearsal, “I want to see bodies moving.” Linda concurred. “I tell the students today at Montclair State and at Juilliard the same thing Paul used to say to me: I don’t want to see ‘steps.’ I want to see you as a distinct individual tell a story in movement. I want to see you make up a story for yourself – show the narrative, even if the piece is abstract – show me you are a *sentient being*.”

I ran another PT quote by Linda from the *Dancemaker* video: “I don’t have a ‘message,’” Taylor tells the interviewer, “I am a watcher, a reporter.” She paused, then nodded, “Dance is food for the eye,” Linda went on, “and you must perform with *conviction*. Without that conviction, there will be no meaning for the audience.” As a teacher, Linda has further inherited from her mentor a sense of how to make the best use of the tradition that the modern dancer has been given. “For the type of classic modernism Paul Taylor exemplifies,” she told me, “in this day and age, ballet training is essential. You need to take your ballet class, and your modern class, every day.”

Lori, I hope that before we see the full-on *Company B* at [Danceworks](#), everyone will read and savor Paul Taylor’s memoir, [Private Domain](#). “I don’t know if my dances will last,” Taylor told critic Terry Teachout, who wrote the *Foreword* to the book, “I try to make them to last. They’re not made to be seen one time.”

And so, with continuing vigilance, ‘till next time, [NB](#)

March 28, 2011 – No. 11

Dear Lori:

As everybody knows by now, the annual Dance Division **INFORMANCE** will be presented this **Wednesday, March 30, from 2:30-4:30 pm in LI-123**. The *Informance* sets the stage (as it were...) for **Danceworks/Americana** which opens on Wednesday, April 6th in Kasser Theater.

Here is the definitive description of the *Informance* as developed by Linda Roberts:

The **Informance** is an *informal performance*. It provides an opportunity for the students and faculty in the Dance Division at MSU to share ideas and to perform for each other in an informal setting. In the past, students as well as faculty have presented choreographic works-in-progress. In addition, students have performed phrases from technique classes as well as projects from courses such as Improvisation, Choreography, Rhythmic Analysis and Laban Movement Analysis, and Dance History. We have also been treated to performances of Butoh, ballroom dancing, Irish step dancing, and other genres of dance that are currently not part of the curriculum. Presenters have always had the option of merely showing their work, posing discussion questions, or asking for audience feedback. Thus, the INFORMANCE also serves to *inform* the presenters and well as the members of the audience about the work in which they are currently engaged. Recently, the Informance has provided a forum for discussing the elements that bring master works as well as contemporary choreography to life in performance. Under the direction of Neil Baldwin, **“danceaturgy”** has become a key element in the Informance. Students examine the social and historical context of dances in addition to the technical, creative, and performance challenges of various dance works. This **holistic approach** allows the performers as well as the audience members to experience these dances on a deeper level.

This year’s student **danceaturgs**, and the **Americana repertory** to be demonstrated and discussed, are:

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <i>Lynchtown</i> (1936) by Charles Weidman | Ashley Schmidt, Jessie Whelan |
| <i>Never Sign A Letter Mrs.</i> (1939) by Hortense Lieberthal Zera | Dana Balsamo |
| <i>Folksay</i> (1942) by Sophie Maslow | Melissa Fuentes |
| <i>Company B</i> (1991) by Paul Taylor | Colleen Lynch, Julian Morales, Kaitlin Paul |
| <i>Rainbow Etude</i> (1996) based upon <i>Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder</i> (1959) by Donald McKayle | Sharrod Williams |

Stompin' (2010) by
Jay T. Jenkins

Elaine Gutierrez, Sharrod Williams

Souvenir (2010)
by Nancy Lushington

Nicholas Harney

By the Sea (2010)
by Maxine Steinman

Lauren Panzica and Melissa Sande

The questions for discussion on Wednesday afternoon are: Describe how you go about preparing for a dance role. Does learning about the historical or contextual information improve your performance of the dance? and: Does seeing repertory under the umbrella of an overarching theme impact your appreciation of the body of work presented? What did you learn about *being an American* from the dances you have viewed today?

On a personal note: I began to work with the MSU Dance Division in the spring of 2008; this will be my fourth **Informance**. As I have learned progressively more about the art and craft of dance, I have slowly modified my orientation – or, better said, my point of view. When I began my dance studies, I was coming out of a long and rigorous formal aesthetic tradition with roots in my earliest scholarly training as a poet, critic of modernism in the visual arts, and translator of French verse. If you had told me as a newly-minted PhD 35+ years ago that I was *not* going to end up in an English or Comparative Literature Department, I would have laughed incredulously. It is at once unexpected, strange and fabulously liberating to find myself immersed now in a mode of expression deriving from the language of the body rather than from an authorial mentality.

I began corresponding and meeting sporadically with this year's danceaturgs at the middle of December when I questioned them about "how [they] assimilate background, historical, and contextual information about a dance [they] are performing...in such a way that this information (ideally) improves and enhances" their performances. This intellectual exercise segued into Linda's *Informance* questions as stated above.

This inquisitive mental stance resides at the (paradoxical) heart of danceaturgy. I am very interested in the dancers' *transmutation*, in the broadest sense – we could even call it *learning* – from outside information to inside knowledge. It might begin as muscle-memory and might diverge into over-thinking along the way. By the time the dance is presented, our students tell me, it should become "second nature." I say this process is "paradoxical" because the intellect cannot be allowed to overwhelm the dancer's intuitive feelings. Perhaps the intellectual component of dance is a way-station on the receding road to perfection – a perfection that, of course, can itself never be entirely achieved.

Ahhh...the endless rippling-forth of unanswered questions!

See you on Wednesday, NB

April 4, 2011 – No. 12

Dear Lori: To quote Linda Roberts at the conclusion of the *Informance* last Wednesday: “You wonderful danceaturgs have brought these dances to life.” What more can I say? Ashley, Jessie, Dana, Melissa, Colleen, Julian, Kaitlin, Sharrod, Elaine, Nick, Lauren and Melissa were so eloquent, so insightful, so reflective...

And now. Not a moment to spare. Onward...to *Lynchtown*.

“*Hold onto that tension!*” With those words echoing in the cavernous MSU Dance Studio, Margaret O’Sullivan -- former Charles Weidman dancer, current vintage dance re-stager, and co-president of the Charles Weidman Dance Foundation – began her galvanizing, gripping two-hour rehearsal session of *Lynchtown* (premiered as a section of *Atavisms* at the Guild Theatre in New York City on January 26, 1936) this past Friday afternoon from 1-3 pm, huddling in impromptu conference with Beth McPherson and exhorting our students in preparation for *Danceworks*.

Settled in the bleachers, faithful black journal in hand, I was privileged to be a scribbling “fly-on-the-wall” that day, and I can tell you, it was an intimate glimpse into another example of the dance heritage come to life. Indeed, notebook open, her eyes gleaming with incessant perception, her lithe form black-clad and constantly in motion, a-tremble even when she was sitting down, Margaret O’Sullivan embodied the Weidman hyperactive, quirky, and always theatrical aesthetic.

She led the two casts through their paces to the accompaniment of the sparse, percussive and plaintive Lehman Engel score. The opening “new aesthetic” processional brought to mind the first moments of *Steps in the Street*, also 1936 – and of course we know that Weidman partnered Martha Graham when they were young members of the Denishawn Company -- except this time, facing forwards instead of backwards as in *Steps*, the dancers’ feet arched, slid and pushed downward, calf-muscles swelling as they moved ahead, each holding to a distinctly different pose during pauses, gazes fixed at a distant point where the evil drama would soon be enacted. The dancers proceeded through a series of curled inward and expanded outward contractions and releases, as if their entire bodies were respiratory organs; or in contradiction to themselves, strained downward yet conveyed the urge to reach upward; and vice-versa. The “whisperers” with dreaded information leaned into the necks and shoulders of the “listeners” with news of a lynching – an event that Weidman (1901-1975) said he had witnessed as a child growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska. The dancers hid their eyes in shame, “sorry they were forced to look at this terrible thing,” Margaret told them as she threaded among them, insisting they find “off-balance” postures and “remain” there.

Watching *Lynchtown* in Memorial Auditorium, so very far away and framed by the proscenium; then scrutinizing it at ground level in the Dance Studio, where I could hear the dancers breathing and see them perspiring; watching the exquisite *Dance Horizons* video documentary narrated by Alwin Nikolais, *Charles Weidman: On His Own* at The New York Public Library; and finally, spending the morning here in my study playing and replaying the video by Rodney Leinberger recorded in December, I have, over time, come to comprehend the sheer *theatricality* of the

piece, the structural spacing, the tableaux, the blocking and carefully-considered positioning of groups of bodies with impeccable exits and entrances.

This perception was reinforced (in reverse, if you will!) by two early critique-reviews. The first, by John Martin, captures his reaction to the *Lynch Town* [sic] premiere in January 1936, with its instantly-noticeable “shifts from travesty to the deeper notes of bitterness as it creates with extraordinary effectiveness the tense hysterics of a ‘lynch town.’” I also dug up a piece by dance critic Sherman Conrad heralding the Doris Humphrey-Charles Weidman theatre work at their brand-new studio on West 16th Street (*The Nation* magazine, January 25, 1941): “With [Irish poet William Butler] Yeats dead, with the Federal Theatre throttled, with [American poet T.S.] Eliot and [French film-maker, playwright and author Jean] Cocteau blocked out and [English poet W.H.] Auden an *émigré* to radio drama, the ‘poetic theater’ has lost its torch-bearers. The dance,” Conrad insisted, “now must carry the brunt of theater experimentation... From [this] frequent repertory production... there may result that necessary accumulation of experience and fecundation of the imagination of poets, dancers, designers and musicians...” More than four decades subsequent, in *The New York Times* on June 30, 1985, Jennifer Dunning invoked Walter Terry’s similar observations about “*Lynch Town*” and its “searing simplicity... attack[ing] the complacency of those who sit in the safety of the theater.” Jack Anderson soon thereafter joined the chorus in extended praise of this modernist “portrait of a community consumed by violent passions, filled with accusatory gestures, grotesque hoppings and stampings and fierce pursuits... The twisted minds of bigots,” Anderson aptly noted of *Lynchtown*, “were symbolized by twisted bodies. Dancers doubled up with rage, and when the lynch mob finally dragged in its victim, they gathered about his body as if they were vultures.”

Lori, I have gone on at length in my letter today recounting the vivid critical reception of this signature work by Charles Weidman because I think it is eloquent tribute to Beth McPherson and her reconstruction from the Labanotation, to our dedicated students, and to the incessant devotion of Margaret O’Sullivan and her colleagues – all toward bringing back into the (well-deserved) spotlight the reputation of Charles Weidman as “the first American modern male dancer... in the last century,” to invoke the words of Carol Mezzacappa of Dance Consort. By representing *Lynchtown*, the Montclair State University Dance Program is proclaiming its awareness of a somewhat-eclipsed and underappreciated dimension within our native tradition.

Alas, the Friday afternoon rehearsal was coming to its end. Beth was reminding everyone that over the coming days before *Danceworks* they would have to “do the dance yourselves, and get it into your bodies, and your brains.” Then came the last words of Margaret O’Sullivan as the clock reached 3:00, the run-throughs had been run, and our dancers were pacing to and fro, breathing heavily, hands on hips, like contemporary, nervous details from a Degas painting; and the next shift – the casts of *Company B* – came bounding through the double doors of the studio.

Margaret gathered the students around, and said, with great emphasis, “Remember – *anything you do* – you need to really *dig down!*”

I know they will!

See you soon, NB

April 10, 2010 – No.13

Dear Lori: I realized that “No.13” is not accurate. The best way to look at these letters that I have been writing for several years is to count them consecutively, from the beginning, then pick up where we left off. Which means that the letter you are reading is number 30-something...

I bring this up as a modest corrective to your concept of the annual “journey” of the curriculum and the dance repertory that have their planning roots in the prior academic year, and are realized between September and May, then “start again” the following fall, in reassuring perennial rhythm.

Perhaps that is because it is a healthier, or less-daunting, way to conceive of your work, rather than as a *continuum* with seamless segues from the end of one year to the beginning of the next. Or perhaps, some people might be saying to themselves by now, my wordy philosophizing is going nowhere. To which I reply that the pursuit of art, in any form, takes at least a lifetime.

Case in point: I was chatting with our friend Kim Whittam earlier this week, regaling (and distracting) her with my newborn “dance revelations,” with my customary wide-eyed enthusiasm, and she said, with a slight and tolerant smile, “I’ve been dancing since I was three years old, so I really don’t think about dance that way anymore.”

By the time this letter goes out via your email blast, *Danceworks* will be over. We will share the customary feelings of elation and sadness, regret and pride; re-live things that could have been done better, tech time that was too short, training that went on too long, cues missed, mistakes not corrected...and on and on and on.

But let us remember that the scores of people reading this letter have been immersed in the “journey” and, as you also said the other day, by now they and we are “living on fumes,” and, as a result, as with common travellers upon any journey, we do not share the perspective of someone from the outside world who bought a ticket and settled into a seat in the Kasser Theater and watched our show once.

How can we possibly vouch for what *they* have seen; how can we ever know what details caught *their* eye? Three dancers trapped in one silken gown as they gazed into an imaginary mirror? The sound of scratchy grooves in an ancient Negro spiritual recording? The slant of light on predatory dancers’ bodies as they gaze off-stage? The archaic diction of a dusty old etiquette manual? Worn red plaid shirts and creased blue jeans and grange hall rhythms? Men wearing ties and jackets on a roller-coaster while women sing Yiddish that strangely makes sense? A fellow named Tico whose upbeat, syncopated name evokes the inexorable approach of mortality?

At the talkback after the Dance Day matinee on Friday, the senior citizen contingent from Clairidge House kept telling Beth and me that *By the Sea* and *Stompin* and *Company B* “brought back so many memories.” When we gently pressed them to be more specific, they kept referring to the days when they were “kids” and teenagers and life was (as the Andrews Sisters sang)

“*grand*.” Yet barely concealed beneath the nostalgia were tears, quavering voices, and harrowing survival stories of air raids and curfews and near-drownings at sea.

Then, at the talkback after yesterday evening’s performance, a young woman in the back row who said she was in her “early twenties” insisted she felt a “disconnect” between the dances she had seen on stage from a bygone era, and her own sense of *Americana* and what it meant to her right then and there.

As Nancy, Jay T, and Maxine explained to her, we constructed a repertory without conscious regard to “current events.” Each choreographer drew upon his or her personal vision of the *Americana* theme, in the same way that, as teachers, they expect the same kind of inner honesty from the student dancers in class.

As Beth then explained with reference to the reconstructed and staged pieces, there are many ways to go about *re-presenting* a vintage dance coming out of the modern tradition – be it video, Labanotation, or the muscle-memory of the instructor who studied with the original choreographer, inheriting his or her biological and imaginative legacy. This is how dance has been made and will continue to be made.

From where I sit -- with regard to devised pieces on the one hand and historical pieces on the other -- I value the attributes of both, serving different purposes yet merging in the end. Nancy, Jay T and Maxine pull influences from their self-acknowledged training and heritage, then layer in stylistic attributes that make each of them as artists special and endlessly-intriguing.

Whereas Lonne Moreton, Margaret O’Sullivan, and Lynn Frielinghaus – to cite the most recent examples, have accepted the responsibility of a prior generation; they come to dances of the 1930s, 40s and 50s with a vision of what needs to be true to the form, and build out from there.

Linda Kent brought *Company B* to MSU, reminding us that Paul Taylor made the dance after she had left his company; but that -- having danced with and for him for more than two decades – she knew his standards, expectations and genius. With Joao Carvalho at her side, Linda made our students reach for a very high bar. The result was trippingly light-footed, *soigné*, swaying, stylish, slightly ironic, self-aware, knowing, disciplined yet free.

To revisit my ornate time-construct at the beginning of this letter: With each season, I become more conscious of the ways in which modern dance is predicated upon a sense of history; another reason why I appreciate what the faculty are doing – because I, too, am an historian.

However, I have been an historian of events, facts, and documents; written history since the time of Herodotus has been describing what certain people did during a certain period of time, with a sustained pretense toward objectivity.

The history of modern dance is the accumulated history of dancers’ bodies. I continue to struggle with the dilemma of how documentary information can be absorbed into living bodies.

Au revoir. Until next year, NB