

2012-13 “Letters from a Danceurg” – Neil Baldwin to Lori Katterhenry First letter - September 18th

Dear Lori – As you would say -- with a smile, of course -- “Here we go again!”

Your welcoming remarks to all the Dance Majors on September 5th set the inspirational tone for this year’s repertory of *Myth & Transformation*, a rich and lofty theme. Two weeks have flown by and this is the first moment I have discovered in which to set down my observations about our first three guest artists/*repetiteurs*.

In the interim, Diann Sichel has just emailed me to say that the initial “setting” of *Runaway* has already caught hold, which does not surprise me, in view of who was running the show -- the titanic energy of [Jaclyn Walsh](#) from [Keigwin + Company](#). Jackie’s audition session on September 6th left me breathless, and all I did was sit there on the sidelines while she jumped right in and told the dancers to “relax...do what you do...try not to stress...” As a matter of fact, she added, the moves she was going to put them through were, if anything, “*super-duper simple*,” which made me smile to myself as Jackie cued up the techno. For the initial exercise, she had them walking up one side of the room and down the other, shifting at the corners in a quick pivot, then heading off at right angles, purposefully, shoulders back, strides long & model-like. My smile widened further when, about ten frantic minutes into this routine, & everybody hyperventilating like crazy, Jackie magnanimously allowed the dancers to “take a 30-second break.” I’ve seen videos for *Runaway* and look forward to stopping by at rehearsal again; and yes, I’ve also watched my share of fashion shows over the years, so I *think* I know what to expect. The struts, “working it” poses, exhibitionism, teamwork, and humor and speed, make up the Keigwin essence. Jackie put it best at the end of the first session when the dancers broke into applause and she interrupted them: “Save the clapping,” she said. “We all know we’re great.”

The following day, Friday the 7th, it was back to the Dance Studio to watch this year’s New Works Initiative artist, [Rebecca Stenn](#), lead auditions for the piece she’s going to devise, inspired by Harold Pinter’s classic play, *Silence*. With a quasi-Indian throbbing/twangy rhythm, the soundtrack to the recent movie *The Best Exotic [Marigold Hotel](#)*, in the background, Rebecca urged the dancers to respond to a set of agreed-upon words – text as the basis for movement. As you know, Rebecca is also bringing in selected student actors to work in tandem with the dancers, so the interaction of performers’ modes will be crucial. When Rebecca came over to the sidelines to change the music track, I quickly told her that I thought the sound was “sinuous.” She liked that – “Well...[Pinter’s language](#) is sinuous, right?” During a controlled improvisation exercise [“Act like you have no plans”], Rebecca goaded the students further, saying “I’m waiting for someone to go nuts! – you guys need to break out of your comfort zone!” Afterwards, Rebecca and I were joined by Debbie Saivetz for a chat in my office where we delved into the complexities of improvisation in the “dancing body” and “the acting body.” I appreciated the paradox that, even as you were being told to “make it up as you go along,” you were still obligated to *think through* your supposed freedom. *Silence* is going to be a great & welcome challenge.

Rebecca left for the City and I dashed back yet again into the rehearsal studio to catch half an hour of [Elizabeth Auclair](#) from the [Martha Graham Center](#) working our dancers through the audition for the Chorus from Graham's archetypal [Night Journey \(1947\)](#). This is the revelatory moment of Sophocles' *Oedipus* tragedy as envisioned/dreamed/refracted through the mortified imagination of Jocasta, Oedipus' despairing mother and wife. After the "The Daughters of the Night" angled their way, cupped hands, lunging steps, across the floor to the strains of William Schuman's mournful score; and after Liz (who herself danced the role of Jocasta to great critical acclaim) took them through an extraordinary series of bodily shifts, during which one could actually see the dancers' centers of gravity *move* from one part of their bodies to another, like an inner weight ["Throw your torso off center and take your leg with it"] – Liz warned the students (although it was clear by their ardent expressions they had already figured it out) that "this choreography is not like anything else...this is guttural...underworld...not 'pretty girl' stuff at all..." I was pleased when several of the young women, at separate moments – hands pressed against their abdomens – told me how much they actually liked the visceral contraction-release technique – testing their bodies in new ways.

Martha Graham is a choreographer of the *mind* as well as the body.

These auditions were an auspicious beginning to what I *know* is going to be a thrilling year of dance.

'Till soon,

NB

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ps – Here's the email I sent to Diann after having watched a *Runaway* rehearsal two days after writing this letter to you:

dear diann - & dancers - [sorry i had to duck out at 5:00 - otherwise i would have missed my train.]

when you told me the first two runthroughs were 'marking,' i couldn't believe it - until i saw the full-out version and all of the clarity and precision and humor came through loud and clear.

i kept thinking - 'this is a dance about dancing' - and by keeping on the beat it is also a dance that makes you *think* more deeply about and also appreciate dancing in general, not just *runaway*.

i know that sounds repetitive but the piece inspires me - as a writer - to be repetitive.

i also liked witnessing different levels of energy on stage at the same time - and not only simultaneously - but also going in opposite directions fluidly and geometrically.

talk about using the space! - to the ultimate.

they made it look easy - but i certainly know it wasn't.

the off-stage counting for each other reinforced the collective spirit.

i shall return.

The Second 2012-13 “Letter from a Danceaturng” – September 29th

Dear Lori:

I am fully aware that [William Wordsworth](#) defined the origins of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility,” however, since there *is* no “tranquility” in my life nowadays, I am writing to you this morning about [Rebecca Stenn](#)’s rehearsal session yesterday afternoon in the Dance Studio.

The atmosphere in the room at 1:00 was well-summarized by Rebecca’s concession that she “wasn’t being extremely clear,” and that, insofar as a specific movement phrase was concerned, “It doesn’t matter until it does and then we’ll change it... This thing is like a puzzle anyway...”

The dancers – joined by the full complement of three actors this time -- didn’t seem to mind, gazes fixed with attention just as they had been last time around, ready and willing to take direction and equally willing to generate something new.

Despite Rebecca’s disarming claims that she was “just playing around,” her theatrical insistence upon a kind of *inductive* choreography (“Do we repeat a section? Do we bring the same thing back?”) and her flat-out confession that she was “directing traffic like a crazy person,” I still saw narrative results at odds with chaos.

By this I mean that the performers were given to believe that a form was emerging out of an ostensibly spontaneous succession of prompts – that they actually wanted to believe this was happening – so that when they *were* successful at creating a new phrase that was crystallized and added to the story of [Silence](#), they were gratified.

There was a telling moment deep into the two-hour rehearsal when Rebecca could not find what she first innocuously referred to as “a piece of paper,” but then, as she became increasingly frantic and her face was flushed with exasperation, she told [Kim Whittam](#) it was her “*Overall Plan*.” But then in the next breath she went on to say, almost cavalierly, something like “Oh well, we’ll just push on without it if we have to.”

So which was it, I asked her in the foyer after the rehearsal – she was still somewhat out of breath and in a hurry – i.e., did she, or did she *not* “have a plan?” We both knew the answer.

You all, as dancers, use the term “improvisation” a lot and it is part of your “vocabulary.” One might think of “making something up.” However, the more I sit and watch Rebecca and the students, the more I see parallel functions – or one function like a layer on top of the other.

First, there’s the process of arranging bodies in space. There was a period of about twenty minutes when at least three different ideas were being incubated simultaneously: The actors were doing a dialogue back and forth across the width of the room, at each exchange drawing closer to each other while escalating the emotional tone. A group of dancers, meanwhile, was devising duets; and another group was practicing a trio. These configurations are symptomatic of

Harold Pinter's drama, and his work is the inspiration for Rebecca's.

The playwright's structural imperatives were then brought together as themes and variations when all three separate endeavors were pulled together and staged as movement illustrating words and vice-versa. It reminded me of a book I first came across when I was writing my biography of [Man Ray](#). He collaborated with his close friend, the poet [Paul Eluard](#), in 1937, and they published a collaborative book called [Les Mains Libres](#), explicitly publicized as "drawings by Man Ray *illustrated by* poems by Paul Eluard." The expected relationship was subverted.

While Rebecca was engaged in her choreography of positive reinforcement – a methodology where everything is "great" and "perfect" and "wonderful" – which it sincerely is, situationally speaking, until the next time – I also thought of another wonderful book that I read when it was first published 35 years ago, called [The Illusion of Technique](#) by the American philosopher and longtime NYU professor [William Barrett](#). You can probably see the intuitive connection just from the title. Barrett's central thesis is that the world around us (let's say, for our purposes, the world of the artist/dancer/actor) exists in a state of potential to be "reshaped" by humans. The artist sees her world as a vast field of inexhaustible potentialities. This capacity is even more important to acknowledge, Barrett writes (don't forget, this was 1988) in an environment of increasing technological encroachment – where "freedom can and in fact *must* be made real."

Another reiterating theme in Rebecca's performance grammar was "I'm *wondering* if...I'm *curious* to see if...I'm *kind of thinking* that...*Why don't we...*" etc etc etc. I felt that she wanted the students to see her in the act of rumination out loud – so that when they went ahead and responded to her "hypothesizing" and the result was good, they came away feeling powerful.

In the end, they were not just "feeling" powerful.

They were powerful.

'Till next time,
[NB](#)

The *Third* 2012-13 "Letter from a Danceurg" – October 8th Elizabeth Auclair/Martha Graham

Dear Lori: Last Friday, I gladly found the opportunity to spend an hour observing **Elizabeth Auclair** working with our dancers on the **Chorus from Martha Graham's *Night Journey* (1947)**. In a future "Letter" to you and our friends, I shall write about the archetypal roots for this iconic "psychic journey;" now, however, I will focus upon the magnificent technique foundation Liz is building within our students.

She began with floor exercises. For Martha Graham, as you know, the floor was the earth, the ground, the springboard, the platform, the basis for action. Palms flat, backs arched, the twelve young women “compressed” their spines (as Liz said), then were bidden to arise and whip through a sequence of three contractions – lower, middle, upper – each punctuated by a simultaneous out-push of breath and voice, arms spread wide, hands flexing inward at the wrist, the core of the body delving back, and back, and back.

From that point, Liz moved them into what she called “the angular geometry of the body...less like ballet,” she said, “and more offset...into an intentional *disarrangement*.” Down to the ground again they went, knees bent, accompanied by a literal contraction of the hands – flexed then cupped and distorted fingers – down into what I scribbled in my notes as “the penitent position,” another indelible Graham sign inspired by the Indian dancers of the Southwest, a pose of supplication to whatever gods have been watching over ritual since the beginning of time.

From “contraction and release until you can’t stand it anymore...until you feel your bones cracking,” Liz said with a smile (and she laughed and smiled frequently during these exercises), the dancers torqued into another iconic Graham form, the *spiral*, taking themselves back down to the ground, in a way falling, but in another sense not -- because the fall was *mediated*, set in slow motion to the grinding strings and woodwinds of William Schuman’s pulsating score. Liz directed them to feel “the diaphragm controlling the legs” ...

...and I thought, *Yes, there is a connection; it may not be logical, but it is biological.*

The fall depended upon the power of the contraction. In my years of watching Martha Graham’s work, I had not until that moment conceptualized contraction and release out beyond the center of the body. The dynamic originates there and as a through-line in Graham’s work can be traced to the anecdotal reminiscences of her students at the Eastman School in the earlier 1920s; and even before, to the “Orientalist” dicta of Graham’s teachers -- Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn.

Then came another important moment when Liz reminded the dancers – I say “reminded” because it sounded to me like she might have said this before – that during the contraction they are not only “accessing breath” but also “adding support with our muscles,” like the diastole and systole of a heart or pulse-beat, involuntary and likewise muscular. This heightened awareness of muscular power *distributed throughout the body* -- I saw at that moment on Friday -- enabled the permanence of muscle memory so essential to this complex mode of choreography.

Liz then had them “contract over [their] front leg.” This is challenging to depict with mere words; the effect was as if the dancers were hurling or *pitching* their body weights forward, up and over – drawing together and collecting the distributed weight into a point around the midriff, then *expelling* it across the room while simultaneously “keeping [their] hips up.”

Then Liz configured the twelve dancers into a phalanx, and the spiral she had instilled in their individual bodies expanded and diversified into the ensemble spiraling of *many* bodies traveling

across the studio space. Now Liz was looking for what she called “desperate breathing...not so much the outer body as the inner body.”

The breathing that accompanies the Graham contraction and release is real and likewise metaphorical. I don't think I'm overdramatizing this. Martha Graham was as much a cultural intellectual as she was a dancer. She read deeply and widely in worldwide ancient myths and later in Jungian psychology. We know that *Night Journey* is predicated upon an ancient story, and the Oedipus/Jocasta story itself dwells in our unconscious.

Martha Graham was obsessed with the artist's imperative of *untergangen* (the “down-going” into the self that must happen before the new work can come up – and Lori, you always exhort our dancers to “dig deeper”).

Martha Graham was engaged in a lifelong “errand into the maze” *of her own mind* just as much as she was on a crusade to push the body far beyond all previous conventions of dance.

‘Till next time,
NB

The 4th Letter from a Danceaturng – October 25, 2012 A Conversation with Benjamin Millepied

Dear Lori: How fascinating to write this letter to you, as usual – except for the fact that you were in the audience yesterday while I had the wonderful opportunity to talk with Benjamin Millepied upstairs at the Kasser Theater. I arrived to a space already near-filled, and by the time our special guest joined me shortly after 2:30 there must have been a hundred fifty people there – I am so glad that so many of our dance and Theatre majors and faculty were able to attend, and also grateful to Jed Wheeler, Carrie Urbanic, & Tom Miller for their outreach and hospitality. Thanks to Carrie's invitation, I had already sat in on a rehearsal for Millepied's piece, *Moving Parts* (2012), which will be premiered this evening along with presentations of two iconic classic works, *Winterbranch* (1964) by Merce Cunningham and *Quintett* (1993) by William Forsythe. And speaking of William Forsythe, it was all the more remarkable that Millepied took time out to talk to us considering that *Forsythe himself* was at that very moment in rehearsal with the six dancers. Reading several interviews and watching videos of Millepied on YouTube, I was expecting him to be a man of few words – or perhaps several words. So I launched into our talk by asking him to define the mission and meaning of his “Curatorial Collective” – the group of colleagues and friends who are working alongside him at the birth of his new company. He leaned back in his chair – as he did for the whole time –planted his feet on the floor, and rocked imperceptibly forward and back, and dove into a rapid, highly-articulate, at times breathless (as if his thoughts and speech were at odds) discourse, full speed ahead for at least five minutes or more, and I thought – “What a relief. This is going to be easy...” He spoke animatedly of the joys of collaboration with like-minded artists Charles Fabius, Dimitri Chamblas, Matthieu

Humery, and Nico Muhly – this last named the thirty-year old wunderkind composer who has already created many musical underpinnings for Millepied’s choreography. I then asked him about his recent performances at LA MOCA and how it seemed to me as if more dance was happening in art museums in the past couple of years – the Whitney has just hired an actual curator for this purpose, as a matter of fact. Millepied agreed. He said that it was completely appropriate for moving bodies to inhabit art spaces and he intended to do more of that – to bring more dance into places heretofore unexpected. This was a big theme that I picked up on from the outset and, from delving into his informing impulses. Millepied wants to get dance “out there.” He wants, wholeheartedly, to keep the flame alive. This was borne out when I then gave you and our dance program a “shout-out” and ran down the list of all the amazing *repetiteurs* who have worked with us over the past decade from the traditions of Paul Taylor, Jose Limon, Martha Graham, Charles Weidman and on and on. Millepied had some critical words for an American culture that does not seem to respect its rich dance legacy enough; that he feels a responsibility, in addition to initiating new works, to bringing back the classics before they become faded memories. This is the eternal challenge of the embodied art we all love, and this young man feels it deeply. I then got into some of my observations of *Moving Parts*, being careful not to give away too much in advance of the performances coming this weekend. I asked how he had come to work with Christopher Wool, the “Visual Installation” artist who designed the three huge square silk-screened alphabet-laden wheeled panels that the six dancers manipulate and glide from side to side and front to back of the stage as they perform the work. Millepied said that he had seen Wool’s work at the apartment of a friend and had liked it and so called him up and they devised the “set.” I loved that so much of what Millepied was doing was spontaneous yet intermingled with deliberation. Indeed, this was a good way to think about his choreography. It synthesizes, I told him, the fluidity of Jerome Robbins, his influential early mentor, and the geometric pace and pedestrian moves of Merce Cunningham, with whom he took classes for some years. Millepied agreed, and went on to speak of the joys of his craft, his delight in configuring bodies in space, taking a mental sketch and making it physical, and – with a wistful tone – of what it now feels like to work with 20-year olds. He reflected for a few minutes on his incredulity that at one time in his past life he was doing 150 shows a year, practicing eight hours a day and constantly in motion. Now, as a director, he realizes what it feels like to have authority, and he is sensitive to this as well. I noted his easy rapport with the dancers on stage and the way his light touch was sufficient to motivate them. He smiled. This behavior, he said, was in response to what he himself had learned at New York City Ballet. I followed up with a question about his apparent dissatisfaction the previous day with the lighting of *Moving Parts* and how he had joked during rehearsal that after dinner he was going to “change out the whole thing.” He said that was not facetious – that driving home in his car he realized they needed a white floor and so now they have one. We moved on to some excellent questions from our students and faculty -- one was about his advice to young choreographers. “Get out and see as much as possible,” Millepied said emphatically. “Learn all you can. Be open to everything. Don’t be afraid to be original. Don’t just put on music and move in the same old ways.” Between questions, Millepied’s eyes took on a distant cast, and I thought, “He wants to get back into the rehearsal hall. He is the middle of preparations. He has been taken out of his element.” As gracious and forthcoming as his conversation was throughout, there was always – to me, sitting three feet away from him, a small and persistent corner of Millepied’s consciousness that was elsewhere -- and rightly so. I decided to give it another five minutes. We spoke of his music collaborator, Nico Muhly, and of the use of music in general in Millepied’s original work. I

pointed out how much he seemed to like the solo violin. Indeed, growing up in a cultured household in Bordeaux and Senegal, he said, he grew to love chamber music – as well as books and art and all the fine cultural things. These affinities, as well as his knowing acceptance of “the popular” kept coming through in his smooth descriptions and references to Marcel Duchamp in one sentence and Barbara Kruger in the next – to the surge of dance shows on TV in one sentence and the thrill of working with Peter Martins the next. “I want to go where the audiences are,” he insisted several times. Benjamin Millepied impressed me – and, I suspect, all of us privileged to be in Kasser with him this day – as a hyper-energetic, driven, sophisticated, complex and worldly-wise *homme libre*, with bittersweet awareness of the way the dancer’s body begins to speak to him, the knowledge that with physical limitations on the one hand come openings of the imagination on the other; he has begun to learn to respond to these signs and devise a big future for himself and whomever is blessed to work with him.

The appreciative applause well-deserved, Benjamin Millepied stood and nodded and smiled and turned around and disappeared back to the performance space.

‘Till next time,
NB

The 5th Letter from a Danceatarg – November 19, 2012

Dear Lori: Last Friday, I spent an enjoyable hour and a half sitting in on a rehearsal for *Reiterations*, the new ballet created and choreographed by our own Elizabeth McPherson.

As you know, this work will be premiered at *Works-a-Foot* in early December. It contains some witty “in-jokes.” In the interests of confidentiality, and to allow for the sparkling visual and allusive humor to shine through the swirling Karinska bodices and blue Romantic tutus, I shall refrain from telling you and our readers about the derivation of the title and its implications of canon, repetition and variations upon a theme.

We have been privileged over the past five years to experience Beth’s depth of knowledge through the restagings of vintage modern works she has supervised and notated. However, this is the first time Beth has devised and set an original piece of her own at MSU. You will soon see that Beth’s choreographic methodology is quite in line with her pedagogical technique – by turns inductive, coaching, inspiring, obsessive, enthusiastic, demonstrative, pensive, and, most powerfully – *demanding*.

This random 90-minute sampling of Beth’s words and exclamations tells much: “Be really clear on the counts when you come in” – “Present yourself as who you want to be” – “I want you to run – really run!” – “Fulfill the movement, not the thought” - “Reach more – travel more – communicate more” – “It’s getting better...we’re almost there [repeated numerous times]” – “Crisper! Sharper!” - “*Off* the floor! *Off* the floor! *Off* the floor!”

The bright strains of Telemann and Vivaldi set a festive and sprightly ambience right away. Beth must have stopped the music at least half a dozen times after a few opening measures; the staggered entrances were still not right...

...then, deeper into the hour, she stood up from her spot next to the mirror and related a quote from Jerome Robbins to his dancers that had been key to her thought process during the construction of the piece: "Only relate to each other – not the audience." She explained that her ballet, likewise, was in the Romantic vein, concerned with narrative, rather than with the bravura style of Classical ballet.

One of Beth's primary goals was to propel the dancers to communicate more directly, look at each other, smile, be committed to the transmission of a feeling toward their opposite or partner – a facility she believes requires emphasis with all of our students. I have heard Beth dwell upon this theme in other classes – wanting students to fulfill the movement, not remain trapped in the thought or in over-thinking; to escape from the bondage of steps into affect-driven emancipation.

In another sense, without giving away the poetic implications, the title, *Reiterations*, applies to Beth's *repetitive* exhortations –as she raises the bar every ten minutes so that the standard of perfection remains out of reach. What's intriguing about this metaphor is that it ties neatly into the *literary* definition of Romantic, to which I am accustomed, i.e., constant striving toward the unity of nature which man (and woman) will never achieve, but nonetheless must pursue.

What of the dance itself? It has a traditional, comforting structure, and an almost-seamless beginning, middle and end. I say "almost" because adjustments and changes are still being made, even though only two full rehearsals and a tech run-through are all that remain on the calendar; the storm threw a snarl into the schedule for everybody around here.

The soloists are double-cast, Tracy/Emma and Malcolm/Genna, and it is thrilling to watch their similarities and differences, while the ensemble of women supports them and spins a warm and loving web of entrances, exits and patterns. Watching the strenuous rehearsal – "marking" was frowned upon -- I realized why, during the auditions for her piece in September, all Beth wanted to see were *piqué* turns, travelling turns beginning with a step onto a straight leg. She was looking for facility, strength and consistency. In our chat after rehearsal, Beth also made mention several times of *musicality*, *line*, and other attributes she seeks to elicit and define in our dance majors.

When I reflect, away from the rehearsal hall, upon the nature of Beth's exhortations and outcries, I realize she wants to see the dancers "open up" their centers, spread arms and reach more widely, hold heads high and smile more broadly, jump higher, travel farther.

Beth McPherson's ballet-sense is about the expressive energy that she *knows* is tightly-coiled within the bodies of youth. 'Till next time,
NB

PS: For those who missed it, here is the [link to my Benjamin Millepied interview](#), with many great photos by Mike Peters of our enthusiastic students in the audience.

The 6th Letter from a Danceaturg – December 9, 2012

Dear Lori: It seems surreal to be writing you a letter, since we sat next to each other on Friday night in Memorial Auditorium during *Works-a-Foot*. While I was scrawling notes in the dark, tapping my feet, nodding my head and exclaiming “wow” and “amazing” and “ridiculous!” [in the ecstatic sense] etc, you were sitting still, silent, focused, & concentrating. Meanwhile, behind us, Jessie DiMauro and Linda Roberts were murmuringly critiquing/praising the dancers one by one by name as they came and went on stage.

Body-language and verbal language aside, it was an evening I can only summarize as *timeless*.

By which I mean that I lost my sense of time passing for the show’s two hours. As each dance began -- and I will get to them in a moment -- I became immersed in its particular, individual ambience. Each dance set its own terms and did not relinquish them. My internal reality and my sense of location were subverted and surrendered. In this respect a word of praise goes to Jorge Arroyo and Kaimaiya Cuffee because the production quality, light and sound values fabricated this separate world.

It’s easier to explain by taking a quick pass through each dance and then coming back with an overview. Beth McPherson’s **Reiterations**, which I have previously written about, was **floaty**. Perhaps there has been no such word in the English language, however there is now. The piece was reverent to the ballet form, yet humorous at the same time. **Dance Me to the End of Love** by Joao Carvalho was **moody**. Kudos to whoever thought of the billowy white shirts with sleeves occasionally rolled up (Debra Otte, I am sure). Jessica DiMauro’s **Adjectio**, as every year, displayed her vivid **imagination** to full effect. I am going to sit down with Jessie soon and talk with her about where she gets her strangely-moving ideas. I intentionally did not sit in on any of Earl Mosley’s rehearsals for **I See You** this fall because the element of surprise is central to an appreciation of his work. Paradoxically, I was not surprised -- at how absolutely galvanizing and brilliant and compelling it was: **funky-formal**. The “Daughters of the Night” Chorus from Martha Graham’s **Night Journey**, set by Elizabeth Auclair, was quintessentially modern: **angular, acrobatic, stark, difficult**. I saw a different side of Jay T. Jenkins on display in **Parallel Lives**; intervals of **classicism** threaded throughout the hip-hop made me sit up even straighter in my seat. I loved Kim Whittam’s **clean**, sinister **Archetypes** – the Miles Davis-style infused background by Glen Fittin meshed with glimpses of grey shiny trousers inside the apparition of a multibodied entity weaving diagonally across the stage. Karen Gayle always has a **story** to tell; **Pace** was a colorfully pulsating testimony to endurance, perseverance, discipline – in a way, the story of dance itself. Then came **Runaway** by Larry Keigwin, set by Jaclyn Walsh and rehearsed by Diann Sichel. I had also seen an early rehearsal of this piece in the Dance Studio where white tape was laid on the floor to simulate the space. But to see it on the cavernous proscenium, to “get” the geometric truth of it, the in-your-face lighting, throbbing sound, satirical strut and bouffant hair, & the unsettling way the work starts as if it had already been going on, and ends by not-ending – well, for this one, **everybody stood and cheered**.

Every year as I take my seat for the Dance Division shows, I remind myself to be as objective as possible, to think the way I tell my writing students to think: at arm's length; to study the work of art – the dance – as a display to be evaluated for inherent merits, critiqued for concomitant defects.

And every night after a show like this as I get in my car and drive home in the dark I am playing over the entire repertory as if a movie were projected on the inside surface of my forehead. Then the next day when I encounter the white computer screen I realize that objectivity, while necessary, should be held off for awhile in deference to the simple appreciation of youth and talent. I appreciate the energy of the young dancers; perhaps I am idealizing them too much.

Is this necessarily bad?

I know from the countless hours I have watched rehearsals that your dancers get plenty of criticism, insistent commands for 'more' of this and 'more' of that. I know that they are berated by tough teachers, driven to get up off the floor and try again & again until the impossible threshold of perfection is in sight -- but never crossed.

When it comes time to perform publicly – the audience on Friday was predominantly parents, family, friends, fellow-students, and faculty – students deserve to be *received* in the deepest sense. The reception is heard in the applause, seen in the bouquets of flowers, felt in the lobby group-photos among the buzz of laughter and conversation at a deafening pitch.

On the other side of another long and complex series of shows awaits the return to the studio, to warm-ups and classes, learning by doing.

'Till next time, and happy holidays,
NB

The 7th Letter from a Danceaturg – January 28th, 2013

Dear Lori: Last Friday morning, from 9:00-10:00 a.m. in the Dean's Conference Room, an historic moment in MSU Dance Division history occurred: the first official, on-the-books *Danceaturgy Workshop* Seminar.

Marissa, Julie, Felicia, Nick, Caitlin, Colleen, Malcolm, Heather, Crystal, Tori, Kelly, Mark and Beth were all there – as was Linda Roberts, who contributed to the sense of history in the room by reminiscing about the departmental *Informance* and how it has varied and grown through the years since she invented it. I must confess that I talked *'way too much* at this first session because of my unbridled excitement and enthusiasm that after four years of developing *Danceaturgy* into an original critical discipline here at MSU, we all finally have a real, credit-bearing course; and also because, as I said to the students, it signals a time for their voices and the voices of their peers to be heard – and read -- more widely.

In addition to brainstorming about the possibilities for the March 20th *Informance* -- and the extent to which it will be shaped by our extraordinary 2012-13 *Myth & Transformation* repertory of Martha Graham, May O'Donnell, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, Larry Keigwin, Earl Mosley, and Rebecca Stenn – we had an important conversation about the modern dance *legacy* in general. Yesterday's article in *The New York Times* about the ['retirement' of Trisha Brown](#) is the most recent vivid reminder.

The wider cultural benefit of investing time and thought into danceaturgy has become more apparent to me as I spend more time in The Jerome Robbins Dance Collections at The New York Public Library in search of anecdotal documentation about Martha Graham, my new biographical obsession. There are, indeed, published reminiscences of those who passed through the doors of her studio, but taped interviews with her earliest students are rare. I also shared with our danceaturgs the difficulties I encountered trying to do research on Robert Battle in preparation for his momentous visit here several years ago. Quite bluntly, there were *no* recorded interviews with him on record in the NYPL, if you can believe it. Before the Battle experience was the *D-Man* “eureka moment,” five years ago, when, also at the Library, I sleuthed out a typed transcript of Demian Acquavella's last revealing and poignant interview before he died, and shared it with Ella Rosewood and Leah Cox at BTJ/New York Live Arts, much to their surprise and delight.

My point in relating these exemplary anecdotes to the danceaturgs was to remind them of their *own* responsibilities to the modern dance legacy going forward. The time has come to start gathering and writing up and videotaping more of the contributory materials by students of dance here at MSU. You and the faculty, have already done a great job of taping the major dance shows; rather, I am talking about preserving our students' impressions of working with visiting *regisseurs* – the amazing array of choreographers and teachers and representatives from the major dance companies who parade through here year in and year out. It's an embarrassment of riches, as I have said to you; but we here in the Dance Division do not want to be “embarrassed” by not amassing a richer and more varied record of their presence.

Linda and I also impressed upon the danceaturgs that, beyond the *Informance*, we want to intensify their participation in *The Danceaturgy Archive*

[http://www.montclair.edu/arts/creative-research-](http://www.montclair.edu/arts/creative-research-center/thedanceaturgyarchive/)

[center/thedanceaturgyarchive/](http://www.montclair.edu/arts/creative-research-center/thedanceaturgyarchive/) which, as you know, now has a dedicated page on **The Creative Research Center** Web Site. I reminded the students that in addition to bearing witness to their work and the work of their fellow-dancers, we also want more introspective results from deep thinking (as Kelly Vaghenas put it [d]anthropologically: “thick description”).

The four course objectives for *The Danceaturgy Workshop* that you, Linda, Beth and I came up with over the past two years laid out the prospects well:

- (1) To *stimulate* within selected undergraduate dance majors a capacity to expand their traditional point of view toward the art from performance-driven (“subjective”) to spectatorship (“objective”);
- (2) to *develop* the capacity to think deeply and write critically about the pieces in the thematic Dance Program repertory in a given academic year;

- (3) to *cultivate* the ability to contextualize “The Modern Dance” within the broader cultural setting of the Modernist Movement in the arts; and
- (4) to *embody* these intellectual exercises and elucidations, thereby coming full circle and enriching themselves as dancers

We should add another objective: (5) to make a commitment to a more secure future for the evanescent modern dance legacy by documenting the thoughts, words and actions of their peers and themselves.

Consonant with the course objectives, there are also two books in the Danceatourgy Workshop syllabus: *The Vision of Modern Dance in the words of its creators*, edited by Jean Morrison Brown *et.al.* (Princeton Book Publishers, 1998); and *Modernism: A Graphic Guide*, by Chris Rodrigues and Chris Garratt (New York: Totem Books, 2010).

We are, eventually, going to get into the ways in which modernism and “the modern dance” interpenetrate and envelop each other. But now that we’ve had the first orientation meeting of the danceatourgs, I realize that we need to measure our pace, and devote some more time to exploratory conversation. After all, it is a “workshop.”

Toward the end of our hour together, we also decided that we want to add commentary about *Dance Collage* into the mix. There was great interest around the table in measuring the students’ own choreographic training and the development of their original work “against” (as it were...) the power and influence of the faculty and the visiting choreographers. The student-as-choreographer seeks his/her own voice and in that process hopes to engender a personal style.

However, [“however...” my favorite word these days, it seems] style is something dance artists *come to after coming through* the strictures of others who set work on them.

There is *so much* to talk about. As I promised, from now on the danceatourgs will do most of the talking -- not me. Yours, NB

Eighth Letter from a Danceatourg – Feb. 24, 2013 – MSU Dance Division at the Joyce Theater in New York City

Dear Lori: When we turned the corner from 18th Street onto 8th Avenue and saw through the rainy mist the iconic, instantly-familiar Joyce Theater marquee with the four words MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY – that was the moment I knew we had truly arrived. Then we made our way through the crowded lobby already abuzz at 1:45, and entered the familiar realm of the steeply-banked, welcoming hall, and you took your seat among the Reserved, and I found a fantastic perch in the very last row on the aisle, and the room filled up quickly, and I realized *again* that we had arrived. And then I opened the program for The University Partners Showcase and saw **Montclair State University** listed on the cover with four – only four! – others (Franklin & Marshall, Sarah Lawrence, New World School of the Arts, and Adelphi) and Graham II and the All-City Panorama, and felt a palpable surge of pride. Then I stood up to survey the crowd and someone called my name and I turned around and it was Janet Eilber, Artistic Director, and

LaRue Allen, Executive Director of The Martha Graham Center, smiling and waving; and there were Don McDonagh and Leslie Getz a few rows down, and NWI artist Rebecca Stenn, and our own Beth McPherson and Kim Whittam and Diann Sichel and rehearsal director Jessie DiMauro next to our brilliant restager Elizabeth Auclair (beaming) and Linda Roberts, and Randy Mugleston, and CART Dean Daniel Gurskis. The place was packed.

The first number was Martha Graham's *Celebration* -- this piece premiered almost exactly seventy-nine years ago to the day (February 25, 1934). As the young women from Franklin & Marshall jumped and jumped and jumped and jumped and jumped to the score by Graham's longtime lover, mentor and collaborator, Louis Horst, originally for trumpet and drum, I understood how very close the two of them had been; as close as the movement was to the music, and, as Horst had written, by this time Graham wanted the movement to actually *lead* the music. But, in the back of my mind, I was impatient for the next number – *Daughters of the Night* from *Night Journey* (1947) –

because it featured J. Selesky, Mirela Amaral, Dina Crupi, Julie Cullen, Colleen “Coco” Lynch, Marcella Maysonet, and Crystal Rodriguez. You told me at intermission that you cried during the performance, and in retrospect I see why. From the instant our ladies appeared out of the William Schuman-infused darkness into the cold, hard light of revelation, mirroring Jocasta's journey of “torment and foreboding,” I had trouble breathing. I do not know whether it was the unique perspective visually occasioned by the way the Joyce space seemed to extend so far laterally; or the pure silence of the audience; or the other-worldliness of the scene; or the startling impression that each woman had a different expression, yet they were all the same...for the first several minutes, I was in a fugue state.

A phrase of Agnes DeMille's describing *Night Journey* leapt to mind, that this particular dance was “comprised of mighty and desperate ideas, frantic cries for identification.” We are accustomed, through long tradition, to view the saga of Oedipus through his eyes (or lack of them). As with all the core Greek tragedies, we know what the protagonists do not; we anticipate the end long before it arrives, and yet, when it finally does, we still feel agony.

To be sure, it was not only the faces of our dancers expressing this agony. As I have written before, the contractions were of the entire body; it seemed as if even the contractions of the *hands*, that configuration of fingers into a strange, curved, hook-like arc, were audible. The contractions of the hands transformed by turns into partial masks in front of faces not wanting to accept the spectacle to come, and then into supplicant gestures toward the impassive gods, and then again into knives slicing the acquiescent kinesphere.

When the Chorus was configured behind and around Jocasta, I marveled at how the others were able to support J's personal drama. She enacted private torture in a public way as the Chorus reiterated and then expanded upon it. And then the Chorus would initiate a series of movements and seem to *expel* J/Jocasta into her separate alien place. Because she never found a secure home among the others, the bodily tension was so excruciating as to reach me in the back row like an arrow pinning me to the back of my seat -- and at one point I realized I was slouching down as if to hide from the emotional energy attacking me.

Mirela, Dina, Julie, Colleen, Marcella and Crystal – to mention their names one more time! – were furthermore, thanks to the dynamism of Elizabeth Auclair, imbued with the spirit of Martha Graham’s *theatricality*. Early reviewers used to come away from Graham’s performances writing about how no matter how many other dancers were with Graham on the stage, she always managed to seize attention. In this case, all of our dancers individually and collectively did just that: the contours of their bodies, as Graham intended, discernible through the long gowns, quite literally told a story; as I said to Janet Eilber after the show, it was Graham’s awareness of archetypal narrative that came through so effectively in *Night Journey* as absorbed and explicated by the students of Montclair State University’s Dance Division.

Adorations, excerpt from *The Rite of Spring*, *Ritual to the Sun*, *Crucifixus* and *Hosanna*, and *Panorama* followed in headlong gorgeousness over the ensuing two hours, and I send kudos to the other colleges and Graham II and the All-City Panorama Project. However the adrenaline had long since kicked in and it was hard for me to concentrate as fully on all that other very fine work. All I could think of was the absolute and consummate *projection* of our dancers and the thunderous applause that saluted them at the end.

Even by the time male dancers had joined her company, Martha Graham insisted upon the eternal feminine and its permutations. The “journey” metaphor rises and falls in other works, perhaps because that is the woman’s lot in life. It would be pretentious of me to speculate further.

In the car on the way back to Montclair, you read me an email from Jessie in which she apologized for having to rush out so quickly but she had to put the *Night Journey* girls on a bus from Port Authority back to the University so they would arrive in time for the evening performance of *Dance Collage*.

That says it all.

‘till next time, NB

April 8th 2013 – Ninth Letter from a Danceatarg & link to the Informance Video

Dear Lori: By the time you read this, I have no doubt your inbox will be filled to overflowing with kudos on *Danceworks 2013 – Myth & Transformation*.

This just came in my email from Janet Eilber of Martha Graham Company: “Neil - The concert was great on Saturday night! The rep was so well chosen and the dancers were excellent. Please tell them all how impressed I was -- with *Night Journey*, of course, but with everything else as well!”

My predominant thoughts this weekend while watching the show had to do with the sheer diversity of dances offered – from the magisterial, art-deco-like antique imagery of *Powers of Ten* – to the visceral agonies and emotional peaks of *Night Journey* – the impossible-to-follow improvisational intricacy of *Continuous Replay* – the cocky struts and hip-throwing riffs of *Runaway* – the dark mournfulness of *Winter for a Year* – the dance-theatre surreal poetry of *Approaching Silence* – and the raucous “all about the jacket” rhythmic irreverence of *I See You*.

It has been an intense & bittersweet run of events lately, from the triumph of ACDF, to the public forum of the Informance, the farewell tribute to Linda Roberts, the cheering, full houses for *Danceworks*, the senior students’ well-deserved awards, and coming up: choreographer **[Jasmin Vardimon’s visit next week](#)** – including a **Q&A** with me for all the dancers and faculty in **Kasser on Tuesday afternoon 4/16 at 4:00** and the premiere of Jasmin’s *Freedom*; and then our return to the 92nd St Y Fridays @ Noon on 4/19 – and, still to come, the publication of the epic *Danthology* collection of writings by the danceatrgs at the end of the semester.

The enumeration of “everything we are doing” distracts us from thoughts of the day to day training and technique and classes that when combined in the bodies and minds of the student dancers produces such artfulness, stamina and grace.

I am pleased to give you and the entire dance community a new link: **[Danceatrgy](#)** **[Archive video of the Informance](#)**, recorded and produced by communications major Lindsay Rassmann and her team.

Watch, and enjoy -- and learn.

‘Till next year
NB