

9/5/2011-4/21/2012. Letters from a Danceurg. Neil Baldwin to Lori Katterhenry.

No.1 - September 5, 2011

Dear Lori:

I am grateful to Ryoko Kudo, Maxine Steinman and our MSU dancers for opening the doors to the studio in Life Hall last week and welcoming me to sit in on three sessions of the setting of excerpts from *There is a Time* (1956) by Jose Limon. They worked on "Opening Circle," "Plant and Reap," "Mourn," "Laugh and Dance," and "Hate & War."

Reviewing and editing my on-site notes, I recalled a helpful observation by Doris Humphrey in *The Art of Making Dances* with regard to this work. She writes, "*There is a Time* states its thematic material in the opening section and builds all the rest of its many parts on variations of the same movements. Unfortunately, this escapes most people; what they see is a suite form, contrasted ideas of dramatic or lyric significance. This is because the eye is not sufficiently trained to remember movement themes, and will usually miss them completely."

Indeed, the fact that the original title of *There is a Time* was *Variations on a Theme* came through powerfully during these sessions. Ryoko's precisely-planned and at the same time intuitively-executed method was the embodiment of Limon's preliminary concept notes for the dance, when he said that "the community...form[s] a very close circle which pulsates symbolizing an ovum or womb in travail...[T]he large circle...symbolize[s] time – the great continuity – eternal, unbroken...without hurry and without end."

I was also mindful of a point that Carla Maxwell made in an interview with *The New York Times* ten years ago about classic modern dance: "What's indispensable is a consistent point of view that relates to the times," she said. "The whole *raison d'être* of early moderns like Humphrey and Limón was to create dances about the human condition. There's always a spiritual element in their work. Without that quality, I don't think anything lives on...Jose wanted to convey passion in the most impeccable form."

I struggled with how best to distill and convey such a wealth of accumulated physical and verbal material. I finally decided to disaggregate my sentence-by-sentence observations from Ryoko's imaginative teaching flow, then present the separate points of view in two different typefaces – **Calibri for Ryoko**, Garamond for me.

This letter is another attempt to distinguish the dancer from the dance; as well as add to the evolving poetics of **danceaturgy**.

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

There is a time

Tuesday

Ryoko -- Find your space – give yourself a nice hug in the ribcage - up and down and counting – a five and a six and a seven and an eight – give yourself a nice voluminous torso, then open it up – hug twice – dive twice – open and open, more and more – expansive and full and springy – stay grounded and rise upward – see how long you can say vertical in your torso – let the breath initiate – soften from the core and let the movement follow through – let go of whatever tension you don't need – make it always a little more yours – gentle arpeggio fingertips -- offering and receiving – let your whole body speak — rise...rise – like birth and rebirth over and over and over again – breathe out with the torso – more up than back – at the bottom of the *grand plié*

think about the *rebound* — let your body release a little bit at the beginning — I want you to be buoyant — you do not want to go too far down — and as soon as you get down there, you want to come up — let the fingertips dive — enjoy the ride like a rollercoaster — *swing* with the upper body — get up there and crest, and let it fall — let it just fall — it is *free* up there! — you don't have to work all the time — now, get *deep* — *dig* in there — as soon as the foot lands, the back goes against it, and then the head takes over -- use your *plies* — one leads to another, and the energy drives it forward from one to the next — up and down at the same time — with a humble head and chest — the pelvis starts to fall when you start to travel — and don't forget about your arm - it is still describing the circle in front of you — like a teapot — in a full circle — now brush the whole foot -- the *down* beat drives the *up*beat — there is a slight halt or hovering, then it tips into the next movement — once it goes up, you let it fall long — keep reaching out — if it falls sooner, go up — let your leg dangle for a second before it goes up — keep it low and kind of swivel that hip — now, we *toss* seeds onto the ground — there is a lot of *swinging* and brushing - let me see your spirit through your eyes — don't let me be able to tell that you don't know it — fake it out if you have to! — and now we are going to use our torsos — down down up up down down up up — a willowy torso — like stargazing -- while you move to the side — sense the weight of different locations in your body — can you tell your neighbors what you needed or what it felt like when you were holding hands with other people, and figure out what didn't work? — put a fist on your sternum and roll it around — fist/flower — fist/flower — fist/flower — because in the circle, you will all be connected — you will all be one organism — now I want you to slice some tall grass, because you need to go *in* there — press and chop before and in front of you — carve it out — carve out a path -- now the sun is just coming up — we need to get to work before it gets too hot — think about slicing, *not* whipping — make the grass as long as your shoulders — *see* what you're cutting — and you *see* your arms and fingertips — the combination of circular and broad — you are pushing into it - and then pull, and then *swing* — imagine other things in the space besides just emptiness — gauge your energy depending upon what the music is doing —

Start with the circle — piece by piece, it begins — like the very first cell that existed on earth starts to split and becomes the first organism — anything that is pregnant with all possibilities — imagine -- and listen to the introductory music of the opening “circle” section, eyes closed — it is relatively mute — it is matted, not sparking — it is round — wavy — it gives you a lot of information so you have that layering and richness - carry the space in front of you — you can be informed by the person next to you — hold hands again — sway slower, and longer... — the feeling initiates and extends through the circle and goes all the way back to you — so you all have to help each other — give and take with your neighbors — look right into the center of the circle — like there is a plumb line down the center of your body from the center of the top of your head — maybe you can see the aura of the person across from you — they are carrying *your* space — see the whole column in front of you — your *friends* are there! — you cannot do it by yourself! — imagine growing from a little seed to a whole belly — and now, shoulder to shoulder, I am going to take my friends with me into the center — cross arms overhead — like goal-posting arms — stay open, open — rising toward the end of the note, into the silence— when you look up, you see the whole earth, ready to be born — and imagine...the parts of a clock moving around — precise and simple — as if it is a building block — each piece needs to be quite solid — a building block that creates a whole -- so you need to help each other out — tell each other what you need! — every time a breath comes in or focus rises, there should be a *swelling of the heart*, a thought before the movement — we start imploded before we get exploded — let your body settle for a second — imagine that you are the

base of the universe – you are not *in* it, but you are *carrying* it – it’s almost as if you are falling away from the stars and then reaching for them again –

NB There is something sad about the opening minutes, but not in a depressing way. Brett Deptua plays a repetitive round and round on the piano and the dancers find their ways in. When he changes to the drums, they evoke more specific movements, from flow into abruptness and back again. I wonder, where does the breath fit in? Because from up close, where I am sitting typing at my little table, they seem to be struggling with breathing and its control. When Ryoko adds movement into the equation and the students take off diagonally across the floor, each exercise builds upon the prior one, and the air becomes more charged, ebullient and “fun.” She adds elements upon elements as parts of the body come in more and more. The different parts blend into the entirety, like the individual and the ensemble. I am realizing that it is one thing to write her words out as an instruction, and another to treat what she says as a “description.” In any case, so much of it is about *rising* and then *carrying the body forward* with that sense of *upwardness* as the most important element – triumphant. Another key element is the minuscule time-break *between* the movements, the pivot-point, following the natural logic of the body, from going the same direction to intentionally shifting direction. She does this by instructing them to face another end of the room. It’s like a parade from left to right, instead of front to back. Always a spring-like connection from one step into the next – to avoid haphazard movement. You must possess an awareness of different realms of your body and also a keen eye for the perambulations of everybody else. So that is why, between tries, Ryoko tells the students to talk to each other. She describes the movements using natural, organic, even at times pastoral terms. There is a constant sense of a space first being *defined* and then *captured*, in different ways, repetitively and rhythmically.

They go for a full ninety minutes without stopping. After a ten-minute break at the end of the class, the dancers divide into Group A and Group B, preparatory to having their first experience with the actual piece. Ryoko wants them first to listen to the musical theme and get sense of rhythm in their bodies. She wants them to keep a notebook journal as they go along so they will remember their insights. Norman Dello Joio’s music (*Meditations on Ecclesiastes*) is Stravinsky-like, pulsating and driving strings and counterpoint with bass, reminding me of the ups and downs of the movement dynamic that the students have learned. Now is the time for the students to begin to understand the *application* of the different elements into the actual work. Listening to the score, I am reminded of *The Rite of Spring*, that same sense of origins and birth and primal feelings; and remember and envision the wall-sized Matisse, *La Danse*, I saw at the Barnes Collection last year – five dyad-like, orange women in a circle, holding hands, heads tilted one way and another, looking both at what is going up and what is coming down. There are echoes of antiquity in the dancing circle, too. In the pause before they start to move counter-clockwise, our dancers take the information in and “get” it, and Ryoko offers them little thumbs-up gestures of approval. Each and every dancer in the circle has a different style of concentrating; I felt embarrassed that my clicking typing was the loudest noise in the room and that I had become a distraction. A story is being told through the body and when you see it being constructed piece by piece, the narrative makes sense -- utterly. There is a narrative to the physicality; the narrative is movement-based, and depends upon what works. In response, Ryoko breaks down each component and describes it without the music, then returns to the music.

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Wednesday

Ryoko – Like you are playing the piano, each note has to be clear – keep the fingertips reaching out – and what are you *saying* with those gestures? – carry that open basket in front of you, with the arms curved and open – keep your focus up, and cradle your vision into the sky – take it off

and go a little further – your back is impressioning in the back space, and then coming forward – front back side nothing, front back side nothing – let the focus take you - find your standing leg, then go *off* it – *offspring* from it – from the pubic or butt or center of pelvis — you are hanging from the elbow, then *release* the elbow – as if you are a marionette, you still have a string hanging on your fingertips – you are lunging and thrusting like a fencer -- you should see the whole ceiling – and you want to *take in* as much as possible – what is your favorite fruit? – strawberries? – imagine they are hanging up there, and you are reaching for them, and you *want* them -- you are going to reach until you fall — now, fine tune it -- put your artistry in there, and think about how you want to do that movement – it can be big, but not out of control – and also for a second you do nothing – that pivot point – the *pause* — so now it is like an accordion – the way one side, and then the other, starts to fold and unfold – it works well in a circle – alone, it is not fun — in the jump – hang from your back – and now, we are in mourning – we feel the *weight* of loss and sorrow – this is a dragging procession, with shoulders tilted down – you have wrapped yourself in a cape or a cloak of mourning - and then you gain a sense of consoling yourself – so give yourself a hug, and then let it go – it would be as if I am talking about my loss – my voice is low – keep your thought of this low sound talking – you are staggering forward under the weight of the sadness – the difficulty of proceeding forward when one is feeling like this – the vulnerable place at the center of the chest is revealed, and then covered up – revealed, covered up...

NB -- The room is more relaxed today; people (including me) know what to expect. The goal is fluidity, and the springlike feeling has returned with the music, Brett's playing is rhapsodic; even his drumming has a melodic pulsation. To get the limbs loose is to regain awareness of the idiom that is needed for this choreography. And there again is *Maxine*, right in the front, in her red-top ensemble, looking like she is about to levitate even when she is just standing there, her shoulders like wings. When Ryoko gives direction, the students don't merely "imitate," they *replicate*, each in his and her own way, although the totality is supposed to be uniform. The uniqueness of each person is valued at the same time that the unity of the group is essential. Today, the inward gazes of contemplation I had first noticed yesterday are more refined, and -- while the dancers are in motion -- quite beautiful to regard up close. What a coincidence that I had thought of Matisse yesterday, and then, while editing this entry, I read the article in Friday's *Times* about Degas' obsession with "the mechanics and sociology of the dancers' art...[and] his relentless scrutiny of the human body in motion." How appropriate, because, although it may seem paradoxical, after you have watched for a while, as I have been doing, *you realize what you are looking for*. I may not quite have command of the technical vocabulary, but I do know what is *beautiful*. I feel that dance is a *constant movement toward beauty* which, in the absolute, is unattainable, undefined. It is not only about shape, or physique, it is about the configuration of all the limbs at the same time, and from moment to moment. I feel badly that I do not know a lot of the dancers by name. However, in those students I do know, the "veterans," I see how their minds and bodies have grown in tandem over the past two or three years. Ryoko builds toward more emphatic movement, from fluidity toward definition. One part of the body is the basis for setting firm and then springing off, like a base for action, explicitly described and simultaneously liberating. Now she has them leaping like gazelles through the woods, and the pastoral resonances return. She tells them that she knows they are excited, but she wants some of the excitement to be *saved*. The funereal procession is built upon both external and internal expressions of grief, through familiar images of sadness; the timing is slowed down, to become halting, lugubrious, *moderato*. Repetition is inherent in learning a dance, that is obvious; and yet, repetition can be *generative*, an unexpected byproduct. What might seem like rote learning will become complex and layered.

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Friday

Ryoko – Keep reaching up, and out — stay on the *reach* – like trees tossed in a storm -- with dawn breaking -- separate your hip from the leg –the back of the skull wants to go back and up, and open your throat — take a *sigh* before you go down – let the whole back impression go, into the back space – can we make a *sounnd* here? – whatever *sound* you want – and again and again – I won’t judge you for your sounds! – let the elbows *fall* – let them hang from opposite arms – see past the windows — lean your head from side to side – imagine you have heavy ears — and now, your arms extended like jaws - like the mouth of war – like you are entering into a war zone – maybe the music feels to you like *magical* realism, but I want you to keep it *real* — find your target, and then don’t let it go – it is starting as a normal day – you start to sense something in the air – then you’ve got to *confront* something – protect yourself – keep *reaching* and go *higher!!* – if you have that passion, do not give it all on stage – give it sixty percent energy – find what is real in how you use your energy – like you are standing on stilts – keeping that midline hugging even though you are going side to side – like a hammer – fists clenched, raised over the head, with arms raised straight up – like spears, almost like you are getting tossed – keep it raw – it is not pretty – it is like you are ripping your skin off your face and pulling it off — it is going to hurt a lot after a while — now we have *three* spears, two arms and a leg straight up up and up – this is *war!* – *this* is the theme for today! – pretend you have your weapon of choice, put it on your back – *attack!* – and *switch* – attack – and *stay!* – like the leg in the back is moving the arm — give me intention – keep everything on guard – you are protecting your organs - get as tall and high as possible – *work* those toes and *move* those heels up to your butt – you have just found your center - let the body lead the leg up up and up – so it doesn’t get flimsy – as direct from your source as possible – you see how I am already landing, but I look a little bit longer when I am in the air, because I keep my arms up and my chest out – the hip is *leading* my feet, not the hip is *carrying* my feet – I want to see how far I can go but still be in control – protect myself as I go – do whatever your upper body wants to do -- make a shallow overcurve – keep those toes sharp – like a cobra, ready to attack --

NB – A morning session today. The deserted campus adds to the tranquility. There are no overhead lights on in the studio, and it is crepuscular, like the awakening of the day that comes with the awakening of their bodies. Ryoko makes outward sighs with the large motor movements, asking the students to do the same. Just as every person’s mode of concentration is different, so, too is each exhaling sound that emerges. The week-long mantra of “reaching” – up up up up -- has a different consistency in the (relatively) early morning than the effort of reaching at noon. When the music shifts to a more catchy rhythm with conga drums, I come back again to the students’ concentrations: every one is different; each person has a distinctive way of being in the dance. I look at *Maxine’s* effortless, weightless limbs, and say to myself that if I got up and walked over to her and just “nudged” her, she would fall over – but of course I know that isn’t really true -- she is so integral in herself and strong as steel. Ryoko is much more verbal, and very funny today! The similes are coming thick and fast; her energy level cranked way up. She is accelerating, snapping her fingers to get the tempo going. For ninety minutes the pace is relentless. The students perspire heavily, breathing hard, hands on hips, pacing back and forth – but completely *inside* the work. Is Ryoko pushing harder today because it is the end of the week and she wants them to have a strong impression to carry them through until she returns in ten days’ time? Ryoko is explicit and analogous at the same time. Every other expression from her contains the word “like.” That is what *poetic* means; I told her when we were walking to class the other day that I thought her method was metaphorical. And “poetry” derives originally from *poesis*, the Greek word for *making* – which makes sense *vis a vis* “the art of making dances.”

This morning's self-conscious revelation is that my danceaturgical writing is *in the service of* the movement. This is unlike when I am observing a static work of art in a gallery or a museum, or reading and critiquing a work of literature, where the critic enters from a different direction and *the art work possesses stasis*.

Rather, in dance, *the art work moves*, and the *critic is stationary*.

For some perverse (and, as yet, unexplored) reason, this critical subservience is pleasurable to me.

[8/29-9/5/11]

October 18, 2011 - No.2

Dear Lori: As you know, I usually do not embark upon these special *Letters* until after *Works-a-Foot*. However, this year, there is so much of compelling interest developing every day in the Dance Program Repertory that I just cannot wait until December to share with you the impressions rushing helter-skelter through my brain.

I was reminded of the drama and magnificence of Jose Limon's *There is a Time* while watching from the wings in Mem Aud as our dancers performed the "Opening Circle" at the Creative Research Center Symposium last Wednesday before a large and (very) appreciative audience. Ryoko Kudo and Maxine Steinman would have been so proud; I know that you and I were beaming with joy.

Over the past couple of weeks - interviewing Beth McPherson, then Margaret O'Sullivan, and sitting in last Friday afternoon on a rehearsal of *Opus 51* - I have become enamored once again with the work of Charles Weidman. Hence my letter today.

As staged by Margaret and rehearsed by Beth, *Lynchtown* stays in my mind as one of last season's *Americana* highlights. It was ritualized, linear, and stealthy - whereas, reflecting upon a mere two hours' observation, *Opus 51* is athletic, interwoven; superficially smooth, yet subversively tricky - I might say that parts of it verge upon the histrionic...in a good way...

...and there is something tantalizingly elusive about Charles Weidman the *character* - his mimetic, clownish *persona* at odds with his oft-reduced profile when gauged against the charisma of Doris Humphrey. That was one of the aspects Beth and I discussed when we met for a chat in my office recently - and the overlooked fact that, as Beth pointed out, Weidman did "more than fill in a gap" in American modern dance - he compensated for an outright domestic "deficiency" in the transition from classical ballet.

In this regard, as I read during the summer more deeply in the dance literature - books by Louis Horst and Margaret H'Doubler are two recent acquisitions - I noticed references to "an American style of movement," or words to that effect. I am not informed enough to make a value-judgment upon the merits of that descriptor; however, I *do* detect an overall American Modernist aesthetic in Weidman's choreographic idiom: Beth, Nancy and Maxine have patiently succeeded in explaining the nuances of "fall and recovery" to me; and that dynamic - intentionality toward becoming off-balance, *decentering*, suspending, then *regaining* the center - is an apt metaphor for the Modernist artistic and literary desire to subvert tradition without destroying its legacy.

Come to think of it – I am “jumping around” somewhat right now, but Charles Weidman wouldn’t mind that - you can extend the Modernist aesthetic into a remark that Margaret O’Sullivan made to Beth and me at the end of the strenuous session last week in the Dance Studio: “Charles did not know the meaning of the word ‘break’ – it was not part of his vocabulary,” she said. “And he never ever said ‘mark,’ either. It was always full-out! You had to make something of *every* movement.” Likewise, the Modern arts, in broad strokes, relentlessly pushed the limits of their forms, in all media.

The medium of music springs to the fore. Thanks to Beth’s having sent all of the dancers, and me, an audio file of the vintage piano solo instrumentation for *Opus 51* by Vivian Fine, I have been able to extend my obsessive listening; I hear the score even as I write these words. In rehearsal, when the first chords rang out, I thought of Stravinsky, then of Mussorgsky’s ten-movement 1874 suite for solo piano, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, not published in a definitive edition until 1931, and then finally recorded by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1937 – the year before Fine developed *Opus 51*.

I employ the term “developed” intentionally because, as Fine wrote in a 1963 reminiscence published in *Dance Perspectives* V.16, “the music for [this dance] was written after the dance was composed...I would write a section as each new part of the dance was completed...In composing for choreography, there is the problem of developing a musical structure and continuity. I was able to do this [with *Opus 51* as well as with works for Doris Humphrey and Hanya Holm] by not composing for individual moments or patterns, but by sensing the impulse that moved the dancer.”

I imagine a picture book *illustrated* by the words.

Elsewhere in the same essay, Fine observes a poetic commonality between music and dance, “two languages with a common source...Before an idea finds its way into *form*, there is the as yet unlabelled *sensation* – a sensation that one recognizes as the modest herald of a new work. Out of this basic sensation of movement the dancer creates choreography; the composer, movement.”

I was stunned to learn that Vivian Fine was all of twenty-five years old (!) when she wrote the suite that became *Opus 51*, first performed at the Fifth Bennington Festival of the Modern Dance in August, 1938. [The original work was twenty-two minutes; the last sixteen minutes, called *Commedia*, was neither filmed nor notated, and rarely performed.] Vivian Fine had moved to NYC from the city of her birth, Chicago, seven years previously, to work as an accompanist at Gluck Sandor’s Dance Studio. In 1931 she became a member of Aaron Copland’s Young Composer’s Group, and went on to study with Roger Sessions.

You can feel the off-kilter, contrapuntal, “finding-its-way” influence of Fine’s stylistic predecessors and teachers pushing through the surviving six minutes of *Opus 51*. Praising Vivian Fine twenty years after the piece was performed, Doris Humphrey wrote that “she had an uncanny sense of what to choose as sound, and that *sine qua non* for dance composers, a complete understanding of body rhythms and dramatic timing.”

All the more reason for me to want to set aside some precious time to talk with Margaret O'Sullivan about the challenges of setting *Opus 51* on our students. Margaret took me aside at the end of the rehearsal still breathless, but, of course, always smiling, and told me that it was "the most complex, most complicated piece of Charles' [she had] ever worked on." She meant it was one thing to be a *performer* in the piece, as she had been so many times during the years 1968-74 when she was part of Weidman's company; but quite another to keep her eye on two rows of three dancers and one soloist moving quickly *and* slowly within the same phrase. "Are you saying it's the difference between seeing and watching?" I inquired, and she essentially agreed. I mentioned to Margaret that I had written down that when she was working with our dancers she flitted in and out of the groups, like a delicate butterfly or a bird, gently waving her hands from the wrists – tending to keep a light touch with adjustments and corrections; and that she liked to be within the group asking for proper breathing and 'pulls,' rather than off to the side calling out comments.

Her metabolism – for lack of a better word – while teaching gradually intensified; the first hour tentative and soft-spoken, and then, as the second hour deepened, Margaret became more heated and energized. "Come on to the stage with pride," she said, "like you are queens being crowned – Up! And Up! Keep your chest and head *up!*"

This afternoon, chatting with her on the telephone, I asked Margaret O'Sullivan if her current method was adapted either consciously or unconsciously from her work with Weidman. "Oh *absolutely!*" she said, remembering that when this warm and trusting man used to show his dancers a movement, "he would *indicate*, never *demonstrate*... Once Charles actually admitted to me that I had been 'doing a movement wrong for years,' but he never said anything to me about it, because, he said, he '*liked*' it that way!"

And so goes the dance...until next time...

NB

No.3 – November 6, 2011

Dear Lori: Before I get into my thoughts and observations derived from the past couple of weeks, I want to share with you and with our MSU dance "family" a couple of important **links**, and a very special **email**.

First of all, for those who were not able to attend the Creative Research Center Symposium on *The Imagination in the Post-9/11 World: How Have We Changed?* – click on [this link](#) to watch the YouTube Video of the entire event, including your heartfelt remarks, as well as the profoundly moving excerpt from *There is a Time* by Jose Limon.

A few days later, Ryoko Kudo, who set the Limon dance on our students, sent me an eloquent email after watching the Symposium and performance video. Here is what she wrote: hi neil, thank you so much for sending me the link to the CRC post-9/11 symposium. i watched the entire discussion, and reflected on the event of 10 years ago. i had just joined the limon company and watched both towers fall from the roof of our then limon home on broadway and

houston. the company witnessed the collapsing towers in horror and saw the debris spread like clouds in front of our eyes. we then rushed out of the building to catch a packed bus uptown among debris covered passengers. broadway and houston was closed off for several weeks so we rented a space uptown to continue with our rehearsals. the first thing we did when we gathered as a company was dance the opening circle. we collectively felt the need to hold hands and let our spirits be consoled by the dance and each other. by having the dancers of MSU dance the opening circle 10 years later in the same context, for me, gave me a sense of coming "full circle." as immediate and connecting as the opening circle was for us 10 years ago, the message continues to carry the message of connectedness and hope. the dancers of MSU performed it beautifully and i hope it reminded the viewers of what we do have, the things we haven't lost and the strength and beauty of togetherness in harmony. thank you for your sensitivity and warmth with which you led the discussion and for including the opening circle in the symposium. bravo to all involved, i particularly loved the light and wit with which lori tackled the topic. yes, let's run our imagination free, let our magical thinking overcome the fear and replace it with love and light. we are on our way...sincerely, ryoko

And finally, for anyone who may not have noticed the November 1st major feature on **danceaturgy** in *Dance Teacher Magazine* posted on the bulletin board by the entrance to Life Hall, click on [this link](#) to read all about it. I am so proud of all of our danceaturgs, past, present - and future.

On Friday, October 28th, I had the privilege of talking with two very different dancer/choreographers, and I will share some of the information with you and our dance "family." At noon, Lane Sayles stopped by my office to chat about himself, his career, and (peripherally) *The Construct* – the work he conceived in 1982 and which he is now setting on our students. Steeped in the Graham technique while an undergraduate at Florida State University, Lane arrived in NYC after graduation with two suitcases and no money. An invitation from Carla Maxwell led to a successful audition for the Limon Company, then in residence at the 92nd Street Y. From Limon, Lane moved on to Jennifer Muller ("I liked her sense of the theatrical, spectacle and narrative – the idea that something is happening to you in the dance"); and Lar Lubovitch ("I especially liked the sweep of his choreography – how it felt," he told me). After an itinerant stint moving from one university or college to another as a guest-choreographer, and despite having been offered a permanent faculty position, Lane had to come to terms with the physical limitations of his maturing body, and so, he "stopped being a dancer." He moved into video and animation, and from that medium into sculpting and glassmaking, which is how he makes his living these days, making stained glass windows and other monumental works on commission.

As we talked about his sudden return to teaching – at your instigation, Lori! – Lane divulged some elements of his pedagogical philosophy. "Dance is motion through time," he said. "And choreography, for me, was fulfilling, because it put me *in charge* of that time span." I mentioned that I had started out as a poet, and Lane seized upon the analogy between the forms. "Dance is a language. Technique, to me, is like learning an alphabet, through which you then learn the words," he said. "You need to acquire *all* the elements; you cannot write anything coherent if you are missing the letter 'L,' for example."

“I don’t *teach* a dance,” Lane insisted, “I teach *how* to dance.” That kind of rigor was evident when I stopped by *The Construct* rehearsal last Monday. It was toward the end of six straight hours, and it showed on the flushed faces and in the body language of our dancers. I must say that the piece lives up to its name. In its current raw state it has an unwieldy ambience. The materials dominate their enactment, because the dance is aimed toward the gradual building of an open-formed assemblage of eight-foot-long poles with interlocking straps at the ends. At this point, the process overwhelms the product – and there is an arduous path ahead. But I can see that the execution will be unlike anything we have ever done before here at MSU.

As Lane left my office to head back to rehearsal, I made my way over to the Courtyard Lounge in University Hall, where I had been invited by Jed Wheeler and Carrie Urbanic to sit in on a roundtable discussion with Wayne McGregor, whose Random Dance group was on campus to perform their work, *FAR*. As you may recall, I participated in the Random Dance residency when Phil Bernard and Scott Delahunt of the *Choreographic Thinking Tools* team were here last spring. Click on [this link](#) to read my observations of that transformative experience.

I enjoyed meeting Wayne. I had heard that he was “articulate,” but that adjective did not do him justice. He spoke incessantly, flawlessly, without hesitation – as if there were an eternally open line between his brain and his vocabulary. Of all the quasi-oracular pronouncements from Wayne McGregor to emerge from his utilitarian imagination in the brief hour we were with him, two things in particular stick in my mind. The first is this: “To *not* know what you are doing as an artist is just as important as aiming toward a finished product.” And the second, which is a kind of corollary, is “There is no such thing as ‘waste’ in the act of creation. The data you throw away has meaning, in and of itself.”

Wayne’s attitude reminded me of a seminal study by the great English anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) that I first read in grad school, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. I am thrilled by the idea of the mind conceptualized as an *environment* in which things *happen*.

On that note, *au revoir*. [NB](#)

No.4 – November 15, 2011

Dear Lori: Time is of the essence – so, in a *slight* variant of our four-year epistolary tradition, I am simultaneously sending this letter to Kim Whittam so that she can get it to her co-rehearsal director, Linda Roberts, and to all of the students involved in the Chase Brock piece.

we love you get up was devised, start to finish, between 1:00 pm this past Friday and 5:00 pm on Sunday; and will have its world premiere at *Works-a-Foot* in two weeks.

Full disclosure: I am not yet recovered from my “Chase Brock Experience” of this past weekend, but in the improvisatory spirit in which the piece was engendered, I will try to give you some sense of what happened – I was going to say, “miraculously,” but upon reflection, that does not do justice to Chase’s process.

What would you think if I told you the tale of a precociously-talented, home-schooled fellow whose grandfather was a musician; the lad grew up in the Village of Flat Rock, nestled in southwestern North Carolina, started taking ballet at the age of six; by ten, had heard the roar of the greasepaint and was running the follow-spot at the Flat Rock Playhouse; was mentored during the summertimes by Anne Reinking, Gregory Hines, and Tommy Tune at the Broadway Theatre Project in Tampa, Florida; told his loving family at the ripe old age of sixteen that he was ready “to do all of this at a higher level – I *gotta* be on Broadway,” and they responded by giving him a ticket to NYC -- where he brashly auditioned for Susan Stroman’s revival of *The Music Man*, got the part, and made his Broadway debut; never looked back over the ensuing decade, founding his own dance company, creating a best-selling video game, making dozens of original dance pieces; at the 11th hour revamping *Spider-Man* – and, most recently, devoted his formidable energies to making a twelve-minute tour de force creation for the MSU Theatre & Dance Program through a commission from The New Works Initiative?

[Sidenote: I wonder if Chase Brock’s natural affinity for American poetry (remember the first NWI piece he was going to devise here was predicated upon the verse of Robert Lowell) has something to do with “environmental DNA” – i.e., the fact that the great Carl Sandburg lived on a farm in Flat Rock from 1945 until his death in 1967.]

By way of introduction to *we love you get up*, here are a few select excerpts from Chase’s email to the students last week, in advance of his visit: “When Lori Katterhenry came to me and proposed commissioning a work that would commemorate the 10th anniversary of September 11th, I immediately thought about a piano sonata I’ve been wanting to choreograph for about five years now: Zez Confrey’s 1932 *Moods of a New Yorker*. He was a [New Jersey-born] novelty pianist...[the piece] is wonderfully psychological and deep and evocative, and it had always stayed with me. True to its title, it’s a real mood piece, and I feel like dealing with feelings - small and large - and impulses and moods people experience, especially during and after tragic events...

”Similarly, a writer friend had given me [New York poet] Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* a few years ago, which led to my buying the complete Frank O’Hara, where I found the poem, “Lana Turner has collapsed.” I found it to be witty and charming and sweet and a little sad, and generally always got a kick out of it, and then when I was thinking about September 11th and how to say something about the collapse of an icon, I thought using [the poem] as the text might be a smart way to undercut the potential pretentiousness or overly seriousness or preciousness in approaching / addressing such a Highly Important Event, particularly one to which I do not have a personal connection, beyond the deep shared empathy we all felt on that day, which has obviously reverberated over the last decade.

”I’m hoping to have the large group of dancers in the piece move through a variety of modes and scenes and little events, which should be quite nonlinear and which may be interpreted as memories or dashed dreams or projections into the future or regrets or fantasies or meetings in the afterlife or simply real events happening in real time, perhaps being experienced by survivors or victims or families or couples or friends. I’d like to remain quite ambiguous about the location of these events and about the timeline of the scenes, and I’d like for the dancers to be able to

participate in multiple relationships / groupings / events, perhaps suggesting different characters or perhaps playing one character throughout.

“...[And] I'm hoping the five actors might feel more out of time, possibly suggesting through their clothing and manner 'poet', but more importantly providing a more direct expression for the audience of the sounds and speech and rhythms we hear and use and experience in times of tragedy. I'm hoping that we can find a number of different ways and relationships in which to deliver Mr. O'Hara's words...”

”The only thing I ask of everyone working on the piece is that you be present, attentive and open to trying anything, no matter how ridiculous or simple or obvious the idea may seem. There will be some things I've imagined pretty concretely but other things I have no idea about yet, and it's very important to me to at least briefly explore every impulse or idea and not shut down ideas before we've tried them or heard them. My least favorite phrase in rehearsal is "my character would never do that.”

.....

It is intriguing to re-read these words in retrospect, now that I have watched Chase in action and had a chance to sit and talk with him. One of the first things Chase told me, in response to a question I asked about his obvious belief in “narrative,” was that he was “much more interested in relationships than in character.” This was evident from the opening instant of the rehearsal, during which he had the dancers “just try” a few steps *en masse* and then in groups of varying sizes and spatial distributions. Once the configuration and timing were to his liking, Chase played a snippet from the final section of *Moods of a New Yorker*, a melancholy piano fugue. The dance fit securely into the musical structure – to the millisecond.

That first minute of dance took about an hour of work. At that point I left, and returned forty-eight hours later, at 3:00 on Sunday afternoon, just as the company was about to do the first run-through of the “completed” piece.

I was impressed by the difference between Chase’s seemingly-casual, almost off-handed and subdued *persona* as a choreographer and the essence of his notes and adjustments. As the dance progressed, he gazed intently, quietly, occasionally gesturing, whispering notes to Kim Whittam and Linda Roberts, sitting next to him; then, as customary, gathered everyone around him and – prompted by Kim -- went systematically through the list. His commentary was meticulously-calibrated, as if emanating from a laser-driven source: “Start to go into the silence before the music starts...Keep your iconic little shapes, the things that say the most about who you are...Your suspended knee is a distraction. Keep it on the ground...[To an actor] When you pause to say ‘Lana Turner has collapsed,’ it wants to feel like an exhale, as a sigh of relief, like kind of not even believing it...The people in front need to be a little smaller, and then we get bigger as we go to the back...Your body is going through a huge sense memory...That little whisper of movement didn’t quite read...”

Chase’s notes were like almost-immeasurable turns of a volume-dial, mostly downward, toward more finely-meted-out intimations. The range and variety of his perceptions sounded as if they could only come from someone with twenty pairs of metaphorical eyes in direct line with his imagination which, in turn, was in a synaptic link with his speech. I remember saying something

about this to Kim during the first auditions for *we love you get up*, when there must have been dozens of dancers out there on the floor. His facility with perception and articulation were strikingly acute.

You can tell by now that I do not want to reveal too much about the actual story of *we love you get up*, because I do not want to diminish its eventual impact. But I will predict -- as someone who literally “walked in” on the arc of the narrative as a whole – it will not fail to touch the audience. The piece deals with varieties of communication among couples, friends, comrades, lovers, families in the broadest sense of the term; with rites of passage, reminiscence -- and hope.

we love you get up also interweaves text with movement, an affinity Chase discussed with me, as a tribute to his formative background equally in dance and theatre, and the “interplay and the tension” (as he called it) between the two. From a young age, he enjoyed the plays and musicals *and* the ballets he performed in and viewed. “The more I work now, the more I want dance and words to intersect,” he said. “And that is what is so fantastic and unique about the MSU program – you have theatre and dance in the same department.”

“If you are asking for a certain result, you are not going to get the desired result,” Chase remarked to me over coffee in Café Diem, with reference to the ways in which he guided the student dancers and actors. “When you are working with really smart, sensitive people, you need to spark their imaginations, have faith, and wait for the right moment -- and most of the time, they will ‘get’ it.” Honesty is another major principle with Chase, as you might well assume: “When I give notes,” he said, “I try never to use the word ‘I.’ Rather, it’s ‘can we have this,’ or ‘this moment needs,’ or the like... It is not about me, and it is always about the piece: what can we give to the moment?”

Chase Brock’s final words to the group before they wearily, but happily, disbanded (Chase remained to give each dancer and actor a big hug and kind words) said it best: “You do not want to start to get ‘smoothed out’ and lose the uniqueness of all the odd pieces we worked so hard to fit together. You’ve created so many special and different emotional moments. Hold on to your individual character work over the next two weeks!”

‘Till next time, and the impending thrill of *Works-a-Foot*, NB

No. 5 - Sunday, December 4, 2011

Dear Lori – I realize that William Wordsworth’s definition of poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquility,” and I have only been home less than an hour after seeing *Works-a-Foot*, but I cannot wait for the tranquility to set in before I write to you in praise of the physical poetry I have just witnessed.

As you know, I usually do not start my letters talking about “production values,” but in this case it is imperative to note the exponential improvement of this week’s *Works-a-Foot* performances, due in no small measure to the lighting prowess of Rachel Budin. The cues were spot-on; the dynamics and shifts in tone were well thought-through; and the overall *mise en scene* for each and every dance was sharp, clear – and, thus, visual and thematic messages came through

clearly. Lighting is so very important for the dance form, because there are no words, and so the mood must be conveyed – of course – through the body; but also through the dimensions and palpable nature of the air through which that body travels. Lighting gives us that added dimension of eloquence.

For that matter, the sound design was also noticeably clearer and, from where I was sitting, dead-center in the first row of the second tier of seats, this also enhanced my experience of the show today. And the stage appeared unusually deep, unadorned and unobstructed – as if the entire space was given over for one purpose only.

In fairness to the richness of all talents on stage, I will not single out any one of our marvelous students over any other – yet another tribute to the choreographic brilliance in evidence. These diverse ensembles were smoothly coordinated; the individuals ceded so often to the group, so that the end-product was a collective radiance and a joy to behold.

Charles Weidman's *Opus 51* – ah, those shimmering, pleated green skirts, and how they rustled in counterpoint to the white skin and the purity of the score. Stepping out from the confines of the rehearsal hall where I had watched this piece take seed and grow under Margaret O'Sullivan, I saw for the first time the complexity of the repeated off-centered line-up, and felt the tender silences in the off-rhythms. Jessie DiMauro's *Mad Memoir* – who was that Teutonic-toned voiceover, and where did the text come from?! No matter, for now – because the counterpoint of voice with movement was fresh and original, sardonic and absurd. Karen Gayle's *The Waiting Room* – what discipline to a hair's breadth, what a momentum was built up from the nearly imperceptible isolated movements to mime-like reflexes to unified ensemble work, and finally to that astonishing costume change that brought all of the patients to a common mortal and anticipatory ground. Earl Mosley's *Breath* showed us yet another side to this mercurial young genius. I had *Running Spirit* in my mind from last year, and so was hugely moved by the spiritual background to this visually-balanced and deeply-emotional effort and commitment. Chase Brock's *we love you get up* – I had watched this piece grow over the single weekend I described to you in my previous letter but expected the unexpected and I was not let down. Above all else, above his fluidity and the way he flirts and flits along the margins of drama and dance, Chase has that unerring eye for placement, counterpoint, open space against groups of forms, and the eloquence of small gestures that are never overpowered. Hints of red in the billowy costumes gave his work another theatrical edge when played off against the verse lines in fugal states. Joao Carvalho's *Valsa Do Abraco* had special significance for me, knowing Joao, and feeling his wry humor, gentle voice, & self-effacing aura coming through in the interaction of the couples and groups. As I said earlier, this particular iteration of *Works a Foot* overcame the formidable difficulty of putting across a successful ensemble without subsuming the individual presentations. And finally, Bill T. Jones' *D-Man in the Waters*, which I had not seen since the 2007-08 season here at MSU. Under the reverent and energetic stewardship of Nicole Smith, this new generation of *D-Man* was exceptionally strong – athletic, boisterous, ebullient, showing stamina without strain, and leaving us with a bittersweet afterthought – knowing that it is in homage to a friend who succumbed to AIDS but always kept his head (literally) high.

Works-a-Foot 2011 caused me to reflect upon the ever-growing coherence of your dance program. From having an office right next to yours, I know when shows are coming down the road how time is always short and there is never enough to make it all perfect. Margaret O'Sullivan and Beth McPherson were telling me about the so-called "emergency rehearsal" for *Opus 51* they managed to fit in during the past week. I see more clearly that the dance work is never "done" in the way that the fixed arts of words on the page or paint on the canvas are secured, figure to ground. The revisions in dance choreography, adjustments and increases in tone and projection that the choreographer feels are necessary, come and go and are of necessity uneven. [Even as the girls were performing this afternoon, Margaret, sitting next to me in the darkness, was "conducting" them with her arms and her voice...]

Similarly, the way in which *we love you get up* continued to evolve from its studio origins three short weeks ago showed me that CB's mind was humming along irrespective of the concept of an "opening night." Even an iconic work like *D-Man* can and does continue to expand and revivify itself, depending upon the set of bodies embodying it...

This *Works-a-Foot* possessed polish and finesse that is, in my experience, unusual for this early in the year in the development of our repertory. Such heightened readiness, despite your protestations to the contrary, can only bode well for the months to come.

Till next time, NB

P.S. – As background, I am inserting, below, my spring 2008 *Informance* essay on **D-Man**.

I ask you all to listen carefully to these words of Bill T. Jones: "How was my dance [*Social Intercourse*, 1982] a reflection of its culture? It's a complicated issue because it's dealing with the exchange between the artist and the artwork, the artwork and its audience. The work was a commentary on the way I perceived the society I was living in at the time. It was about the way I perceived the relationships between men and women and men and men, as well as the way I perceived the restraints." *New Yorker* magazine dance critic Arlene Croce refused to review a performance of Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here*, labelling it "victim art" because the piece included people who were terminally ill, an accompanying projected video of members of the "Survival Workshop" talking openly about facing death. "The AIDS epidemic marked the critical turning point in Bill's career," Rosalynde (Roz) LeBlanc told me. She danced with the Company from 1993-1999 and, of course, as choreography *repetiteur*, worked closely with many of you here at Montclair State on the precise setting of *D-Man*. "Bill has been HIV-positive since 1985. Arnie [Zane] died from complications of AIDS-related lymphoma in 1988. Demian Acquavella passed a year later," she said. "Over the past two decades, Bill's work has taken on a measure of full-throttle desperation. That's where the incredible rigor of his dance comes from. It extends to the way Bill lives his life. In dance, as in life, Bill digs his heels in and uses every muscle in his body, and that's what he expected of me as a dancer – of all of us – then and now." Who was D-Man? Demian Acquavella was born in Brooklyn on January 25, 1958. At age twenty, he was a dance major at Santa Monica Community

College. Moving back to NYC, he trained with Marjorie Mussman, Cindi Green, and Phil Black, and also danced for a time with the Elsa Monte Dance Company and Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, among others, before joining Jones/Zane in 1985. In the fall of 1987, when Acquavella first found out he was sick, he began to re-channel his creative energies into marketing silkscreened T-shirts decorated with his original artwork. And he continued to dance. "Just because you have AIDS doesn't mean you have to stop the world," he told Maya Wallach in a tape-recorded interview which, again, you all can listen to in the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the NY Public Library. In early 1989, Jones was commissioned by the St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra to choreograph a work for an ensemble of nine dancers set to the first movement of Felix Mendelssohn's *Octet in E-Flat Major*. "At first, Bill [and Janet Lilly were] going to call it just *Waters*," Acquavella recalled. "But then Bill looked over at me, and changed the title [by including his nick-name for me] and I will never forget Bill saying I would be in it, even though I could hardly walk. 'We all want you to be in the piece,' Bill said. 'You will always have a little place in the company.'" Jones' recollection corroborates: "I had a daydream, I had a vision," he wrote in *Last Night on Earth*. "...I saw Demian and a myriad of friends, living and dead, in a body of water. Perhaps it was a lake as vast as the ocean, a lake emptied by a vast and unforgiving waterfall. This company of people was struggling against the current. "*D-Man in the Waters* had its premiere at the Joyce Theatre on March 14, 1989. "As he could no longer walk by the time of the debut," Jones wrote, "I carried Demian onstage, offering my legs as he executed the arm movements of what would have been his solo." With distinctively aquiline profile, meditative gaze, and close-cropped blond hair, Acquavella was especially proud of the arm-gestures he was "very good at," and confessed that he was "amazed [he] even was able to stand up and take my bow. But the company pulled me through it." When Acquavella could no longer perform, Jones did not replace him in the piece. "Oddly asymmetrical groupings [marked] his absence," which made an even more poignant impression on subsequent viewers. Jack Anderson of the New York Times was moved by the -literally-diving, belly-flopping, rolling energy of the dance, the diversity of performers of all body types in outlandish camouflage garb that looked as if - as Bill once wryly remarked - "the dancers had emptied their closets." "This was no ponderous elegy," Anderson wrote, "...In one episode, [the dancers] punched in the air with their fists. But no one drowned in any sea of troubles or was knocked out in a battle with adversity." Demian Acquavella died on June 8, 1990. He was thirty-two years old. Over the ensuing decade and beyond, *D-Man in the Waters* achieved a permanent place in the Jones/Zane repertory. After awhile, Jones expressed ambivalence about *D-Man's* popularity. In an ironic, admittedly "irascible" diary entry jotted down on November 17, 2000, in a dim, stuffy dressing room at the Milan Teatre Lirico after a performance of *D-Man* in which Jones had to step in for an injured dancer, he conceded that the piece was "perhaps more insistent in its importance than I would prefer...[T]hough I am not old, I am no longer young," he reflected. "...It's sobering and bothersome to realize that people, many filled with good will, cannot hear or see me free of the aura of H.I.V. and the supposed death sentence it represents." I

concur with Roz LeBlanc's astute observation about the way Bill T. Jones "makes" dance with such enduring resolution; there's an all-important verb – "makes." This indomitable, steadfastly de-romanticized ability to appropriate, accept (and when called upon, likewise unashamedly to mourn) , revise, and then transcend raw materials, gestures and stories from his own life as well as the lives of his dancers is the moral core of Bill T. Jones' artistry. It is an artistry that has evolved over an astonishing arc since his student-days at SUNY/Binghamton in 1971 when nineteen-year old William Jones, the son of migrant workers and the tenth of twelve children, first met Queens-raised photographer and actor A.M. Zane – whose father was an Italian-Catholic immigrant from Brazil and whose mother was an Orthodox Jewish immigrant from Lithuania. The ostensibly unlikely pair – Bill, lissome, sensual, lyrical, tender, cool, literate; Arnie wiry, athletic, impetuous, confrontational, hyper, visual -- became lovers and mutually-inspiring collaborative "contact improvisation" partners. They set into motion a corpus of work connecting the initial, trusting intimacy of a "body against body" duet to the finally full-fledged, fashionable, avant-garde, (or perhaps *vanguard* is more accurate nowadays) visceral, multi- and inter-media spectacle of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Co. – from *Pas de Deux for Two to Fever Swamp*; from *Whosedebabedoll* (love the title) to *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Blind Date*, and on and on. Four months after Zane's death, Jones made this trenchant comment: "I can see his hand in my choreography...But I am Bill, I'm not Arnie, and I'm not Bill and Arnie, which was a hard thing to realize. So I'm going deeper into myself, into my tastes. I have to trust them a bit more...How much time do any of us have left? I don't know. The stakes have been raised in our rush to the finish line."

No. 6 - January 22, 2012 – *Story/Time* World Premiere

Dear Lori: Happy New Year to you and everybody who reads this. It's good to be back.

In the spirit of Bill T. Jones' *Story/Time* let me begin by telling you that I arrived home last night from the Kasser Theater World Premiere at 9:34 p.m. – couldn't stay for the Champagne – I really wanted to – and – true disclosure, I promised Bob Bursey before the show that I would stick around – but was too wired, my head was buzzing – and then, it took me until somewhere between 1:00 and 2:00 a.m. to fall asleep, and is now 5:56 a.m., and I've had two cups of coffee, and here I am about to try to stabilize my jittery thoughts.

Toward the end of the piece, Bill was telling a story about sitting in a doctor's office waiting room reading an article in *Art in America* about the Glenn Ligon *America* show/retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York City. My first "flash" thought was – "I went to that show last spring!...It was fabulous...unlike anything I had ever seen before..." and my second "flash" thought was to something Bill had told Felicia R. Lee in *The New York Times* interview last Wednesday, January 18, that "he has long admired [John] Cage and liked his insistence in *Indeterminacy* that audiences bring their own meaning to the work and discover the unity between sounds and stories." And indeed – I had, at that very moment, it was about 48

minutes into the 70 minute work – brought *my* very own visual memories of the half-obliterated-jargon-phrased canvases of Glenn Ligon set against the pale walls of the Whitney galleries, and his glaring neon-reversed constructions, and his fake/authentic handbills mimicking vintage Wanted posters seeking escaped slaves. And, after I had finished this thought and its accompanying images in the Kasser Theater last night at about 8:53 or thereabouts, I then realized that for about thirty seconds I had stopped paying attention to what Bill was saying (sitting there, as he put it, “in the middle of the playing area,” dressed in a white, long-sleeved shirt, behind a simple desk with a pinpoint reading lamp, text in plain sight, feet planted firmly on the floor]) and that I had also drifted away from following the sinuous movements of the dancers.

I had responded to what John Cage and Bill T. Jones had hoped for, and then, as a result, I had “missed” some of the piece – half the time of one story out of seventy...

Or had I?

One more citation from John Cage to help crystallize the context: In an essay called “Grace and Clarity” published in *Dance Observer* [now *there’s* a title I can relate to!] in 1944, he wrote, “...a dance, a poem, a piece of music (any of the time arts) occupies a length of time, and the manner in which this length of time is divided...is the work’s very life- structure.” -- “**any of the time arts**” -- that concept is crucial here, and helps unlock some of the purported mystery of *Story/Time*. For me, and -- judging from the relaxed, good-humored, attentive vibe in Kasser Theater -- I think for most of the people in the audience last night, the piece was far from opaque. Its “life-structure” was laid out for all to see and hear and feel. In this respect I wholly agree with Jed Wheeler’s observation: “[Bill T. Jones] does not doubt his audience.”

The collaboration of John Cage [words], Merce Cunningham [movement], and David Tudor [music] resulted in staged works often, but not always, “governed by chance procedure.” Perusing Bill’s *Director’s Note*, which he reminded the audience in brief pre-show remarks to be sure to read – I saw his homage to these Modernist masters and heard the question of his own situation within that tradition. A characteristic of Modernism that we should bear in mind when watching *Story/Time* is that those iconoclasts could not have achieved their at-times-anarchistic realignments of space, time, sound and narrative *without* a sense of the history that preceded them. In order to be a Cubist you needed to paint your way through Impressionism. In order to be a Dada novelist you needed to de-construct your way through Social Realism. In order to be atonal you needed to find and transcend the through-line of melody.

In that regard, surely it is no “accident” (in the ironic sense) that one of the major textual motifs of *Story/Time* is the tale of Noah and the Flood. If my ears did not deceive me, it is the only excerpt from the Bible that BTJ cites in the entire 70 minutes. Quite timely, in that 2011 marks the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The King James Bible*.

And the story of Noah, like the story of the Modern movement, is about creative destruction. Bill T. Jones’ would no doubt insist that his role (his words) “in the great discourse around art” is yet to be determined. He forges ahead as an artist by posing huge existential challenges to

himself regardless of the honors and kudos and acclaim piled on year after year. Fame gives him the momentum to devise creative obstacles.

The most poignant theme, “random” or not, of *Story/Time* is the motif of Bill’s first partner, Arnie Zane, who died of AIDS almost twenty-five years ago. Every time Bill mentioned “Arnie” or “Arnie and I...” and every time he reminisced about something that happened in the 1970s in upstate New York when the two of them were in college, or after they moved down to NYC to start the company that still bears Arnie’s name, or the time Arnie photographed Louise Nevelson, or their tragicomic hitchhiking episodes – a softer hue crept into Bill’s mellifluous voice. Even if this nuance was concocted by my imagination, or by my knowledge of the romantic backstory, it is still delightfully contributory to my affection for that theme.

I see in referring to my tattered program from the show that at one point I scrawled in the darkness on the front of it – “BTJ is the curator of real life.” I wrote those words after a particularly effective sequence, an eviction story involving the dancers as a family in conflict with an harassing landlord. The variations on this theme – literally -- moved from one side of the stage to the other, a logistical ballet so smoothly figured out that only in retrospect did one realize how much planning went into it. Layered on top of the dramatic movement, and moving in and out of the most heavenly and tricky set of movable scrims, the dancers unfurled their acting talents; in this case, placing “body against body” to create an athletic language. I have written previously (when we staged *D-Man in the Waters* in the Dance Division four years ago) about the unique *shape* of BTJ’s idiom. His choreography celebrates the “real body.” He valorizes all sizes and shapes and colors; and, in doing so, reminds the non-dancing viewers (like me) that the dance can/should be elicited out of daily movement. There’s the “curatorial” mentality in its finest essence. I have never had the opportunity to watch BTJ in rehearsal; I would like to imagine that he reaches into the individual dancer’s natural repertoire and selects/curates the most representative themes and then synthesizes them into the overall work. “Bill, it’s the problem of beauty,” a curator replied when BTJ, walking through the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and passing a striking gestural canvas by the painter Joan Mitchell, asked “why it had taken so long for her to achieve recognition.” Hearing that trenchant line, another epiphany hit me last night...something else I had once read by Cage... and I rushed home to pull one of his books from the shelf.

Yes! – there it was -- all the way back at the beginning of Cage’s original *Indeterminacy* lecture, delivered in September, 1958, at the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt, Germany [you can find it on pp.35-40 of the anthology *Silences* [Wesleyan University Press, 1973]. John Cage writes, “The function of the performer...is comparable to that of someone filling in color where outlines are given...He may do this in an organized way which may be subjected successfully to analysis...or he may perform his function as colorist in a way which is not consciously organized.”

With eager anticipation of BTJ’s coming back in March to work with our Dance students on this year’s staging of *D-Man*,

-- N. B., “finished” @ 9:36 am, 1/22/12

No.7 – January 29, 2012 – Tobi Roppo

Dear Lori: Before I *dive* [appropriate metaphor!] into the account of my interview with Sabatino and Barbara Verlezza, and Nancy Lushington, and my observation of an intense studio rehearsal of *Tobi Roppo* – I want to tell you how successful our first **Danceaturgs' Roundtable Meeting** was, convened over coffee and doughnuts [all of which were eaten, I am proud to say] at 9:00 a.m. this past Friday morning in the peaceful sanctuary of the Life Hall Dean's Conference Room.

Angelica, Marissa, Jake, Tracy, Elaine, Nick, Morgan, Colleen, Kelly, Jessie, and Sharrod were there; and I met later that day with Julian and Jazmine. We spent our time together – for me, anyway, the hour passed in an instant – discussing and defining, at my instigation, the mental and psychological signposts on the journey to learning a new piece. What are the internal steps, I asked, and how do you go through them, one at a time? And here are the keywords of the danceaturgs: “preparation – bringing an open mind – leaving your issues at the door – rolling with the punches – developing a sense of humility – paying attention – making it your own – going deeper.” In each case, with each term, I pushed them to spell out exactly how these concepts *feel* as they are invoked and implemented.

I reminded the danceaturgs of the crucial questions that Linda Roberts and I had sent before the holiday break. I am sharing them again with you, and also all of our readers, as they are designed to provoke thought and will be of interest to our extended community: **As you know, the transcendent theme of our repertory this 2011-12 academic year is “Dance and the Human Spirit.” As danceaturgs, your mission is as follows: (1) Reflect upon the ways in which dance – for you, personally, in your life and art thus far – serves as a “way in” for you to seek, and find, deeper understanding of what makes your *own* human spirit thrive. (2) How does dancing make you into a more self-aware human being/person? (3) How does dance cause you to appreciate the precious value of your life, and the life of others around you? (4) And what lasting insights does dancing in “your” piece give you into this year's theme? Remember that in developing answers to these questions, you will need to sit down with your fellow-dancers -- not just in the hallway, but at the beginning and/or the end of rehearsals -- starting at the start of the spring semester, and collect *their* answers and impressions along the way, so that you truly “represent” your group -- and your dance. The answers you develop will serve as the basis for our *Informance* on March 28th as well as talkbacks around *DanceWorks* in April.**

These questions will form the basis for our next **Danceaturgs Roundtable Meeting** on February 10th. I am thrilled to be embarking upon this course of inquiry with such a bright and committed group.

Twenty-four hours later, Sabatino and Barbara Verlezza squeezed into my modest office for an unhurried chat about *Tobi Roppo*, the four-part work they are setting on our students; Nancy Lushington joined us when she had finished ballet class, so it was quite a cozy scene. It had really been three years, we incredulously reminded ourselves, since Sabatino and Barbara last

visited MSU, when Nancy was setting *The Pursuit of Happiness*, a suite of dances by the renowned choreographer May O'Donnell – revered teacher and mentor my three guests. Barbara handed me a sheet of paper with a few paragraphs of background to *Tobi Roppo*, “spawned by the 40th Commemoration of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” she wrote...”Sabatino Verlezza, the choreographer, was particularly moved [to tears, after having seen a commemorative TV documentary about the *hibakusha*] by the words of an elderly female survivor, who, when asked, “What was [the Atomic blast] like,” replied, “First you see the flash...then you feel the heat...then there is nothing.”

The title of the piece derives from a Kabuki Theatre term which means different things according to which *sensei* you listen to: “flying in six directions” or “exits along the [extra stage platform] 花道 *hanamichi*” or, perhaps, the so-called “swaggering walk (*tanzen roppo*) of the Edo period dandies as they strutted between the tea-houses,” or, perhaps again, the “purification ceremony of the low-ranking priests during which they referred to heaven, earth, east, west, north and south;” or, even more intriguingly, “the *roppogumi*, six groups of chivalrous young men wandering the city streets...making a bold exit with dramatic gestures;” or, here’s just one more, for whimsical, improvisatory purposes: “gaming dice thrown down to randomly select techniques that can deal with any situation from any direction...”

I asked the Verlezzas to reflect upon the confluence of events circulating through their downtown culture/scene of NYC in the mid-‘80s that led to the composition. Indeed, they had also seen the spectacular performance of The Grand Kabuki at the Metropolitan Opera House in July, 1985; and the Sankai Juko Butoh tour that had come through NYC that September. Just a year prior, they experienced the harrowing film *The Killing Fields*, the story of a photographer trapped in Cambodia during tyrant Pol Pot's bloody "Year Zero" cleansing campaign, which claimed the lives of two million "undesirables." Sabatino had remained riveted to his seat when the final theme of the film, Mike Oldfield's [he of *Tubular Bells* fame] re-treatment of Francisco Tarrega's guitar “Étude” played during the credits.

Adding another layer to this heady mixture, Sabatino had a unique movement phrase – “sixteen sixes!” Nancy interjected – buzzing incessantly in his mind, and so, after an initial run-through at the White Mountain Summer Dance Festival, he invited five other May O'Donnell colleagues to the Fanta Se [that is not a typo!] Studio on Bleecker and Broadway. Here, “the original six” – Nancy L., and Barbara V., joined by Lisa Kevis, Julie Brown, David Christel, and Regina Larkin – worked through Sabatino's vision of a vocabulary, he told me, “different than what May O'Donnell had taught us, more visceral, more personal.”

“We were the ‘soldiers of the dance’ back then,” Barbara chimed in. “Following along dutifully and respectfully and unquestioningly with what May O'Donnell wanted us to do...but now, the time had come to make some work on our own, drawn from within ourselves -- not in defiance of May, but as a natural evolution.” At that instant she turned to her husband and said, “I remember so vividly – you had a vision I had never seen before in all the years I'd known you!”

“The language of the movement in *Tobi Roppo* is unique to *Tobi Roppo*,” Sabatino continued, picking up the thread. “When I was developing it in that very early phase, I gave the dancers prompts and stimulated their imaginations, and then I responded to what they came up with and

recycled it back into the piece. To get the *essence* when you are choreographing a piece, you often have to give up something in order to arrive at something new.”

By this time, through a *Meet the Composer* grant, Elliot Sokolov had joined the team, and *Tobi Roppo* premiered in the fall of 1986 at the Pineapple Dance Center, a 99-seat venue “on the tip of Houston Street” near Astor Place. The following May 6, writing of its sensational debut on the stage of the Joyce Theater, Jennifer Dunning of *The New York Times* praised *Tobi Roppo* as “exciting...nuanced...finely detailed...beautifully crafted...impressive [in its] inexorability...,” singling out Sabatino as “a young choreographer with a remarkably sure touch,” and Regina Larkin’s solo as “the highlight of the evening.”

...Well, Lori, it is no exaggeration to say that Jennifer Dunning’s words were brought to vivid life twenty-five years later in our Dance Studio, where I found myself on Thursday afternoon balancing my laptop and trying to move my chair backwards against the mirror so I would not be run over by the dancers bounding, leaping, scrambling, and reconfiguring their lithe bodies under the loud, boisterous counting and pushing of Sabatino, Nancy, Barbara – as well as Lynn Freilinghaus joining the fray. Cacophonous and breathless, this session was a complete “180” from the cloistered chat of earlier in the morning, when Sabatino had come across as introspective, reflective, a man of few words, pausing for long silences between answers, only to be urged on by Barbara.

Now, he was like an uncaged beast, prowling across the floor, managing to be in three places at once: “React to something unseen!” – “Imagine the devastation!” – “It’s all about exhaustion and fear!” – “Encourage the awayness!” - “The big *plie* should be like a tumbleweed!” – “Body two three four five six head two three four five six!” – “Up hill and back down and hill and forward and back and down and continue!” – “Do not choreograph yourself – let it happen to you!” – “Ah and ah and ahahahhah!” - “Hang on to your core!”

A mere transcript of these instructions and prompts, always delivered with upbeat humor and with a smile, does not do justice to the most powerful –biological -- theme of the hour and a half I was there, which is the connection of choreographic intent with specific parts of the body. Energy flow was being translated into expression of emotion; the raw material of the dancers’ stamina was channeled and parceled out by the choreographer and his vociferous chorus such that there was a direct line between the order to act, and the action itself.

‘Till next time, NB

No. 8 – February 18, 2012 – The Danceaturgs Speak

Dear Lori : Yesterday morning at nine, Linda and I met once again with the Danceaturgs, and this time we posed the question to the group of how *the human spirit* theme of this year’s repertory applied to them as *individuals* – how they sensed and expressed the human spirit within and how dance engendered these feelings. We went around the table and listened to Nick, Marissa, Kelly, Morgan, Jake, Tracy, Elaine, Colleen, Jessie, and Angelica speak in turn, and I pecked away on my laptop.

Here is an informal anthology of what they had to say and I purposely did not identify quotes with specific individuals because they spoke from the heart and also recognized the community

enveloping them. I think you and our readers will also enjoy the final phase where we turned our focus to ballet:

The human spirit can apply to art in all its forms – but I have tried other art forms – and it is with dance that I feel the strongest connection – it makes me feel other-worldly and inspired – dance is a necessity to me -- it is my greatest pleasure – part of that pleasure is putting yourself out there for all to judge – and it is not the easiest life – Dance makes me feel free and connected with myself like nothing else can -- dancing is not a hobby – it is a lifestyle – and when I started getting into it all I wanted to do was take class – dance can tell you how you are feeling on the inside – so if I come into class upset I always leave feeling relieved and refreshed – sweat it out and you are fine – Dance makes me feel spiritual because I can express things and get things out of my system better than by saying it – sometimes when I talk I feel like all I am doing is making noises – I am more clear inside myself when I am dancing – I can come into class feeling down and feeling the stress of life – and once I start dancing, nothing else really matters – When I meet somebody new if they want to get to know me they must first of all understand dance – lots of time when I talk I don't make sense – it takes a really long time for me to say what I am thinking, unlike dance, where it happens right away – dance keeps me together as a person – dance keeps my bones in place – without dance I am scattered all over the place – dance helps me to get away from everything else – it makes me feel that I am independent and growing – I can feel the growth within – as a person – and I always am striving to reach my full potential – because you have to have faith in yourself when you are dancing – Dance unites your body and mind unlike any other art form – the thrill for me goes way beyond endorphins – you are allowing your body to do what it is naturally made to do – it is literally biological – when we take a good dance class we feel so empowered and free – you understand yourself better through dance – you see your strengths and your weaknesses – I consider myself to be a very internal person – I feel connected to myself on a deeper level when I am dancing -- I feel an almost mystical feeling of looking within myself while I am in motion – and dance has helped me cope through very difficult periods of my life – And when I was injured that was when I really discovered how important dance was to me – when I couldn't do it I appreciated it even more and I realized that I was in school for the right thing – Everyone has a different spirit – and my spirit is not necessarily spiritual in the religious sense – I get a high and I get a boost of energy from dance – my spirit is more quirky – I enjoy portraying the character – I enjoy the performance aspect best of all – when I can enter a world of fiction and

fantasy – I like to pretend – to act – to not be an average person – to pretend that I am grand and live my life not hour to hour but on a larger scale – and when we dance we are not on the same level as the audience – we are raised on the platform – we are different than the people watching us – we have the power to spread calm throughout the theatre – Dance provides me with a sense of personal fulfillment – the spiritual aspect really flowered when I came back to it after being away from dance for a while and I got an almost biological feeling – I was really hungry for it – And there was a religious aspect for me -- going in to the studio every day – changing my clothes and entering the studio – it is a real ritual and a cycle – Our body is our instrument and we carry it wherever we go – “dancers are the athletes of God” – I am quick to hold my emotions in most of the time – so dance becomes my way of releasing emotion – And it is one of those things when you walk into a room and you meet someone else who is a dancer -- there is an instant bond – an automatic connection – like an immigrant from another country entering a world of mixed cultures where you find out what is common to you and the others who dance – you have to be in tune with your body – you have to accept that how you move is expressing an idea – an idea that is connected to your body and spirit and emotion – the spiritual part of dance to me means channeling something to make you stronger than yourself – to strive to give yourself qualities that you don't normally have – to think to myself that I can be stronger than this – that I can and will always do better -- and when it comes to ballet -- Ballet is our church – but you can read the Bible at home and you can pray anywhere if you want to – and ballet is the foundation -- but you can always branch out of that – modern dance is more natural – and when you take modern sometimes you are told that it is “like” ballet but it is not – when it comes to ballet class it really is about how you literally “take” the class – because you have to “take” it for all it's worth -- you have got to work at it – you have got to accept that there is an impossible technique you will never achieve – in ballet, you are working with an imperfect technique – it is the root of perfection – an already unattainable ideal – the perfect form – and you are therefore in a position of striving for transcendence – and reaching for the higher power – so that you may have the chance to feel that oneness and connection –

After the conversation I pointed out to the danceatugs that each and every person, at some point when they were speaking, mentioned something that someone else around the circle had said. To me, this was the most eloquent testimony to the collective human spirit even as individuals held sway. And when each person was speaking, everyone else was listening attentively and looking at the person. This is the common bond that exists among dancers.

I am telling you and our colleagues and students something you already know.

We are going to meet one more time with the danceatugs before spring break to begin preparations in earnest for the *Informance*.

I am looking forward to Dance Collage this week.

‘Till soon, NB

#9 – March 6, 2012 – A Conversation with Karen Gayle

Dear Lori: All these years walking past the “Ballery” on Thursdays and feeling the pulsation of drumming through the floors, and glancing in at Karen Gayle’s Horton Technique classes and realizing that for whatever reason I had never actually sat down and talked with Karen – and then being transfixed by *The Waiting Room* at Works-a-Foot and Dance Collage – I finally decided to make a time to meet with this talented and energetic young woman.

I know that readers of this letter are familiar with the work of LA-based Lester Horton (1906-1953) – “the genius on the wrong coast.” I was particularly intrigued with the Alvin Ailey connection. In 1949, the 18-year-old Ailey left UCLA and at the instigation of his friend Carmen de Lavellade joined Lester Horton and Bella Lewitzky’s (pioneering, inter-racial) Hollywood company, then traveled East with Horton to New York; and when his beloved mentor passed away the following year, Ailey took over as artistic director and resident choreographer of the Horton Dance Theatre.

Fast-forward to Karen Gayle -- trained in Graham and Limon and exposed to the Toronto scene – she developed (as she called it) an “eclectic downtown” style. When she left her native Canada and moved to NYC, Karen began taking Horton classes at the Ailey School – and thus, the generational connection was born, an affinity that persists to this day.

Horton Technique, as you know, emphasizes *the whole body*, an anatomical approach to dance based upon what its inventor called “corrective exercises...[that will] prepare a dancer for any type of dancing he may wish to follow.” It forces students to become hyper-aware of the pull of gravity relative to their own physiologies while respecting their idiosyncracies. Projections, locomotions, preludes, rhythms, improvisations, and (most importantly) fortifications all combine to construct a deep consciousness of movement quality. The Horton Technique thus feeds into the entire expressive spectrum of dance.

As Horton’s long-time collaborator, Frank Eng, said it so well: “The human skeletal musculature body [is] an instrument of movement through space and time, transcend[ing] mere technique.”

I asked Karen what it was about Horton that inspired her so much. “I always wanted to be a dancer and a choreographer,” she told me. “And I have always been dedicated to the *dynamics* of dance, **by which I mean** the *choices* about how much proportionate weight you give to the different elements of a piece when you are in the process of devising it...**Horton training is the foundation for my way of making dance.**”

She continued, “**I challenge my students constantly: It is important to know what moves you in dance. If you cannot define it, then why are you here in the studio right now?**” Horton gives me strength and clarity of movement. I always leave a Horton class feeling as though I could climb a

mountain. It's the underlying power to define my reasons for dancing and I want the students to find that same motivation."

With regard to *The Waiting Room*, I mentioned to Karen that as a requirement in my Play Script Interpretation and Introduction to Theatre courses, students must attend and critique a dance performance, because I want them to have some grounding in another expressive art form. And when I surveyed the Theatre students on the dances that spoke most eloquently to them, *The Waiting Room* was pre-eminent because, they said, it possessed a quirky but captivating narrative flow, accessible even to those who were not as conversant with dance vocabulary.

Karen agreed. "I am captivated by strong story-telling," she said. "I love movies and I have a cinematic approach to dance. Everybody up there on the stage played a role on two levels, as an individual with their own reason for 'waiting,' and then also as part of a group process. And another reason that piece might have gone over so well with Theatre students is because I am also committed to dances that imply a story that came before and a story that will continue after the dancers leave the stage – dance as a slice of life."

Was Karen concerned about the future of the Horton *legacy*? "Yes, I am," she said. "I am of the philosophy that if you are going to be a dancer you must have your hands in *all* of it – ballet, tap, jazz, hip hop and modern. **I worry that many of today's dancers are solely interested in learning 'contemporary' without a secure grounding in tradition and the classic forms.**"

When Karen Gayle left my office to teach her class, these words echoed in my mind, and, three days later, as I sit here typing, their urgency returns.

I am reminded of conversations I have had with other members of our faculty as well as visiting choreographers and *repetiteurs* from the great dance companies about the particular pressures incumbent upon those who teach an art form predicated upon specific human bodies doing specific things in a specific style for specific reasons.

'Till next time, NB

PS - I must include this link to a rave review in *The New York Times* of the [Whitney Museum Biennial in NYC](#) which just opened this week and which, for the first time, ***"includes not just video and performance art but music, theatre, film, and dance – and does so on an [unprecedented] scale."***

Everybody should give themselves a day off during spring break next week and go to the Whitney [75th and Madison Ave] to bear witness to the broadening profile of dance!

No.10 – March 24, 2012

Dear Lori: It was a profound day. I am going to write about everything that happened, soon – and we have the video of the *D-Man* Rehearsal/Cleaning and the Talkback, which I will share with everyone, as soon as our friend Rodney has it all edited and ready.

Meanwhile, however, I thought the following would be a provocative souvenir of our time with Bill T. Jones, Janet Wong and Leah Cox. What follows are the nine detailed questions I had so assiduously researched and [over-]prepared for the talkback. As soon as Bill and I started conversing, I realized that the proscribed format would not work – so I abandoned the prepared script and went along intuitively.

**BTJ and NB, Interview/talkback preparatory notes for Saturday afternoon, 3/24/12
[Or, “Nine Questions I Did Not Ask Him”]**

[Emphasize up front – This will be a thematic conversation – as opposed to zeroing in on specific works in the past forty years and what I have seen as your core beliefs and core declarations – of course this can only be a mere selection.]

1. Always there is high **intentionality** of your work – “what are the toughest questions we can ask ourselves?” – so zealous – “fierce pride” - ambitious – intensity – passion - challenging himself – extending himself – “setting out to do” this or that – “something that would exhaust me” – “to affect people, yet be cool and distant” – “try to set myself on fire” – “I am a performing monster” - how does this coalesce? **Do you think the nature of your intentionality has changed/evolved over time, or is it fundamentally the same drive toward an unknown – like the 19th century Romantic poets?**

2. Your growing determination – another big goal – if that is OK to say – a through-line as time goes along – you have said that you want to add to “the great discourse” on the big issues – art, culture, society. i.e., “I want dance to participate in the world of ideas” – i.e. “How is [*Social Intercourse*] a reflection of its culture?” – throughout yr career I see this persistence – this determination to keep posing the large questions – you are never comfortable – never staying in one place [even if in yr most recent piece you are sitting in one place!] – **your imagination is all over the place – with these big ambitions must come big frustrations – what are they and how do you cope with them?**

3. Following on, with regard to “big” - I really see your rapport with the painter Anselm Kiefer as you have written – there is something about creating a big canvas that one knows going into it will not be big enough – monumentality as self-defeating. Like Kiefer - big – ambitious – serious – lots of scope – no sense of limitation of vista or subject matter – & with history deeply embedded – etc – I read in one of your journals how you saw a rapport when you visited a Kiefer show in Bologna in late 1999. – ‘leaping into the great impersonal sea of mankind’

– and likewise, my viewing of K’s Gagosian Gallery show in NYC fall 2010 – the glass cubes – the huge cor-ten steel boxes – unable to enclose such a capacious vision – I felt as if the artist was still challenged – still measuring his ambition against what he could and could not do – **Bill, is it fair to say that despite – or because of - these same limitations, dance remains your chosen medium?**

4. Now let’s take the evocative phrase - body *against* body – with its combined sense of intimacy and conflict - from intense, varied athleticism [BTJ often praised for his strength] to sitting in

one place – which leads me to an observation about the *objectification* of your body – ‘ideas are actions or they are nothing at all’ – [as an explanation for the dance form?] – your oft-made distinction between the *group of bodies and the community of bodies* – you say that collaboration is very important to you – and collaboration has been defined and redefined and morphed in many ways and taken different forms over the years – Janet Wong is so crucial to this now – since the mid-1990’s – *she* acts as a collaborative audience – along with the use of video – again – And with relation to that – you said ***”I’ve always believed that any action done with a sufficient level of consciousness and commitment is never wasted.” So let’s talk about improvisation again as objectified – **“it [improv] catches me at my most animal” so has your own body become a kind of collaborator?**

5. Follow-up – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible* has written, “To have a body is to be looked at” and Bill, you write about – “entering into the body” – and ask the question about whether or not the audience really “sees” you thereby raising these incredibly difficult questions throughout yr work of the perception of the moving body – [like danceaturgy] – [but now, I am thinking about how in S/T he does not watch the dancers – he purposefully does *not* do so - depending upon where you literally “stand.” – “we onstage never witness the chemistry of our live performance” – & ”how difficult it is for people to *see* me” – **or one might say, to imagine yourself being seen the right way, the way you want to be – to go back to intentionality –is this (!) the endless fascination of dance?**

6. Following up on that - I am struck by the complexity and intensity of yr relationship to/with yr own body – talking about it both connectedly and disconnectedly – The literary critic and poet Stanley Burnshaw says in his classic, *The Seamless Web* – “poetry begins with the body and ends with the body” – and Bill says – “art asks us to look at ourselves and watch ourselves watching” – **like Whitman taking his whole life to write Leaves of Grass in so many iterations – so in that sense, Bill, are you, yourself an ongoing project?**

7. Stories – narrative – including the quite wonderful early poetry [hold up the book] - and the [ever] *presence of the past* as personal history – in the beginning yr work was referred to by the early critics as “nonlinear” – and yet Cage has *always* been there – in the sense of narrative as repetition – using repetition and reflection. – **sometimes you imply that using language is a way to fill in the spaces that physicality cannot fill...? Is this a proper definition for the language of narrative in your work over the years?**

8. In 1998, you wrote that ”The secret of what we [Bill & Arnie] *were* doing was in syntax, not so much in vocabulary...now I am interested in the words I am creating, before I even make a sentence.” Again, coming back now at the end of this conversation to connecting that language to the concept of the body – as a form of identity - “I am Bill. I’m not Arnie, and I’m not Bill and Arnie.” **Does Arnie still live in your body – without being sentimental – but yet, I noticed all of the references to him in Story/Time?**

9. And so, let us, as is only right, end with *D-Man* – you have famously said, “this is not a dance about AIDS” – I like this insistently anti-representational stance – so could one say, rather, that yr dances are about what they do?

-- NB, 3/24-25, 2012

No.11 – April 15, 2012 – The Triumph of *Danceworks*

Dear Lori: The key that unlocked *Danceworks* for me came on Friday early afternoon in Kasser Theater, when Beth McPherson introduced the confident, well-prepared and articulate *danceaturgs* to the visiting high school student audience, and she remarked that Charles Weidman (*Opus 51* - 1938) taught Jose Limon (*There is a Time* - 1956), and that Lane Sayles (*The Construct* - 1982) danced with the Limon Company. At that moment I wrote on the front of my program, “this is one big interlocking story.”

And it was not only the chronology of tradition I was jotting about. The theme of *Dance and the Human Spirit* was omnipresent; even if you were not aware of the overarching title, the indomitability of that spirit penetrated into every moment of the two hour show.

The circle of *There is a Time* shone luminously, emerging from a half-realized dream, then fading into the fog of human history. Along the way, we witnessed the vicissitudes of the life cycle echoed in Biblical words, and the multitude of ways in which the body reaches for sublimity. *Opus 51* seen from a distance and framed by the proscenium, as it is meant to be, affirmed its uneasy asymmetry and clarity once and for all. The pleats in the shimmering green skirts – I have written of them before – were a fragmented vertical river. The dancers held their heads high; I was sitting in the audience behind Margaret O’Sullivan as she swayed and swerved with every motion. Earl Mosley’s *Breath* – every time I see this piece it brings tears to my eyes, and I tried to figure out why – it has to do with the ancient message of spiritual faith juxtaposed onto young bodies – there is something painful and poignant about mortality expressed by sinuous youth. *The Construct*, as I told you and (a very amused) Lonne, stands now as the ultimate testimony to obsession. The poles possessed *gravitas*. This angularly cumulative piece shows how far the possibilities of dance will be stretched when the governing choreographic motivation is to succeed no matter the absurdities or the cost. *Tobi Roppo* impressed me with its openness, the spacious incursions of the dancers and the episodic phases of the narrative. It was an easy dance to “read,” and the arc of the story rose, fell and rose again with the exquisitely-lit final message of hope. *We love you get up* – in full force of décor, color motif, poses and width – affirmed Chase Brock as a spatialist who grasps the panorama of the stage and configures bodies in motion and stasis so they are in constant tune with each other and the words being spoken, like a picture book within which the illustrations were conceived first. Finally there was *D-Man*, which we have lived through and lived with in the company of Bill T. Jones himself. The indefatigable surges, the glorious high releases, the swimming with and – even more powerfully -- *against* the fugues and tides of time and life, the camaraderie and support, the laughter and the sorrow and the final grey tableaux.

As the moment neared for the talk-back, I was thinking, frankly, *what is the point?* Words have no place here and now, in this theatre, at this moment. We should let the physicality wash over and through us, I reasoned, and remain satisfied with our biological identities and our sense of selfhood witnessing ecstasy. We should just get up out of our seats, applaud our students and choreographers, and drift away into the chilly spring evening. But then, [Chase Brock](#), decked out in his turquoise blazer and madras tie, and the ever-elegant and composed [Ryoko Kudo](#) in her geometric hand-made print scarf joined me on stage, and that resignation left me, replaced by an intense desire to engage with these two gifted artists.

That is why I said to the audience that having learned my lesson from [my recent conversation with Bill T.](#), and laboring under the nagging, residual feeling of the uselessness of language, I was going to dispense with the list of prepared questions. However, then, Gemini that I am and always will be, I again reversed my mind without saying anything further, and juggled around the prepared questions, instead of abandoning them. I began by talking with the two guests about the different natures of their works in the show. CB had created, directed and choreographed an original new piece on our students. RK had meticulously and laboriously restaged a classic, vintage work from a master's repertory on our students. On the surface, one would see two very different activities. But were they, really? What are the commonalities we can draw?

We segued into a subject I had just discussed with Bill T., and with Robert Battle when he was on that very stage with me last year – the weighted term, “legacy;” and I realized this meant different things in different contexts – i.e., maintaining the Limon legacy as you restage his works or any such classic work vs. sharing a new technique – but what about on a personal level, I asked them both, as choreographers and teachers -- what did this fraught term mean to CB and RK, and did they believe there was an inherent danger/challenge/problem embedded within the *dance* legacy because of its ephemerality? At the matinee, I had eavesdropped when Ryoko and Maxine and I were sitting together during *There is a Time* and as the lights came up briefly, Maxine asked Ryoko if she was going to give the students any more notes, and she shook her head and said no, now that it was on stage, “they should own it.” What does that mean to you, I asked Ryoko, how do you make that decision, what does that act of closure feel like within yourself – that turning point of letting go? Where resides the responsibility?

We moved on to discuss the use of poetic language [[see link below!](#)] and text in dance (RK with Ecclesiastes, CB with Frank O’Hara); the dangers of over-thinking; and varieties of pedagogy, Chase and Ryoko were talking to the audience and, more revealingly, talking animatedly to each other, as if I were not even there (a good thing, by the way). Another audio track played in my head, “Let them talk! Keep your mouth shut. Stop intervening. Stop analogizing with your own experiences.”

Lori, this schizophrenic mentality is a contrarian sign of progress in my rough journey of dance learning. I accept the superfluity of talk while at the same time am compelled to acknowledge its necessity. This is not a paradox. *It is a fact of the form of dance.* Talking about a speechless mode of expression is not a contradiction; it is a concession to what makes us who we are. It was through first reading the ecstatic poetry of the visionary William Blake several decades ago that I came to understand that “without contraries there can be no progression.”

Driving myself to combat inarticulateness, pushing to see, notate, acknowledge and discuss modern dance, I am in this later stage in life forging a new creative direction. This is not an altruistic or purely pedagogical pursuit. But you already know that.

‘Till next year, NB

PS April is National Poetry Month – everybody should visit the [Creative Research Center](#)

P.S. April 21, 2012 – An email after Fridays at Noon at the 92nd Street “Y”

Everybody - what a great day!

i wanted to add a danceaturgical footnote and some links for yesterday.

one of the dances in the show was *lament for the death of a bullfighter* (1945) by anna sokolow performed by francesca todesco.

nobody mentioned that the dance was inspired by the famous poem of the same name (*llanto por ignacio sanchez mejias*) by federico garcia lorca. originally published in 1935, each of its four parts talks about the goring and death of a bullfighter who had been a friend of the poet. this very moving and dramatic elegy contains the famous refrain, *a los cinco de la tarde* ("at 5:00 in the afternoon").

for biographical background on lorca, click here <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/163>
and to read the poem in english and spanish, click here
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/lament-for-ignacio-s-nchez-mej-as/>

in fact, as beth mentioned, there is even more "text-based" work going on than one might think.

all the best, nb