

MSU Informance 09: “A different kind of knowledge set in the human body”

“I look forward to planning this year’s *Informance* ...As I mentioned to everyone, I would like to suggest having the students get up and perform small segments of the choreography – perhaps as an example of subject matter, movement philosophy, style, choreographic process, music/musicality, etc.” – Prof. Linda Roberts, email to NB, September 10, 2008.

“Art is a theory performed in practice. Art-practice is an inquiry, a celebration, a mourning, an intervention, a critique, an interested observation, an action, an act.” – Marjorie Garber, *Patronizing the Arts*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

The most noteworthy phenomenon about participating in this year’s *Informance* is that, although I am not an expert in any of the subject matters cited above by Prof. Roberts -- now in her 38th year of teaching here at MSU – I have been entrusted by the Dance Program with the responsibility of serving for a second season as your “*Danceaturg*” (more about that term in a moment). This gesture of pedagogical faith is a tribute to Linda, of course; as well as to Lori Katterhenry, director of the Dance program for 23 years; Nancy Lushington, Maxine Steinman, Wilson Mendieta, Beth McPherson, Kim Whittam, Nicole Smith, and the entire Dance faculty – and the talented and tireless Dance students who crowd the Lobby of Life Hall, day in and day out, from what seems like the crack of dawn into the middle of the night.

I would like to share some general reflections upon the circumstances bringing us together today before I delve into the particulars of the three exciting choreographers whose works we will demonstrate and discuss.

I believe that I have a promising future in this field, if all of you will continue to allow me to spread my wings. Many of you already know that I am a nonfiction author by trade, predominantly a biographer, which means that I have been a student of the human condition during more than three decades of writing and publishing books. I have spent my adult life watching and researching the span of modern American culture and history and describing it to the uninitiated reader. I love to observe, take note, and take *notes*; I relish the intellectual bird’s eye view of the passing scene, assuming a quiet, unobtrusive position slightly off to the side, but never too far away, so that I can hear and feel what is going on. I delight in observing the actions of others, then valuing and ennobling such actions by crafting narratives about them: a coherent, flowing, connected, harmonious *story*. Nothing is more satisfying and reassuring than a well-told story, in any medium or art form, even in arts that go beyond words. That is why *you* possess a vocabulary of the body.

I also spent many years as a working journalist, a freelance newspaper and magazine critic of theatre, books, photography and the visual arts. In this adventuresome dimension of my career, I was actually *hired* (for money!) to go out and see, read and view – then come back and convey my impressions and assessments to the public. This livelihood forced me to take a deep breath and -- before I set even one word on paper – remind myself that my sensibility – the disposition and acuity of my senses -- was worth something to others, that they were depending upon my opinion before they made a decision

about whether to see or hear or read something on their own. Quite a daunting responsibility at first, but I became comfortable with it.

Going to the deepest echelon of what I will always consider *real writing*, even before I was a biographer and a critic, I was a poet. Poetry is predicated upon being able and willing to open up the mind in order to take in the widest possible breadth of stimuli from the outside world. To write a good poem, you need to possess a fearless imagination, and you use that imagination to gather a garland of sensory and emotional images. Then you need to selectively trim and mold these impressions into a pleasing and provocative presentation, only to be as successful as the unforced transitions between its lines and stanzas. The *whole poem*, what the reader takes away, must feel greater than the sum of those parts. The whole poem must be “beautiful,” (whatever that signifies), in and of itself, and outwardly, in the eye of the beholder -- or, again, in *your* case, to bring the rhetoric back to modern dance -- the spectator.

You can see by now where I am going with this reverse chronology. A lifetime immersed in language prepared me to take on the huge job of *danceaturg*. I do not take credit for this intriguing label. *Danceaturg* evolved out of several ruminative conversations with Lori and Linda in the fall of '07 when we determined that we owed it to ourselves to work closely together; even more now that I am Lori's office-neighbor and so, as a consequence, merely by keeping my door open, I've seen all of the students in the program. Searching for a way to make a viable connection with my growing responsibilities teaching, mentoring and practicing “dramaturgy” in the MSU Theatre program, the commonly-accepted term for what I am doing in the dance field would be “dance dramaturgy.” However, Lori, Linda and I were trying to break new ground, and this usage -- though widely accepted -- sounded derivative. Whatever you want to name it, dance dramaturgy -- virtually non-existent a decade ago -- is presently more often situated in the universities and conservatories of Western Europe than it is here in the US. But no matter where, its ingredients and imperatives remain in a state of ongoing debate. For example, to cite some issues raised at recent dance symposia in Vienna, Berlin and New York City and well worth pondering: How engaged can/should the dance dramaturg be in the practice of choreography? Is it sufficient to accept the simple presence of documentary “eyes from outside” as a valid form of dance dramaturgy? Should the dance dramaturg be privy to the complete rehearsal process, or bow out at a certain proscribed moment? How much theoretical background should s/he bring to the rehearsal hall, and to what constructive effect? Should there be a correlation between the need for the “dance dramaturg” and the abstract level of the given dance? What is the most pragmatic relationship between dance dramaturgy, directing, and criticism? How do you integrate the *abstract* language of *thoughts and concepts* into collaboration with so many young people wholeheartedly dedicated to *active performance*?

What a perfect moment to convene this year's *Informance*! We have seen every number in *Works a Foot* (December) and *Dance Collage* (March). *Dance Works* (April) is around the corner. And just imagine, when spring comes, can summer be far behind? It will be seventy-five years since the summer of 1934 when Martha Hill (thank you, Beth!), and Mary Josephine Shelley established the Bennington College Summer School of the Dance, featuring a first-year faculty that included Martha Graham, Louis Horst (assisted in his Pre-Classic Dance Forms Class by 28-year-old May O'Donnell), Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. What a glorious time it was, when modern dancers shook free from

ballet's external formalist tradition, toward shaping their work from "a movement that came out of them," employing, in the prophetic words of the Bennington School's very first *Bulletin*, "a diversified rather than a single style."

Let's continue that emancipation, right here and right now.

"I've always attempted to familiarize myself with the traditions, and I consider that to be the responsibility of the artist. I think it is a bit facile to go in as the *avant-garde* is expected to do and just chop off the past and say, 'Okay, now we start.' It seems wasteful to me. Let's take what we've got and *push* it somewhere and let's *use* it – because why waste all those good lessons about how the body moves? Tradition is competition with the best you know that has preceded you." -- **Twyla Tharp**, interview, June 25, 1993.

To figure out where Twyla Tharp's **Torelli** was "coming from" I decided to track down and watch as many of her early dances that preceded it as possible, beginning with *Stride* (1965), created when she was twenty-four years old. In Tharp's view, *Stride* was so conceptual that it was never formally performed. It represented what she called "an absolute minimum of invented movement through time and space...devoid of stages and steps." *Re-Moves* (1966) was not much clearer in depiction, as again there was no music, the costuming was minimal, and many parts of the dance were physically concealed behind walls. Bearing out Tharp's oft-stated belief that "we're rigorous machines and we have to have a necessary regime, and be *worked* in the same way," the demeanor of the three dancers in *Re-Moves* ran the irregular gamut from angry to deadpan to deeply-serious to joyless. *After "Suite"* (1969), similarly-unsentimental, designed in homage to Merce Cunningham, includes the ticking of a metronome in the second part, and was significant as the last costumed dance Tharp herself was to appear in for several years. She said she wanted to watch her works from a distance, later referring to this particular dance as "discarded." In the version of *Medley* (1969) I saw, the "sacred ground" of the rehearsal studio was transported outdoors as six Tharp soloists took over a corner of The Sheep's Meadow in NYC's Central Park. The dance was resolute in not claiming a specific beginning; rather, simultaneous with "a surge of pure movement" including walking, running, and skipping (what Tharp calls "building blocks belonging to everybody") the dancers "appropriated" curious passers-by, gently tugging at their sleeves or beckoning them to join in with nearly-imitative movements, barefoot on the grass, spreading out organically in all directions. Spinning off a year later, in August 1970, *The One Hundreds* premiered at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The NYPL Jerome Robbins Dance collection owns a unique 16-mm silent film of this dance: Dancers of the Company stretch and flex, then perform a series of movement executions face to face with shy as well as willing audience members on a wide stage, coaxing, coaching and helping what eventually becomes a huge crowd into refreshing, "plotted chaos," bodies appearing to spill out of nowhere and without self-consciousness. *The Fugue* (1970) was developed as a solo by a visibly-pregnant Tharp in the high-ceilinged attic of a barn on her 200-acre farm in rural New Berlin, NY. "I was in a certain state," she recalled of that time, "where the cerebral powers are turned off, and the body just goes according to a directive that I know not of, that I feel a very special connection to...It is that hour that tells me who I am." *The Fugue* was intended, again, in her own

forthright words, “to dismiss everything up to this point – I decided [at that time] to definitely retire from the art world. I used contrapuntal techniques I had gained from our early work to put my craft entirely at the service of creating and resolving tension...The reward that I felt for doing that piece,” she recalled more than twenty-five years later, “will never be surpassed.”

On May 28, 1971 – four months before the advent of the far-more well-known *Eight Jelly Rolls* -- **Torelli** premiered outdoors, at dawn, in NYC’s Fort Tryon Park, to the music of the ornate and powerful *Concerto in D Minor* by the Baroque master Giuseppe Torelli (1658-1709). On October 4, 2008, I sat in on the first of many rehearsals for *Torelli*, set on our students by Kim Whittam, and listened to her talk them through the challenges. At one point early on, Kim observed that there was no “narrative” to the piece, but rather, a “movement vocabulary.” Walking back to the parking lot that evening, I questioned her on this distinction. Speaking as a writer, I had difficulty conceptualizing non-narrative art, let alone the dance, at least my idealized idea of it. Surely dance had to convey *some* kind of story message! Kim explained to me that *Torelli* was given to MSU via the technological medium of a modular training DVD (which I subsequently viewed, finding it austere and objectified, but then again, I reflected, why wouldn’t it be?). Issued by the Tharp Dance Company, the videorecording was composed of eight discrete movement “phrases,” each demonstrated from several visual points of view, front and sides. There was no stipulated cast limit – for the MSU performance, Kim used two casts with eight dancers in each; and no stated time limit. The phrases or exercises could be presented in any permutation and/or sequence desired, and within each phrase were elements that could be arranged and rearranged -- as long as the essential “integrity” of these phrases was maintained.

As Kim counted aloud in beats from one to fifty, designs in time and space, the students ran the piece in percussive silence, a repertory of the phrases systematically “demonstrated” by the group, separately and collectively. A voiceover Tharp made, narrating a 1976 WNET documentary, *Making TV Dance*, popped into my head: “I don’t make anything for the arms and the legs in particular,” she said. “It is more about the void between us.” Be that as it may, (Tharp’s habitual, sometimes annoying disclaimers aside) the movements of the dancers, purportedly random, manifested the gamine-like, quick, high-energy, fluid, impatient “Tharpian” ingredients recognizable to anyone familiar with her preceding work – hips rocking and thrusting forward and back, arms swinging front and back and from side to side as if “brushing” the air, hands in “offering” poses and flapping, torsos twisting, heads tilting one way then another as if at the end of a marionette-string, limbs splaying, legs pumping up and down, anxious to fold and unfold as quickly as possible.

When Kim finished counting, the *Concerto*’s five movements commenced immediately with a sudden blast – loud, cyclical and toe-tappingly rhythmic. I felt as if I had been subjected to a “set-up” for the dance to follow, but no expected logic took over. (At that moment, however, I got what Kim had meant about the abandonment of conventional narrative.) The mathematical and exhilarating Baroque tonal progressions and interpolations gave the vivid *impression* of living geometry pulsing through the dancers’ movements. Exemplifying this opportunity, during a short break, one of the dancers raised her hand and questioned the placement of a specific move within the framework of a “phrase,” with the supportive encouragement of a few of the young women sitting nearby. “Fine,” Kim replied, without a

pause, dropping her instructional posture and nodding in agreement, collaboratively. “You’re doing the choreography, and that’s your choreography from now on.”

At the conclusion of the frenetic run-through, Kim sat the breathless girls in a semi-circle and reviewed her notes. The predominant theme from this day forward, she said, would be to continue to “kick butt...all we are going to do next week, and the week after that, is plough ahead, and hone in on those counts.” Kim had been infused with the informing spirit of the choreographer herself, who had written with passion of the dancers’ never-ending need to encounter “discovery -- from a place that is not totally organized...Discoveries,” Twyla Tharp inspirationally believes, “are in a place we do not already know about...”

“...and real learning is not copying.”

The tall and beautiful **May O’Donnell** was born in Sacramento, California in 1906, where her father worked for the Southern Pacific railroad. After early studies with Estelle Reed in San Francisco, she took the train across the country to New York to attend the Wigman School run by Hanya Holm, and danced with Martha Graham from 1932-1938. With her husband and collaborator, the Missouri-born composer Ray Green (1908-1997), O’Donnell founded the San Francisco Dance Theatre in 1939, where she met and subsequently toured and choreographed repertory with the young Jose Limon. In early 1943, she created her signature piece, *Suspension*, which the dance critic Jack Anderson described as “cool, clear and unhurried.” She introduced the piece with a quote from poet T. S. Eliot, “...at the still point of the turning world...there the dance is.” O’Donnell recalled the dance as having been inspired by looking down from a high hill in San Francisco, seeing a military plane flying below, and thinking, “There is no ‘up,’ there is no ‘down’...[only] an inner balance to hang on to, in the momentary terrors of War.” *Suspension* marked the beginning of O’Donnell’s sustained interest in what she called “the relationship of movements and lines and figures in space.” She returned to Graham in 1944 for nine years as a guest artist, performing as the original “serene and stalwart” Pioneer Woman in *Appalachian Spring*, the Attendant in *Herodiade*, the Earth in *Dark Meadow*, and the Chorus in Graham’s *Cave of the Heart*. In 1949, with her old friend, Gertrude Shurr, O’Donnell founded an independent and exploratory New York based modern dance company; among her many pupils were such future luminaries as Robert Joffrey, Gerald Arpino, Dudley Williams and Ben Vereen. Works such as *Celtic Ritual*, *Magic Ceremony*, *Lilacs and Portals*, and the epic *Dance Energies* (1958-1974) followed. In 1974, the May O’Donnell Concert Dance Company was created, with a home at 429 Lafayette Street. In 2002, O’Donnell received the Martha Hill Lifetime Achievement Award. She died in New York City in 2004.

These are the basic facts of her long career. However, the most eloquent, immediate personal introduction to May O’Donnell is through the words of our own Nancy Lushington, who met O’Donnell in 1974 when she visited Adelphi University (where Nancy was a student). Nancy then went on to dance as a soloist with O’Donnell’s Company for fifteen years, and knew her teacher as a friend for another dozen years after that. Nancy now serves as Vice-President of the Board of Directors of the O’Donnell

Green Foundation of Music and Dance, where she is the indefatigable keeper of the flame, and the pre-eminent advocate for setting the O'Donnell technique on a new generation of dancers.

Nancy and I talked for a long time recently about the necessity, above all else, of setting the record straight, extricating the vital distinctions of the O'Donnell technique from Martha Graham's prepossessing shadow. I noticed in several obituaries that May was described as a "Graham disciple," but based upon my intuitive impressions from multiple viewings of archival films and videos, and hours of rehearsals for *Pursuit of Happiness* here at MSU, I remained skeptical of this facile attribution. Indeed, as Nancy describes it, the focal source for the initial energy of the inhaling/exhaling aerobic O'Donnell dynamism "emanates from the upper *torso*...It's *high*-release, centered at chest-level," as opposed to the *contraction-release* lower abdomen wherein Graham found her nexus. Following-through that specific physical location of "the germinal source," O'Donnell's next propulsive goal, Nancy said, was to "get you *down* to the floor and then spring you up *off* the floor, aerobically and as quickly as possible."

Aside from these different physical roots for their two methods, and the fact that Martha was barely five foot two, whereas May was a limber, statuesque five foot six, the women promoted different pedagogical styles. Martha -- as we learned last year from the charismatic Denise Vale -- was strict, driven, and given to blunt directiveness -- all to the good of the final, dramatically-disciplined performance. Whereas May, in Nancy's memory, while equally fervent, "was always a *teacher* first and foremost...She just loved working with 'all the kids,' as she called them. She was so giving and open, striving to impress upon them a clean line and a strong range of movement."

O'Donnell herself affirmed Nancy's observations. In an interview she gave to Linda Small at the Lafayette Street Studio in 1979, when the subject of Martha came up, (as it invariably did), May described herself, in contrast, as having "a less-intense way of movement. Working with Martha, I was an instrument she played upon in a tight fashion...But, you see, I was from the *raw West*...the open air, the pioneer stock... I am a big, exuberant person, and that's the kind of feeling I wanted from the dancers in my own company!" Over the years of on and off association with Martha, May made a point of saying that she "kept [her] distance from" her, maintaining a professional and cordial rather than intimate relationship.

Pursuit of Happiness, today's featured work, created in 1976-77 in celebration of the nation's Bicentennial, gives vibrant life to O'Donnell's "wonderful memories" of the music of The Jazz Age. The swinging themes of the Greatest Generation of her youth as embodied in the tunes of Glenn Miller, Woody Herman, Tommy Dorsey, and DeLange/Hudson/Mills proved to be the ideal inspiration for *Pursuit*; we should also bear in mind May's inherent patriotism and love of the American scene, constantly cultivated as she traversed the breadth of the land throughout her long, fruitful life. Even before *Suspension*, in the earlier years of World War II, May had already struck a blatantly nativistic tone with such works as *So Proudly We Hail* and *On American Themes/Three Inventions of Casey Jones*. "I wanted to give the feeling of covering space in *Pursuit of Happiness*," she said. "This is a *moving* country, and we as Americans feel that movement in our daily lives...Our land is a *new* land, and I wanted to express that newness in my work."

Watching Barbara and Sabatino Verlezza rehearse our dancers with Nancy Lushington last month, starting off with *In the Mood*, and continuing with *Blues on Parade*, *I'm Getting Sentimental Over You*, and *Moonglow*, all of May's principles came to life. Traditional popular dances of the period, the Charleston and the boogie woogie, frenetically intermingled with expected modern dance patterns, but the distinction in styles of the varying components was never clouded. The word "focus" echoed through the room over and over, reinforced by many references to May, as "she," as in, "She was never arbitrary...she was always smiling...she was not presentational."

Another important attribute of May's aesthetic drummed into the heads and bodies of our students was the idea of humor. They were often told by Barbara and Sabatino and Nancy not to take themselves seriously, to "have fun with this," and to "keep smiling." Certainly the imperative was ever-present to keep the sustained hyper-athleticism alive, "getting off the floor right away." Once I had seen this compulsion to action countless times in succession, I also understood how "American" the urgency of May's ongoing movement choreography really resembled -- as Nancy called out at one point, "a flock of birds."

Knowing May as we do now, we understand that her dances were not made for the faint of heart or the unconditioned, nor should the reconstruction process become a literal, photographic *imitation* of May. Rather, Nancy and the Verlezzas faced the subtle, more difficult challenge of translating emotional drive -- recalled from the biological imprint of disciples' memories -- into current physical action. May taught Nancy her solo, and Nancy taught Sarah *her* solo, tantalizing her young student and urging her to "feel longing with a sense of remembrance...[to] imagine your sweetheart over there, offstage, just beyond...you're *almost* there, but not quite." Indeed, *tantalized*, because the poignant result of *setting* the dance cannot be a matter of mere replication. The spring 2009 likeness of the 1977 *Pursuit of Happiness* will become preserved in the visual sense, so that, in fleeting performance, we in the audience bear ephemeral witness to its creator's vision -- *in* and *through* the bodies of our Dance majors.

Six months ago, notebook and pencil in hand, and truly having *no idea* what to expect, I walked hesitantly into a workshop-in-progress for **Danial Shapiro and Joanie Smith's *To Have and To Hold*** conducted by S&S company reconstructors Laura Selle and Dan Weltner. A frantic group of loosely-clothed, limber MSU students were, in the memorable words of Lori Katterhenry, "wildly careening over three benches." The second thing I noticed was a haunting, electronic keyboard music score by Scott Killian pulsating through the air of Life Hall Room 123. And the third (and ultimately, it turned out, most important) contributory element to my eventual understanding of the piece was Laura's voice calling out, by turns, "stay with your partner...look into the eyes of your friend...[and] keep in step with your *families!*" Yes, that's right, *families*. In my subsequent exploratory research, I came across a revealing observation about Shapiro & Smith Dance by John Tomlinson, general manager of the Paul Taylor Dance Company, who met the dynamic couple in 1982, three years before they were married. "They have had an amazing ability to tap into commonalities we share as human beings," he said. "The structure of family, our relationships, our struggles -- and to bring them to the stage in ways that are intense, humorous, provocative, and accessible."

In a comment to *Minnesota Monthly* in late September, 2006, just days before Danial Shapiro's death from prostate cancer at the age of 48, Laura Selle referred to the Company's *Anytown: Stories of America*, a folk-opera extravaganza built upon nine songs of Bruce Springsteen along with others by Patti Scialfa and Soozie Tyrell, as "wrapped up in the idea of *family*. You don't always feel like you are performing," Laura said. "Just *living* the dance with people you love."

Enthralled, I have watched this hypnotic dance, a veritable festival of physical abandon, dozens of times, live and on video in different versions starting with its premiere presentation at "The Yard" in Martha's Vineyard in August, 1989; and each time it feels as if another gossamer, rhythmic layer of potential meaning has been laid down gently upon its predecessor. Bounded by what Laura called "the world of the benches" parallel in the diagonal, six dancers begin provocatively in groups of three and two and singly, and conclude fifteen minutes later in three pairs of two: one above, lying stretched out on a seven foot-long bench, and one beneath, on the floor. Yet although there is a motif of pairing up and requiring each others' literal support, there is an equally strong theme of individuality and interchangeability, as the dancers lean and pivot against each others' shoulders and hips, push against each others' chests, breathe in tandem and alone, engage in sequential, staggered movements, line up, and break ranks. About halfway through these interweaving perambulations, at the seven minute and forty second mark, there is a shift in mood, toward decline and darkness. A more measured tempo comes to the fore, segueing into bittersweet farewells, dreams interrupted, fitful reawakenings, ambivalent letting go and resignation, and one poignant attempt at retrieval -- before the final blackout.

I spoke with Joanie Smith on the telephone this past January. She was in her office on campus at the University of Minnesota, where she has held the Barbara Barker Endowed Chair in Theatre Arts and Dance since moving to Minneapolis from New York in 1995. Having just watched a video of "Social Studies," a performance taped at St. Mark's Church on May 12, 1991 as part of the Danspace Project, I enumerated some vintage Shapiro & Smith dances from that show, and Joanie shared insights into the intuitive and collaborative process that she and her late husband explored during their two decades together after they left the Alwin Nikolais/Murray Louis company and struck out on their own. The first number on the tape, *Rhapsodies*, was choreographed modularly for six (seemingly-crazy) dancers cavorting in groups of two and three and singly around three tufted ottomans. Causing me to think instantly of *To Have and To Hold*, I marveled at how much altitude and "bounce" the dancers achieved, bounding on and offstage. Joanie laughed. "The tops of the ottomans were stretched into mini-trampolines," she said. The second piece, *Square Dance*, again like *To Have and To Hold*, incorporated planned chaos, only this time within the conventional "frame" of a folksy evening complete with a dance caller ("swing your partner," "do si do," "all join hands and circle left," etc.). The promenading couples remained as such up to a deliberate point, after which they split apart, marched in circles, and asserted individual integrity. The third piece, *The Art of War*, used this 2,500 year old military training manual by Sun Tzu, beautifully narrated by Jan Owen as its textual springboard. The dance was spatially restricted to the territorial confines of a six foot by nine foot Oriental rug. I asked Joanie how she decided upon that prop. She laughed again. "It was my grandmother's and it was in our basement," she replied casually. When I remarked upon the disciplined yet vulnerable, powerful physicality and sinuous grace

with which the shirtless Danny carried himself through the strenuous piece, she told me he had been a ju-jitsu black belt as well as a kung-fu enthusiast.

I also wanted to share with her my strong impressions of the “elegaic “ ending of *To Have and To Hold*. Joanie did not correct that analogy; however, by this time, late in our conversation, I could sense that her initial enthusiasm was dissipating. It was painful for her to talk about the piece beyond vague allusions to its presently ironic hope that “if you lost someone, you might somehow, some way, still ‘see’ them again...,” the dance having been dedicated at its creation in response to the AIDS crisis, “on behalf,” she told me, “of those we have loved and lost, but not forgotten.”

After I hung up the phone, I discovered in my papers The New York *Times* critic Jack Anderson’s review of a 1993 performance of *To Have and To Hold* at the Joyce Theatre, which had moved him to conclude with this chilling quote from the poet Charles Baudelaire: “Life is a hospital where every patient is obsessed by the desire to change beds.”

I extended my inquiry a month later with an opportunity to meet and talk with Wilson Mendieta who, as you all know, holds degrees in both Acting and Dance from MSU, performed with Smith & Shapiro, and has been helping set *To Have and To Hold* on our students. Recalling his own fruitful experiences learning the dance from the S&S team, Wilson viewed his current responsibility as reconstructor to “pass on the information” instilled in him by the two original choreographers; to “create the same muscle-memory” in the bodies of our students as had been impressed upon him; and to teach both demandingly *and* nurturally, making use of the same qualities as Joanie, whom he called with affection the “intellectual” member of the team; and Danny, the “physical” influence. Wilson and I ruminated about the timeless message of *To Have and To Hold*. For him -- and I think that I am beginning to concur as time goes along -- the dance is not so much about any so-called subject in particular; rather, it embodies, in Wilson’s words, a constant, undeniable “sense of urgency through sensuality.”

Beginnings, middles and endings – as we have witnessed here today, they mean different things to different choreographers in the evolving tradition of “The Modern Dance.” Taking a different entry-point to each dance I observed, I tried to accept the limitations of language to describe them, whether it be Twyla Tharp’s formative years as a choreographer, and seeing *Torelli* as the peak of that phase; May O’Donnell’s overcoming the burden of Martha Graham’s influence, and seeing *Pursuit of Happiness* as the fluid response; or, with Shapiro and Smith’s *To Have and to Hold*, feeling the subtle and overt ways in which an emotional wound can remain open and shape the work. Three different dances cannot be held to the same standards. This infinite variety makes *danceaturgy* a recurring adventure.

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