

Writings on  
the 2012–13  
Performance Season

Choreography by  
Reggie Wilson  
and Akram Khan

The  
Yale  
Dance  
Theater  
Journal

Contributions by

Caroline Andersson (MC '15)  
Aymarie K. Bartholomew (DC '13)  
Lauren Dawson (JE '16)  
Derek DiMartini (ES '13)  
Lila Ann Dodge (AFST MA '14)  
Hannah Dreitcer (DIV '14)  
Laura Fridman (BC '15)  
Molly Haig (DC '14)  
Karlanna Lewis (LW/SOM '15)  
Indrani Krishnan-Lukomski (JE '15)  
Elena Light (JE '13)  
Clarissa Marzán (PC '14)  
Elizabeth Quander (SY '15)  
Zoe Reich-Aviles (DC '15)  
Aren Vastola (BK '14)  
Cecillia Xie (TC '13)  
and Emily Coates







The

*Yale*

Dance

Theater

Journal

**Faculty Director**

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**Editors-in-Chief**

Karlanna Lewis and Aren Vastola

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## **About Yale Dance Theater**

Yale Dance Theater (YDT) is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and/or development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance.

As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. In the final phase of the project, we draw on these writings to develop a print journal. YDT's mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.

### **Faculty Director**

Emily Coates

### **YDT Student Coordinators**

Aren Vastola and Karlanna Lewis

YDT's spring 2013 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College and the Lionel F. Conacher and Joan T. Dea Fund, in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.



Akram Khan's *Kaash* moves like a piston: long quick lunges to the side that plumb impossible depths of *plié*, followed by split-second rebounds to upright. The arms, stabilizing pendulums of support, direct and redirect the legs, supporting the body before the next nosedive toward earth. The phrase comes in three versions: "normal," "simple," and "double." "Normal" includes a whiplashing action in which the arms ripple like a piece of cloth up and around the head, swing forward and out to the left, then swing back to the other side to indicate and retract parallel to the floor before circling and swirling back up around the head to repeat. The head responds accordingly—up, forward and left side, right side, back up to the sky, forward and left, then other side and back skyward. No choreography I have ever danced has made me this dizzy.

Yale Dance Theater (YDT) augments and extends the work being done within the dance studies curriculum. Many of the students involved in YDT have passed through one or more of the dance studies courses, in which we blend studio practice with the study of relevant historical and theoretical contexts, and hone methods of movement research. YDT allows for an even deeper immersion into an artist's body of work. With our dual focus on the critically acclaimed repertoires of Akram Khan and Reggie Wilson, Yale Dance Theater's spring 2013 project presented a bounty of movement research. While Khan synthesizes his training in classical kathak with contemporary dance, Wilson borrows liberally from postmodern choreographic strategies, dances of the African diaspora and ethnographic methods, in a nod to American artists of the mid-20th century updated for the 21st. Wilson's phrases are no simpler than Khan's: 1, 1, 3, 4, 4, 6, 7, 7, 9, 11, 11, 12 one phrase goes, built on the structure of a fractal.

The dancers of YDT gained intimate knowledge of innovations in contemporary dance through learning this work. They also grew stronger as artists. The works' complexity makes Khan and Wilson the ideal focus for Yale Dance Theater's inaugural print journal. Since YDT's inception, we have experimented collectively with research and writing, in response to the choreographic aesthetics under scrutiny. With this project, we agreed on several key tenets: writing does not replace the dancing. The dancing feeds and

directs the language. The best writing vibrates with the same physical and expressive presence as a good dance. Edited and introduced by Karlanna Lewis LW/SOM '15 and Aren Vastola '14, the writing that follows energetically responds to the choreography of both Wilson and Khan, respectively.

Dancers practice for innumerable hours to synthesize kinesthetic ideas. The world doesn't stop spinning, but at least we learn when to expect the vertigo—not to mention how to capture it in words. Read on to see, hear, and feel for yourself.

**Both/And**

Where Academia Meets Art, and  
Dancing Meets Writing

One of my favorite “Reggie-isms” from our time spent working with Reggie Wilson and his Brooklyn-based Fist and Heel Performance Group is his customary response of “both/and” to any question that demands “either/or.” Is it a step or a stumble? Is it forceful or fluid? Should I be thinking about the elbow or the wrist?

Dancing, when you “just do it” as Reggie so often instructed, inhabits such limits of language, and often baffles attempts at articulation. It is herein that the wonder lies. Yale Dance Theater is devoted to working at the limits, and then pushing past them with its unprecedented fusion of rigorous professional dance experience, creative approaches to arts research, and emphasis on critical writing.

Before coming to Yale during Yale Dance Theater’s inaugural year, I saw my identity in “either/or” terms. Am I a dancer or a scholar? Am I an artist or an academic? Many other members faced similar choices in deciding to come to Yale, fearing that they would need to give up their passion for dance to focus on their studies. Yale Dance Theater gave us all a place to explore our love of dance in new and thought-provoking ways; through YDT, we have

studied choreography over the past three years that challenges both our minds and our bodies. So, is the work mental or physical? In the words of Reggie, we’ve come to the conclusion that it is “both/and.”

An integral component of Yale Dance Theater is student writing. While we sometimes have prompts to guide us, the ways in which we write are more often individual and experimental. As a fledgling field in academia, dance scholarship employs a wide array of analytical methods, drawn from critical theory, philosophy, and anthropology among other disciplines. Furthermore, it is a dynamic field that requires blazing new trails of investigation; there is information that can only be gained through movement, and we must dance to discover it! This overlap between arts and humanities makes our process inherently interdisciplinary. As arts researchers we value the voices and creativity of practitioners within academic dialogue, and therefore pursue innovative means to make these voices heard.

As a company we are united in our love of dance, but we are also academically diverse. We have dancers majoring in Chemistry, Theater Studies, Economics, Philosophy, Art History, Mathematics, Psychology,



and numerous other fields. Graduate programs are also represented, from doctoral students in French, to Law students, to Divinity students. These backgrounds inform our approach to research and offer up a panoply of different perspectives, which I am so pleased to finally be able to share with the wider Yale community.

Karlanna and I hope that this student journal will provide another voice to enrich the vibrant and varied world of on-campus publications at Yale; as far as we are aware, this is the first such publication devoted to dance writing. It has been a pleasure to read and assemble this anthology, which we intend to make into an annual publication. Whatever your interest or field of study, I hope you encounter interesting insights and discoveries in the writings of your peers within this volume. Thank you for your support of Yale Dance Theater, and dance studies at Yale more broadly.

A composer, of dances or of music, takes various individual personalities or voices and compiles them together into that fabled greater whole. Together with Aren Vastola, as Student Coordinators of Yale Dance Theater for the 2013–2014 season, our challenge has been to comb through the numerous artful blog posts written by the 2012–2013 Yale Dance Theater company and combine them into a whole that reflects the diversity of dancers' experiences with resident choreographers Reggie Wilson and dancers of the Akram Khan company, as well as the commonality. Dance is not an individual pursuit, and neither has been this journal.

First, as many of the dancers' posts illuminate, writing and dancing are arts born of different natures. In dancing, the artist becomes bigger than herself, collaborating with other dancers to make a new whole in this physical and impulsive art. In writing, the artist distills herself into a few words, embarking on this individualistic and thoughtful pursuit with nothing moving beyond a pen or a few clicking keys. If dancing takes the artist out of the self and away from the mind, writing forces the artist to confront the inner in spirit and ask questions of the secret part

that dwells in all of our beings. But yet as much as we recognize the disparities between writing and dancing, they are both arts, and share an essential human creativity.

When the artist masters either writing or dancing, the artist reveals something about the nature of human experience, drawing connections that always existed but that, in our busy lives, we may not have noticed. Yet when either writing or dancing is done without skill, they are reduced to hobbies. For an artist, hobbies are anathema. Many people write poems in their bedrooms, but despite the similar actions, the poet might argue that his work is of another world. The dancer cringes when innocent acquaintances ask, "Oh, so dance is your hobby?" No, dance is our art—an essential difference.

Both writing and dancing seek to alter time. Dance exists in four dimensions. Beyond the three physical dimensions, dance occupies the spatial dimension of time. Separating dance from the time in which it exists is impossible. The few minutes, or seconds, of a dance's arc form an indelible part of dance's reality-altering ability. Dance compresses a multitude of experiences, stories of humanity, into an evening, defying time's ordinary, metronomic control.

Writing works the opposite way. If dance works in four dimensions, writing works in two. Writing doesn't alter time the way dance does, but denies it—an hour of time in dance can be preserved forever on a written page, or it can be read in two minutes—writing escapes the temporal dimension. When humans are limited by time in their daily pursuits, both writing and dancing burst free from limits.

What you will read in this inaugural journal is writing by artists who are dancers first. This project, which was first about dance but merged with the art of writing, doesn't occupy an identity-less no-man's land between the two arts. Instead, view this project as a bridge between dance and writing, with feet on both lands but where the view is fullest from the apex in the middle. With many voices meditating on the same dance processes, the writing is no longer individual. As with dance, you can pick out the individual dancers, but sometimes it's better to let your focus relax to take in the whole feeling of bodies, or voices, in their highest moments. This is not writing that leaps off the page, as the cliché goes, but like the dance, writing that undulates between what we know of our bodies, and what we hope they can be.





REGGIE

WILSON

## Yale Dance Theater 2013 Part I: Reggie Wilson

Lecture/Demonstration  
March 6, 2012  
6 pm & 8 pm  
Yale University  
Stiles-Morse Crescent Theater  
19 Tower Parkway

This evening's program includes movement material from the following works:

N/UM (1989)  
GEEREWOL (1989)  
the ReVisitation: Big Brick and *the Duet* (1992, 2012)  
(project) Moseses Project (current)

Choreography by Reggie Wilson  
Rehearsal assistance by performers of Fist and Heel Performance Group: Dwayne Brown, Paul Hamilton, Raja Feather Kelly, Clement Mensah, and Anna Schon.

With music selections from:

1. Ballad of Mack the Knife by Kurt Weil sung by Lotte Lenya [Germany]
2. Le Renard Aux Grandes Oreilles (1) from the recording **Namibie-Chants des bushmen Ju'hoansi** [Namibia]
3. Muhogo Wa jang'ombe (W/ Shikamoo Jazz & Twinkling Stars) sung by BiKidude [Zanzibar, Tanzania]
4. Travellers 1,2,3 by Meredith Monk from **Book of Days** [US]

### Yale Dance Theater

Caroline Andersson (MC '15), Amymarie K. Bartholomew (DC '13), Lauren Dawson (JE '16), Derek DiMartini (ES '13), Lila Ann Dodge (AFST MA '14), Laura Fridman (BC '15), Molly Haig (DC '14), Karlanna Lewis (LW '15), Indrani Krishnan-Lukomski (JE '15), Elena Light (JE '13), Clarissa Marzán (PC '14), Elizabeth Quander (SY '15), Zoe Reich-Aviles (DC '15), Aren Vastola (BK '14), Cecillia Xie (TC '13)

Faculty Director: Emily Coates  
YDT Student Coordinators: Elena Light, Aren Vastola  
YDT Producers: Laurel Durning-Hammond, Yuvika Tolani

This Lecture/Demonstration concludes the first half of Yale Dance Theater's semester-long investigation into the choreography of contemporary artists working today. Please join us in late April for Part II, featuring the work of British-Bangladeshi artist Akram Khan. Over the course of the project, the dancers of Yale Dance Theater reflect on the process on the YDT blog. For more information on the project and to read their writing visit: <http://ydtcommons.yale.edu/>.

YDT's spring 2013 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College and the Lionel F. Conacher and Joan T. Dea Fund, in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.

We would like to extend special thanks to Susan Cahan, Penelope Laurans, Nina Glickson, Tom Delgado, Nathan Roberts, Kathryn Krier and the UP staff, Paul McKinley, Michael Marsland, Matt Regan, Pam Patterson, Susan Hart, May Brantley, and Theater Studies.

### About the Artist

**Reggie Wilson** founded his company, Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group, in 1989. He draws from the movement languages of the blues, slave and spiritual cultures of Africans in the Americas and combines them with post-modern elements and his own personal movement style to create what he calls "post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern dances." His work has been presented nationally and internationally in the United States Europe, and Africa.

Wilson was the recipient of the 2000-01 Minnesota Dance Alliance's McKnight National Fellowship. Wilson is also a 2002 BESSIE-New York Dance and Performance Award recipient for his work *The Tie-tongued Goat and the Lightning Bug Who Tried to Put Her Foot Down* and a 2002 John Simon Guggenheim Fellow. Most recently, in recognition of his creative contributions to the field, Wilson was named a 2009 United States Artists Prudential Fellow and is also the 2009 recipient of the Herb Alpert Award in Dance. Most recently, Wilson received the 2012 Joyce Foundation Award for his new work (project) *Moses Project*, premiering 2013 as well as being an inaugural Doris Duke Artist.

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As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. YDT's mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.

Post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern Dancing  
with Reggie Wilson

On the first day the 2013 Yale Dance Theater company had the chance to work with Reggie Wilson, he stood in the corner, observing as any professional choreographer does, the dancers he was about to work with warming themselves up. Over the course of his six-week residency at Yale, we learned excerpts from his body of dances spanning from the 1980s through today. These included the gumboot dance, which Reggie created and performed as a student at New York University's Tisch School of Arts; big brick, originally a dance for four men which we, the men and women of the full YDT company, performed; Reggie's solo, which we all learned but which remained a solo; the Koch curve, a fractal dance based on the repeating patterns Helge von Koch discovered in snowflakes; the dew wet, a duet; another duet; the finger dance, or the pointing; and "the poses," or one-two-three. Most of these are not proper names for the dances, which were a sampling of the past twenty-five years of Reggie's work, but they are how we identified them. Words, for Reggie, were not as meaningful as dancing itself—and with Reggie, we danced, and transcen-danced.

Reggie refers to his work as "post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern dancing," a term you will read throughout these posts. This mish-mesh of adjectives combined in a mold-breaking way to create a personal and inimitable genre is Reggie through and through. His movement draws on the blues as well as African slave and spiritual cultures in the Americas and the Diaspora, and between broad heritages he adds his own post-modern touches and original style.

Since 1989 Reggie has been infusing Brooklyn with his personal and wide-ranging choreography via his contemporary company, Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group. Wilson refers to this performance tradition as "clapping and stomping, shouting and hollerin'," a subversive art born out of African spiritual tradition. Enslaved Africans' traditions



reinvented themselves in the Americas, where drums were denied but the soulful energies lived on in the new form, circumventing authorities who dismissed the clapping and stomping “as merely ‘fist and heel worshipping.’”

Reggie’s has presented his work at venues including Dance Theater Workshop, Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, UCLA Live, Contemporary Arts Center (New Orleans), Summerstage (NYC), Linkfest and Festival e’Nkundleni (Zimbabwe), Dance Factory (South Africa), Danças na Cidade (Portugal), Festival Kaay Fecc (Senegal) and The Politics of Ecstasy (Germany). Reggie has also traveled to research spiritual traditions that inform his dancing, crossing from the Mississippi Delta (where his family has roots) to Trinidad and Tobago to all corners of the African continent. For Reggie, as he told us dancers, his travels were not just about what he could learn from local cultures, but also about what he could share and transmit in return.

Among Reggie Wilson’s dance mentors are Phyllis Lamhut and Ohad Naharin. Now that Reggie is inspiring the next generation, his contributions to dance have been recognized through awards including Minnesota Dance Alliance’s McKnight National Fellowship, BESSIE and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His upcoming work, *Moses Project*, some of which YDT dancers had a chance to learn, will premiere in Fall 2013.

Much as his choreographic tradition blends diverse movements, Reggie blended the excerpts he shared with YDT into a seamless whole: *Draft*. As a dancer, Reggie rejects the academic inclination to mark movements inside the mind—he wanted to see the movement full-on, because only when the dance bursts out of the mind and into the body does it become what it has always strived to be. Yet Reggie also draws on interdisciplinary traditions, from the mathematics in fractals to literature in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. In introducing her work, considering the power of Moses in Africa, Hurston asks, “[W]ho can talk with God face to face? Who has the power to command God to go to a peak of mountain and there demand of Him laws with which to govern a nation?” We all have our Moseses, our leaders, and maybe, for a winter in Connecticut, Reggie Wilson became a Moses to us.





In a few weeks, I'm up to preach at the church where I intern. The day I've been assigned is Transfiguration Sunday, and while I usually keep my church work and religious life to myself, this idea of Transfiguration keeps coming into my head as I think about the work we've been doing in YDT.

The Transfiguration, a part of the Christian tradition, is a story about a moment on a mountaintop when some of Jesus' closest friends see a changed Jesus conversing with Elijah and Moses. I don't really get the Transfiguration, and I still have no idea what I'm going to say about it in a few weeks. But I keep coming back to the physicality, both within the story and within the word "transfiguration" itself.

For me, the word "transfiguration" seems to describe dance. It's a changing figure—a body in transition. And it seems particularly apt for Reggie's work—a transfiguration not just in our bodies in the moment as we perform the movements, but also a transfiguration of our minds in the moment, as we think through and of the movement.

There's another part of the story that I've carried into the studio, and which Reggie's work and teaching has illuminated for me. The language of the story as told in the book of Luke is very physical, but more cerebral, than that, it is very definite. Down is DOWN, unequivocally, in a deeply felt and completely committed way. There is no half-assing down, or up, or the experience itself.

In hearing about how Reggie has come to create this movement we've started to learn, the theme of transfiguration keeps coming to me. The idea of change and transformation seems to be everywhere. I see it particularly in the way Reggie has sought and learned and gathered different ideas and movement—and then made it his own, transfigured it into something new and individual.

I see it also in the task that lies before us as students, dancers, and humans—a transfiguration not just of the movement we learn as we bring it into our bodies, but also of ourselves, as we open our bodies and minds to this movement and are changed in some way—transfigured by this process and experience.

Themes of Transfiguration

On the first day of rehearsal, Reggie taught us a segment inspired by South African gumboot dancing. He quietly showed us a segment, counted down, and watched calmly as we produced a cacophony of unsynchronized sound. He showed us the segment again, and we slowly progressed toward coordination as a class. I grew extremely frustrated. I am on the Step team here at school, and when we are not together we all start shouting out the downbeats and the claps "BA DA DA PAUSE PAUSE BUM!" Reggie's way of learning was so much more organic. I ended up making up a strict rhythm to shout in my own head, and I convinced myself I had mastered the combination.

This is what has always been natural for me. I analyze and count first in dance, and then find ways to stretch the movements and pull time. Along with nearly everybody else here, I'm an overthinker and I get worried and nervous when I don't have ideas nicely organized in my mind. This is what has made me a dedicated student—but it did not help with Reggie's movement. I wasn't sure what to think, especially when he started quipping and making fun of us know-it-all Yalies, overanalyzing and practicing with him as he demonstrated a pattern. I felt the same sense of shame I do when people ask me where I go to school. My firmly organized sense of being has always helped me: why not now?

$2 \times 3 = ?$



I started to realize what the problem was during a warmup. We were walking and I briefly thought about my math homework for the night. One of the hardest problems was as follows:

Prove  $2+3=5$ .

I have to use several steps to prove this, and the answer draws upon Set Theory and the Peano Axioms. Similarly, in ballet, walking is usually as a deconstructed, complicated step. Do you pull your foot through coupé? How do you roll through your foot? How are your arms held?

It is so unnatural for us to just do. When Reggie says “go down,” we ask “how?” Our questions are scholarly and academic, not physical. We focus on shapes rather than movement. We want counts and rules. We are good at following rules. We are not good at just going down.

But the best moment was when Reggie told us to “throw away the judge.” I had been caught in a circle! I was berating myself for thinking analytically, and trying to accurately identify a way to bypass that mental tendency. I think that this transition to a more organic mind process will be difficult and I will look like a crazy lady a lot this semester, but maybe it will help me find a different side of myself.

If Reggie wanted to prove  $2+3=5$ , while I sat there leafing through my textbook and muttering to myself, he would simply hold up all the fingers on one hand. “This is five.”

At issue is the assuming, of movement, itself. I could have said “learn” instead of “assume,” but learning is not so straightforward as that: maybe assume reminds that there are palpably various ways to get at the ability to repeat (uniquely individually of course) a given pattern.

Concerning this project of writing a blog, to which each student participant in Yale Dance Theater contributes, Reggie encouraged us to start by taking what is “relevant” to us personally, individually, antecedently, as a center point from which to approach our experience of his work: how is, or isn’t, what Reggie does with us relevant, involved with or in conversation with our own values.

A critical or investigative stance pivoting on self-recognition.

More broadly, he emphasizes as well his intention to offer us an “experience”

by his sojourn with YDT: what does he mean? That, rather than just “learn”—what might mean dryly acquire the ability to repeat back what is instructed, we might try to know the time we spend working with him experientially—which would be something more like feeling (in the colloquial sense of a multisensory amalgam) through the unfinished states of learning; knowing that we know by trying and doing. Reggie is interested in us, as students, considering this experiential process. A rendition of self to immediate experience, including its potential vagaries.

Thus, Reggie would like to hear us speak from experience—to ask him questions that arise from a processual attention to experiencing, as opposed to asking objectively or academically interesting or appropriate questions that haven’t

themselves registered the sway of the doing of the movement on their framework, bite, rationale. An intellectual sensitivity to self as experiential.

But perhaps even closer to the crux, he would also like to see us move from an experiential intelligence—to note the rote and thence note the specific divergence of a new movement directive, as yet unaccomplished, from the rote we know. This actually becomes a question of technique—but especially technique of bridging technique. The challenge is to recognize differential—between what I see Reggie or one of his dancers do, and what of my habitual movement vocabulary might most closely approximate that. Approximation, a rough application of what I know to what I don’t, doesn’t make the cut. The challenge is to take the leap... to recognize, identify, and analyze (one way or another) the zones of a phrase of movement that

I do not know, do not know how to perform, and without skipping a beat go into that because even though I don’t know it, I feel it. An instantaneous merging with what I don’t know based on what I already feel of it; almost pre-empting self.

Last Wednesday Reggie emphasized, in response to an observation by Emily Carson Coates, that it is *the body* that has, that does, that makes possible diverse dance practices. But what he seems to be enjoining us to enable, at least eventually, is more like a multiplicity of body/bodies which we might very swiftly assume and reassume. Reggie and his dancers both note the choreographer’s interest in contrast as a compositional motor: meaning for instance that movement in his phrasings may not seem to “follow” one another in a fluid, consistent manner, but rather

Notes Around Gaps

Lauren Dawson  
January 28, 2013

Karlanna Lewis  
February 1, 2013

elaborate striking dynamic, directional, dimensional changes. From what Reggie tells us, besides looking directly at his work, this essentially rhythmic proclivity has an influence in African diasporic expressive culture, and a palette of movement or qualitative motifs drawing on quite diverse cultural and aesthetic heritages—touchstones including South African gumboot dance, downtown postmodern dance of New York City's final 20th century decades, Spiritual Baptist traditions of Trinidad and Tobago, classical ballet, Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, Tai Chi... Reggie encourages quick, high contrast, even surprising changes of physicality: though some precision is wanting in the description, technically it requires throwing oneself into another body, and then another, and then another. And technically this requires, as Reggie has emphasized and as seems quite fruitful, a "core orientational focus" on, in, the pelvis. A unifying orientation of bodily focus for a diversifying or multiplying assumption of body.

I walk around the dance studio slowly tuning into my own body. My feet lift up and down in a rhythmic pattern as I feel my weight shift from heel to toe and heel to toe again. It is all about body awareness, but rather an internal awareness of how I feel within myself. The physicality of dance is of course one of its main components that can easily be lost in over analysis and intellectualization. It's true that different forms of dance and post-modern dance especially are artistic expressions of the choreographer and their influences, but this expression of art is incased within the body.

### The Pelvis

Never before have I taken the time to truly open my mental awareness to the way every portion of my body moved in space. While walking around, tuning in to the soreness in my shoulder blades and the lengthening of my joints, I realized everyone has the same limbs in the same place but every body is a very distinct and different piece of artwork. These four divides are all held together by one pivotal point; the pelvis. The pelvis is the central point for the body. It acts as a grounding point from which all other types of movement can flow. In performing Reggie's movements the importance of the pelvis is vital for me in keeping myself grounded. Whenever I was confused in the movements, which to be completely honest happened quite often, I thought about the position of the pelvis. Yet I was still confused. My pelvis was not ready for this large responsibility. I've never depended on it this much before and I felt I had a large amount of catching up to do in accordance to its abilities. Perhaps my pelvis will step up to the challenge that it has been given. With time, effort, and of course that fantastic technique called rehearsal.

What are we talking about? Talking about talking? Talking about writing? Talking about words? Now I'm just riffing...

—Reggie Wilson

If dance-writers faced one eternal question, the question would be how to put words to a wordless art. Yet to me that very challenge is enticing. What words can do is preserve the experiential essence of a dance for those who didn't experience the dance in the moment, or even for those who did, to preserve the experiential essence in the best approximation of a time machine—taking the dancers and their watchers back to a moment when bodies were giants and gravity was a force under human control.

I once heard dancers have five strengths—technique, musicality, beauty, poetry and charisma. A strong background in ballet or modern dance gives technique, but in Mr. Wilson's work, musicality is a new animal. Counts are as subjective as gravity in his work.

### Can a Body?

Counts are as fluid as

the spine rolling up and down its three positions. Counts don't adhere to the standard 5-6-7-8 of "dancers' counts," just as up becomes larger than "dancers' up."

Counts are the spaces between the clap, or the stomp, or the switch of pelvis. And in those spaces too is the beauty. "Don't be dramatic," Mr. Wilson urged us, "just move the pelvis." See from the pelvis, and the pelvis moves by its own vast intelligence.

When we hung our wrists by invisible  
threads and collapsed back into  
  
our pelvises, opening our chests  
to the sky—*someday rain will*  
  
*come*, our mothers promised—but  
we already knew about the rain, because  
  
we were also weathervanes, and divining  
rods, and any way our pelvises turned  
  
we followed, and gravity followed the bend  
in our knees, and we wrapped masks across  
  
our hips to take on the dance, but we didn't  
know it was the dance who had taken on us.

I was really intrigued by the idea that a body holds not only organs, veins and bones, but also history, culture and experiences. Before working with Reggie, I assumed that the latter three were stored in the mind: we remember our history, contemplate our culture, and recall experiences. And yet I failed to realize that muscle memory, that which is so crucial for dancers to develop, remembers more than just choreography. It actually inhabits my history, my culture and my experience.

I made this connection between mental and corporal recollection during the first week. Our first class consisted of footwork and hand clapping. At first I was a bit crestfallen about the fact that we weren't going to plunge into full-body, sweat-inducing contemporary dance. But then it hit me that I had previously studied a dance genre that also concentrated on footwork and handclapping: flamenco. Coordinating my hand- and footwork tickled my brain at first, but then I realized that my mind and body were engaging in a form of movement that was vaguely familiar and becoming increasingly more so. It's as if I had been assigned to flex a muscle that hadn't been activated for many years. My flamenco memory was dormant but had been awakened with the gumboot choreography.

But the culture that is instilled in my body has been alive and well. I'm in love with the music that Reggie uses for class and the primary reason is because it's so familiar to me.

Puerto Rico, where my father is from, is a Caribbean island whose music and culture was very much influenced by Afro-Caribbean music so what is a popular African pop song sounds a lot like a merengue or a Brazilian samba. When I don't even think about my, my body just enters Latin-mode and I'll instinctively start doing some merengue

A Personal Archive of My Past and Present

My Body





or samba steps before my mind realizes that the music isn't actually from Puerto Rico or Brazil. It's fascinating to hear it though because one can see the rhythms and singing styles that crossed the ocean along with the slaves long ago.

But with Reggie's repertory, particularly with Clement's solo, I feel the ballet muscle flex too much. One of the challenges has been letting go without letting go. A chronic problem for me is that I grip just about everything, but when I "let go," my alignment and core go away too. It's only recently in ballet and modern classes that I have increasing the strength of my core and using it to liberate my movement. With Reggie's work, though, the focus is less on the core and more on the pelvis. Because my pelvis and I don't really know each other in a studio context (we're best friends on the dance floor when it comes to Latin dance!), I fall back on my default problem: grip my quads and glutes. It's become a challenge to realize that focusing on the pelvis is key to being able to let go in the proper sense, to be able to enter this state of flow and inhabit the dance that is embedded in the music without losing the base level of control that allows you to keep your balances and shift your weight successfully.

I initially thought that this emphasis on the pelvis was particular to Reggie's work and movement style, but after taking my first Limón technique class today, I realize that the pelvis is like a passport into a whole new world of fluid movement, and I'm still filling out the paperwork to understand what it means and how to use it so I can explore this new world. I'm curious to find out how the pelvis guides Akram Khan's work in the next segment of the workshop.

Dancing with Reggie brought back buried memories of my very first ballet classes. I was once again struggling with my own body as I was desperately trying to imitate a movement. Since the age of 10 I have been learning to control every possible muscle in my body, forcing it to realize unnatural shapes. This feeling of confusion had passed long ago as I attended regular ballet lessons. Learning Reggie's choreography brought back memories of blankness. The movements I was learning were new to me and

Starting Over

the awkwardness came back as my body parts felt uncoordinated and completely lost. It felt like a new beginning.

I found it challenging memorizing Reggie's choreography.

The parts he showed us were not defined phrases, and counts were inexistent. I only had time to get an idea of the movement and soon realized that I had to think through movements on my own. I had to stay open to ideas, listen to my body, and analyze its reaction towards Reggie's combinations.

Ballet lessons introduced me to musicality, which I have always believed to be an essential quality of a dancer. In Reggie's work, I discovered how music does not seem to play an essential role. As we learnt his choreography, he would either leave us in silence, or choose a random music. At first I found this frustrating, as dancing in a group meant being together and we had nothing to rely upon. However, very soon I realized the awareness he wanted us to have of our bodies.

With those few classes, I discovered a totally new language of dance, one that articulates itself not through music but rather through culture, ideas and intelligence.

The question that Reggie's work poses is simple: Can a body? *Can* a body? For many traditional dance forms, what a body can and cannot do is superfluous—it is merely about what a body *should* do. From perfect turnouts to multiple pirouettes to jumps that seem to suspend in midair, dancers are told what they *should* do. Even in last year's project with Merce Cunningham's choreography, I felt a constant awareness of what my body should look like in motion, what the rhythms of my footsteps should sound like. Usually, the word I associate the most with dance is "should." Not so with Reggie's work.

Anna, one of the Fist & Heel dancers, told us that Reggie self-described (facetiously?) his work as "post-African neo-hoodoo modern dance." Coming from a background of mostly jazz and ballet, I was flummoxed by post-African neo-hoodoo modern dance. I didn't know what I should be paying attention to when he demonstrated the choreography. I didn't know my body should look like when executing the movement.

The Difference Between Can and Should

I didn't know how to approach this incredibly new movement at all. Where does one begin when one's body is backing away, shaking its head, and saying, "I can't, I can't, I can't?" It was beautiful to watch, but I had no conception of how I could make my own body replicate the action.

At this point, after several weeks of rehearsal,



*And if you're lost enough to find yourself  
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you  
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me,  
Then make yourself at home*  
—"Directive," Robert Frost

however, I am starting to realize something. In the very beginning, a dancer always faces the question of *can*. Before my first ballet class, I watched the instructor with awe and asked myself, "Can I?" Before my first double pirouette, I watched the other girls complete them and asked myself, "Can I?" It is only after conquering *can* that a body can move onto *should*, which is in itself a somewhat individual construct in Reggie's work. While many dance forms use *can* as a pathway to the bigger question of *should*, Reggie's postmodern work urged me to slow down through the *can* and embrace fully the confusion and depth of wondering, "Can a body?"

As a dancer, I live for those moments—when everything falls away and it's just my body in space, those are the moments that keep me dancing. In a recent discussion after rehearsal we talked about them as "trance moments." Instead, I like to think of the sensation as losing myself. Inspired by Robert Frost's poem "Directive," I describe it as losing myself just enough to find myself, then making myself at home. The image feels so apt, for in those moments, I feel myself lost in the movement, but at the same time I find home...within *me*.

In rehearsal, Reggie implores us to listen to our bodies, to think about our bodies. He said once, "How you think about your body becomes how you use your body." When he said that, it struck me. For so long, I had thought of the mind and body as separate entities. I never thought to put them in conversation with each other. Working with Reggie however, I've realized how important this conversation is.

Dancing with Reggie, it is *always* all about the pelvis.

To know where your pelvis is at any given time, that is the key.

For Reggie—and so many other dancers/choreographers—the pelvis is the dancer's home base, the body's home base. It is the starting point of our alignment and it anchors us. If you know where the pelvis is you can know not only where you are, but also where you've been and where you're going.

But to use the pelvis as your anchor, you must first think about the pelvis. You must know your body deeply. Once you've achieved this knowing, it becomes that much easier to inhabit your body, to lose yourself in space and find your home within. I think that's the magic of Reggie's movement. Drawing from movements of the African diaspora, from post-modern dance, from various times and places, Reggie keeps the pelvis as the constant anchor. If his dancers think about the pelvis and use the pelvis, they can find that glorious sense of home.

*Finding Home*

Dancing Reggie Wilson's technique has reassured me of the connection of the mind to the body. One of the classes I am enrolled in this semester is the Introduction to Modern Philosophy. The class has

focused on reconstructing the arguments Descartes makes in his Meditations of First Philosophy. At the beginning of the Meditations

Descartes convinces himself to doubt everything. The only thing that he can be sure of is that "I am thinking, therefore i exist". When I first encountered this argument, I interpreted the "I" Descartes referred to, to mean the mind. To me, it seemed his argument meant that the mind could exist without the body.

Therefore, the body could not exist. This conclusion seemed valid to me, but it went against what I intuitively felt to be true.

As a dancer I am very aware of my body. My body is my instrument to create art. I can distinctly perceive the differences in flexibility between my left and right ankles. I notice as muscles that were less flexible two weeks ago, gradually gain flexibility. When I am studying as a Yale student I tend to neglect the presence of my body and focus on thinking by using my brain.

What I have discovered while dancing Mr.Wilson's technique is that the body can think too.

I am better able to execute

the difficult combinations that are in his choreography when I let my body be the movement, rather than if I think about what the movement is supposed to look like. When I let my body be the movement, I am

actually letting my body think. My mind simply focuses on where each movement ends and begins in order to connect them.

Dancing is similar to riding a bike. After you spend a lot of energy familiarizing yourself with the movement, your body simply knows what to do. I simply have to focus my mind away from the idea of the movement and to the actual movement.

There is a fear of speaking, and an even greater fear of writing. I circumvented this block around writing by finding other means for expression, like dance and photography.

In doing so, I ended out re-enforcing my obstacle.

The process of writing has come to feel like a straightjacket.

Writing has become an oppressive process.

It left me feeling constricted, clumsy and violated. It took me a

month to start writing this blog. Actually I have not written my first blog yet, this is the second assignment. I would put aside time after rehearsal to sit in front of my computer and swipe my fingers across the keyboard, helplessly. This exercise of narrating a choreography first scared me, and then I considered it as an attempt to unblock the writing process.

Writing about dance seems absurd to

me, since I dive into dancing into my body instead of writing.

In my body, sweating, ragged, bare and tiny. Awkward and uncomfortable. And strangled, silenced by the loudness of words and the weight of my flesh. At first these limbs are distant. But then there is cold ground and movement around. I must shake my limbs before the first group ends. I shake my body as a big bird on the ground shaking its feathers lazily before flight, or an attempt to jump into thin air. I feel like Baudelaire's ugly Albatross, not quite made for this environment, I am clumsy in my body and terribly unwelcome. Reggie's "shake" helps me release this tension, I get rid of my epistemological barriers, I get out of that body, I shake off the ugliness

*The Mind Body Connection*

and imagine drops of water, dust and mud fly in each direction. It is a new rise. I am cleansed and energized. There are ripples moving from inwards out and back again. Where the frenzy that inhabits my soul embraces the convulsions of my body.

One step, a second step I am not listening to the music yet. With my third step I tune in. There is a beat there is a cry. I do not know what we called this song. The long? the short? It is the one with breath and cries and moans. it is the one we learnt with Anna and Raja. I drag my right leg out and place my weight on top of it. I just sat on those big air/sand cushions, and the air is gushing in every direction under my weight. The noise of air colliding through a pressed bag. A cushion of bursting energy ready to spring back into motion. But first it is a slow movement and in it I collect strength. It is a statement. I have to look at myself in the mirror, and acknowledge what I am for what I am at this moment, not who I am. And I feel others around me making that same statement of presence.

Breathe in. Sharp. It is as though I were plunging under water. A preparation. When I go under water, I disconnect. Soaking in the bath, I breathe in before plunging underneath to hear nothing but the beating of blood against my eardrums. It is like a form of meditation. Nothing else exists. You only exist within; the rest is blurred and distant. And so I breathe in. I breathe into my senses, everything else receding into soft focus. I cannot clearly perceive those around me, but I will feel the ripples as someone kicks through the water

besides me. The wave hits me, and so the ripples of water become ripples of energy in the dance studio.

So I breathe into that dimension before jumping into the phrase. Before pivoting with the force of my arms swaying under and above. It is a ball that I throw to those next to me. When Reggie leads the warm up. When he brings his shoulders to his ears and I know what is coming: the tension builds, builds in the neck, the tension of the week: it hangs us from above and there we are suspended by that energy, waiting for release... and then it comes, that moment when we can cut the cord and release, and scream, and shout and drop down. There I release that tension of the breath as I throw both my arms and right leg. Arms, arms, Shoulder, shoulder, elbow, elbow: a moment of ease has arrived. Of unconfined energy and unthought movement.

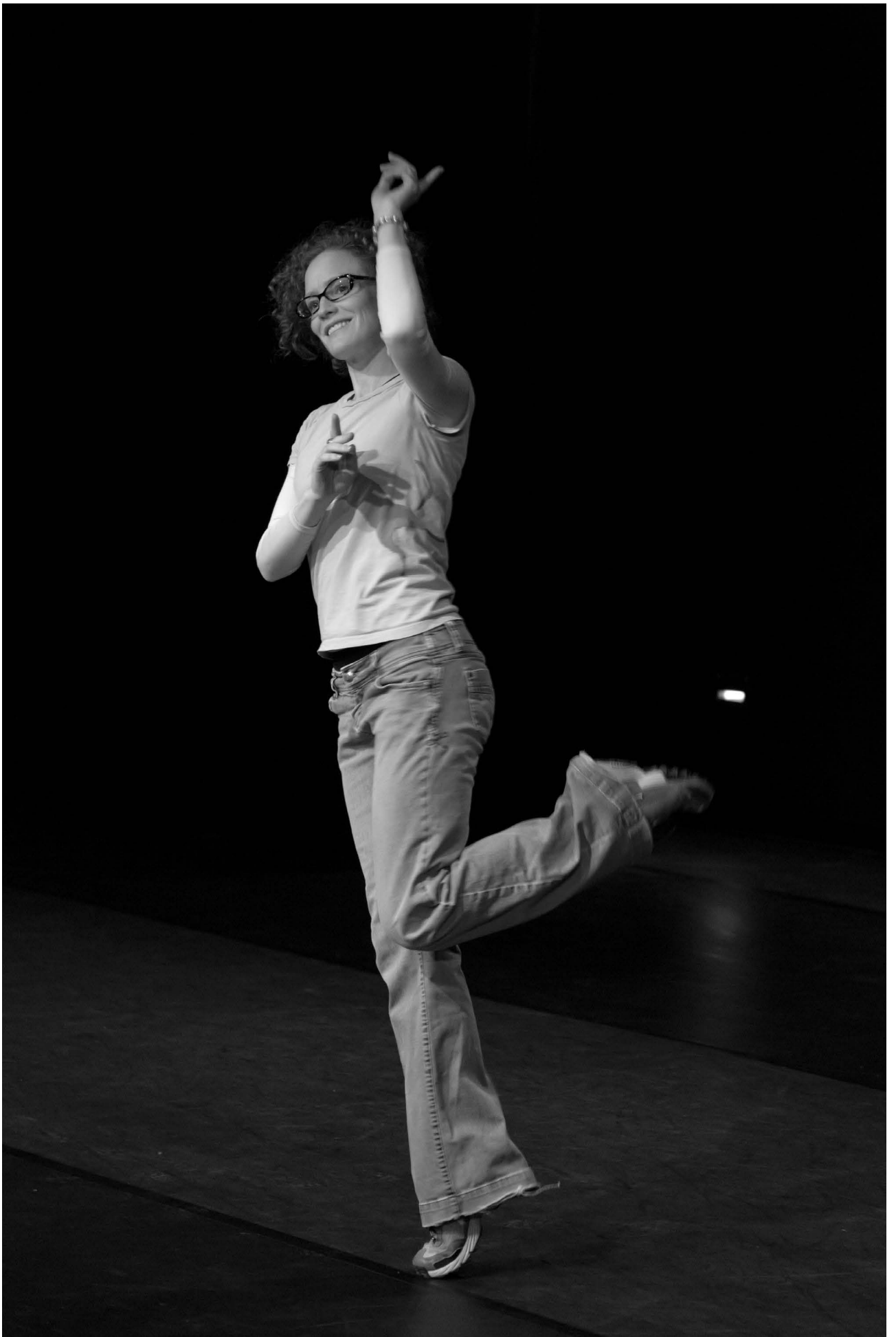
This drop. A missed flight of steps. A low shutter speed photograph. A heart beat that dropped. Weightless. A split second in midair. An exhalation, like one you would do in the fresh night air to test your vapor. But before it dissipates you're spinning. There is no story. There is only now. There is only flow. There is only forms in space and senses in time. Pascal's division of time. An infinite present. Music notes. The vapor is still there in suspension and I swivel to see it fly to pieces: dispersed and disappearing like a balloon of dust just burst and flying in the air, the energy bursts in every direction. Slow motion and sharp at the same time.

When I contain the motion. My foot turns out, twisting through my heel. It is when I try to seem composed. But it is there tugging at my leg. Wake up. Morning call, the top of my body follows the movement effortlessly before falling back into position. The movement is an

opening of the chest, and brings my sensual satisfaction: Because I predict my next second where I will give into the impulse. It is a tingle in my stomach. A little twitch: like when someone pinches your lower thigh, just above knee level. That tingle. It is acknowledged joy where I consciously accept the movement and follow the impulse. I thrust my arms in the air, and I cannot help but be dramatic, whole body following the movement and dragging my steps. And what a flow.

The energy pulls me forward. An energy that sucks me in, which is why my movement is motivated by the opening of the chest that pursues itself into my arms and whole body falling into those small forward steps. Before coming to halt on the edge of a cliff. The cliff is not emptiness. It is a great open landscape. A landscape of possibilities, and of unrestricted movement: the edge of the scene and of the stage. On the edge between performance and wholeness. The limit to which the dancer can entirely let go of everything, and I walk towards it, considering it.

There I catch my breath. The call of emptiness that had drawn me forward, sucked me into its impulse. My internal voice moans, but its the moan of a weight lifter. When I dance I place sounds to energy, in the same way Raja does. I have cries, loud breaths, moans and shrieks for movements and their according energies. So here my sound, it's like that of the weight-lifter trying to make that first motion up, like when you are lying in bed and you give yourself a little motivational cry to contract those abs and sit up straight. I have this deep frustration when dancing. It always feels slightly off, slightly wrong. I try to find myself entirely connected to the movement, and the moment that I do, I suddenly mess up. I get



Molly Haig  
March 6, 2013

A few weeks ago, Reggie and Emily had a polite disagreement about the relationship between writing and dance. Emily argued that two forms of expression fit together perfectly while Reggie argued that writing has a necessary place, but can also push us too far into our own heads and reduce our ability to actually dance.

My first impulse is to agree with Emily. I have ideas about dance, but I often don't fully formulate them until I write them down.

Writing helps me to discover my thoughts, and express them with a clarity

### Overanalyzing Underanalysis

that I often struggle to achieve when I speak on the spot. I don't think that writing about dancing hinders my dancing. However I think that some of the ways I (we?) think about dance really are problematic, and that in connecting them to our writing process, Reggie draws attention to difference between the way we are used to learning in classes, and the way we must learn Reggie's choreography.

As Reggie mentions almost every rehearsal, we need to do the steps with our bodies, not to think them with our minds. He connects writing to overthinking, or not being present in the body, and since I know I am guilty of "thinking" the steps some of the time, perhaps I should not argue against Reggie's semi-condemnation of writing. Still, writing seems separate; I am not composing paragraphs as I dance. I believe that I overthink not because I write, but because many of the movements feel so strange to me that my mind becomes the loudest thing going on in my body. ("Did he really want

it wrong, I miss a step, hit someone, fall out of rhythm: just when I thought I had accessed that point, the point of letting go.

Here I am on that edge of the cliff, sucked in by the energy of emptiness, and I have to pull out from it. The cry fades as my leg effectively forces me back to the middle of the scene, where the action is happening. It is back in a flung arabesque, but my body is still there gazing at the horizon one last time before energetically giving into the motion. It is a choice, and the choice propels me in my swirl -feet lift the ground, -loose, -air, -wind, -freeze, -cross arms, -breathe out, -place yourself, -place your shoulders, -center the weight, -be present. Feel the tension flowing through those crossed arms as though they were crossed overlapping highways and cars, energy zooming down one forearm, lane, onto the next, up the shoulder down the back through the left. Like a giant rollercoaster in a figure of eight.

My heart is still pounding and when I can't take it anymore I let it all out, throw arms down, the release, the shaking, the throwing, the sound in my mind mimics our shrieks when warming up with Reggie, that furious rage. This is the point when I breathe in again. And for some reason, this is also when I remember how every Wednesday night, I have two essays to write. That helps me swing into the weird "go through your legs and swing your body along". The risk, the chance, the intent, I need to move away from something. To throw the weight off my back. Probably also because blood is flowing through my neck to my eyes, and I start to feel claustrophobic and once again conscious of my physical trap.

At that moment, my eyes, they always seem lost in the distance, pleading. My arms are outstretched

and then, I feel so vulnerable. As though I had just been caught in a moment of utmost deliverance, one where I let the world see how desperate I am. And there my arms are suspended, a little hopeless as though I just let something I was firmly clutching fall to the ground, and shatter. Let my composure fall and shatter. I am plié, arms relaxed and outstretch, gaze lost and asking for something. Do you know why I move? Do you know why I threw it away? Why I had to shake it all off? But that's hardly a split second. It's the captured moment when we awake and have no idea where we are, it hardly lasts a moment, and then everything is normal again? And I can go on with my movement. It is all unconscious again and just about the present time again. This arabesque is a stretch. To the tip of my finger to my extended foot, I could nearly shake from the energy and force I am putting into the extension. It travels from the inside out, like a blossom. Like a drop of coffee on paper-towel. When all the energy there is has been consumed, when I feel the satisfaction nestling into my muscles, as a yawn or a stretch, I release. And the sound of my head is exactly that of a yawn coming to an end. I fall backwards. I imagine gushing air, the noise of a high speed train passing right through your ear. Or standing just a little too close to the sidewalk edge when the bus swoops by. I let the potential movement drag me and I fall with the extended leg, pulled out of place by the motion. Falling into movement. Falling into release.



Elena Light  
March 7, 2013

this leg turned in?" "How does he kaflop in such a natural-looking way—does my kaflop look like that?" "Help! What step is next?") I have noticed that as I become more comfortable with the sequence of steps, I think slightly less, so maybe not-overanalyzing just requires familiarity and practice.

So while I don't agree that writing causes our thinking problem, I agree that the thinking problem is there, and that Reggie has an important point about how much we (as Yale students) rely on analysis and language when we learn. We use a lot of words.

"What quality is this movement supposed to have? Is it sharp? Smooth?"

"Just watch."

"Can I ask another question?"

"No."

Reggie is right—words can be superfluous. He wants us to realize that physical movement has the information in it that we need. But this reality is hard to accept. Yalies exist in a blizzard of words (our professors and classmates' words, our own words, textbooks, papers, computer screens—words words words everywhere). Words are how we have learned to learn. We are used to articulating our confusion through language, so we struggle to separate the confusing aspect from the rest of the movement without the focus of words. I think that this reliance on words (and the over-analysis which can accompany it) are what Reggie notices when he worries that writing gets in our way as dancers. So while I don't agree that writing itself is the problem, I agree that we should notice that Reggie's (non)language is different from what we are used to, and work to approach it in a different way.

I lunge, sitting into my hips,  
staring straight ahead into  
nothing  
My right arm picks it itself  
up, dragging  
**Rawness** the rest of my  
body with it  
to the left so that I'm  
facing the back  
The arm continues swing-  
ing as my leg follows  
I jab my elbow once, twice  
to the right, not making a  
big deal of it, just letting  
my arms and legs do their  
thing  
I stop.

I plie abruptly, letting  
my pelvis sink where it  
wants to

Pivoting to my right, I  
walk to the upstage  
left corner

I halt, showing off my  
left heel once, then  
a second time with a  
nice twisting gesture  
of my arms overhead  
My left heel reaches  
to the left, causing the  
rest of my body to fall  
after it, then walking  
once, twice

I plie only to reach out  
with my right heel, which  
drags me forward, forcing  
me to turn and lurching  
my right leg out to the side  
and back

I step back to stop.

My right arm bends and  
wraps around and so does  
my left, meeting each other  
in a folded "I Dream of Genie"  
gesture

I lean forward, shoving my hands  
to the grand and stepping

Right

Left

Right—as I do this, my left leg kicks  
up to extend out side while my  
arms reach overhead

I contract my stomach, peering  
under my legs and toward the front  
Until I can't look any farther  
And my body flips around, facing  
forward with my head, my foot, and  
my hands

I step right left right  
I pivot to the right, sinking into a  
slight plie as my head begins to tilt  
forward while my right heel lifts  
off the ground, leading the rest of  
my right leg into a straightened  
position as my left arm falls until  
it is perpendicular with the floor  
There is a moment of falling  
Until I land, and walk  
Only to let my fingers be carried  
by a string on the ceiling so that  
the rest of my body can swivel  
around easily

This description could go on and  
on, but I'm going to stop it here,  
simply because writing this made  
me want to dance, so I'm going to,  
and I'm realizing also that the poetry  
I've created here is actually what  
happens when I'm dancing. Even if  
it's more difficult to see, the same  
listening occurs. Between chore-  
ography and body and vision and  
mind, the same sort of beauty and  
clumsiness and rawness emerges.  
I guess that's how I feel dancing  
Reggie's choreography: I feel raw.  
Like I'm announcing: This is it, folks.  
This is me. This isn't a character.  
This is real, live Elena, without  
artifice. I feel as if, by following my  
body's cues, I'm following my truest  
self, my most real reality. It's scary  
and fun and exciting and difficult  
all at the same time. I didn't expect  
that simply feeling my pelvis under-  
neath me could actually lead to a  
sort of exposure of myself through  
dance. In short, thanks Reggie, for  
forcing some rawness out of me.

"I've never heard of a fractal dance," said my friend, when, after seeing a book on fractals in the trunk of her car, I tried to explain Reggie's work. In the age of technology, I relied on the pending video in lieu of words to explain.

Before I worked with Reggie, I had never seen a fractal dance either. Yet what I love most about Reggie's work is how it interweaves curiosities—be they about fractals or Moseses. Dance may be the most lively art, and for a choreographer to draw inspiration from all of life is fitting.

Though I know very little about religion myself, I was drawn to Reggie's explanation of his upcoming work, *Moses*. The Koch Curve, the fractal dance, is a

part of *Moses*—and its repetition fits the *Moses* theme—the many forms of leaders and prophets, and the dancers following the leaders up and down life's curve.

Moses is sometimes considered a lawgiver, and Moses' mystery and leadership make the idea that your Moses reveals your self more meaningful than similar ideas about defining a person by the company she keeps.

I don't know who my Moses is, but my Moses must be a dancer.

*This isn't that kind of jump*, Moses warned me, *or even that kind of dance*, but how

else could we move when gravity was over our heads and the sea was so red

our blood ran clear—when you leap so deep underwater even the desert

can be a Promised Land. Moses was another riddle, floating on the Dead

Sea. Because if the sea is so dead, what do the seafloor dancers eat? And where

do they breathe? And how did fifteen seafloor dancers *plié* on the underside of the sky?

Show Me Your Moses and I'll Show You Who You Are

Walk forward. Stay in plié.

Roll right shoulder back.

Keep walking. Keep the plié.

Left shoulder back.

Stage light changes you.

You feel its warmth on your cheekbones and raise your chin to meet it, half-conscious of a ballet teacher's instructions to lift your face to the last balcony, although there is no balcony here.

Reach both arms up, straight.

Feel the tension in your shoulders, caught between your floating arms and the downward pull of your center. Your back and arm muscles feel wrapped, tight, holding your humeri in their sockets.

Stay in plié.

Keep walking.

Bend right elbow down to right hip, palm up.

There is Nothing in your right hand. Look down at it. After all, you control the audience/dancer stare-down. They will look where you look.

Reach both arms forward, straight. Let your eyes follow your fingers.

Remember: Plié. Walk.

Turn out both arms. Both elbows elbow both hips.

Right arm straight up.

Look left.

Walking still.

Still in plié.

Step out with right foot. Close

left to paral-

lel, facing

the right

downstage corner.

You've stopped. This feels different. Awkward, legs pressing together, knees bent. Reach both arms forward, straight, but this time, press your palms together. Your arms form a V with the point extending from your core. Your upper back and shoulders tighten again to hold your arms in place.

Break out! *Croise*. Right leg bent front, forced arch. Right arm curved, up and front. Look audience. You're moving again: big movements now, and faster.

Battement left side, don't turn

## Writing Movement

out. Bend chest over, like a bird.

Shoulders up, arms, wings.

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Is it possible to write dance steps in a way that captures the details of the movement but is still engaging to read? I don't think I was especially successful here. What bothers me is the discrepancy between the timing of my words and the timing of the choreography. My writing caught thoughts and directions, but lost the rhythm of the dance.

Perhaps losing time is inevitable.

Movements that occur simultaneously in space separate into multiple words on paper. Reading these words, we assemble every split-second slowly, like a puzzle whose pieces are limbs, facings, torsos, speeds, levels, expressions, orientations, thoughts, etc.

The dance was not meant to be experienced as disjointed puzzle pieces; translation from movement to words robs even simple steps of their sparkle. Perhaps just hinting at the steps would be truer to the choreography. Should I have called the whole sequence "a series of flowing movements" and left it at that? Or just summarized it as "post-African neo-hoodoo modern dance"?

The reader would have imagined something—probably something completely unlike the actual steps—but the timing and emotional quality of that description may have been closer to the feel of the choreography. I think that when writing movement, we face a trade-off between the loyalty to the dance's flow (timing, emotion) and loyalty to details of physical movement.

Think DOWN and forward, the slight rise and fall back forward will drift naturally, just as the waves crash down, the water jumps up and then cascades down to the sand.

But don't say "down and up," "stage front," or "1 and 2, 1 and 2, jump."

Don't say "arms out," "elbows back," and "turn around." Invisible ropes peel your arms from your sides outwards before a giant being picks you up by your elbow and moves you back as if you were a mere paper doll before It whips you around and you face him before plunging in fear into a tombé away from him.

Stop thinking. The voices in your head need to stop instructing you. That

moment when you are really dancing is when the voice of perfectionism and precision, that rigid, rational voice, simmers down to a mere whisper that I barely hear because the gust of movements are just too loud. That voice in your head takes over the natural non-silent silence that marches to the beat of physics, the thump of your heart, your gasp for air, or the down beat of your fall. Action and reaction are the rhythms you heed and the its music must consume you.

As you bend your knees, gaze at the floor, and shoot you right then left arms out, exhale that accent down before you breathe in at the moment when you thrust so that you almost hear that *crack* of the whip as you snap to that position. And your movements must embody the soundwaves that result from that *crack* as you enter a flow of motion by turning around, *sauté*ing up, and gently explode into a double leg jump before

crashing down twice on one foot and exhaling that

## An Experiment

## Never Stand Still

Aren Vastola  
April 21, 2013

I found this free-write/thick description/poem that I wrote the night after our performance, and am posting it now as my final post for the Reggie Wilson residency.

We open to  
the audience,  
the last heel  
dig into the  
floor—Ba dum, dum dum, out out,  
in in...  
My peripheral vision on Karlanna  
the involuntary inhalation—  
Anticipation given breath and bone.  
I see/hear/feel it successional/ly/  
then all at once, not realizing our  
unison in breath and body until  
we feel the pelvis *pull* back, *push*  
front—tiny increments made miles  
in microsync.

In an exhalation, the span of  
evolution.

Now there goes the world.  
It shoots down the elbow and  
flings from the wrist.

BOOM

Your side is your front:  
A universe of difference  
where we once walked  
slow circles in silent  
space.

The angle of the light.  
Everything.

Curved over the  
electric potential—Bang!  
Cross! Surge into right foot,  
electric drill spiral down  
WHOOSH, like turning  
on the tide in the circle  
of a dime, is sucks you  
under and in and down  
then BURST! You're up  
and you see the backs  
of heads of those around  
you, then falling

(Elena

Karlanna

Indrani

Clarissa)

the reminder of gravity's  
down. No! Too free, too much  
force to fall it's a JUMP down,  
pulled back into the tide, feet  
begging contact, legs bend  
deep deep into the briefest  
reciprocal  
push

strength as your back bends in  
exhaustion and your collarbone  
turns to the heavens for air.

Your hands suddenly superglue  
themselves together as you slight  
bend your shoulders and stare at  
your feet with pliéed legs. But like  
a snake, your right leg glides away  
from your body towards the back  
corner as if running away. And you  
turn around to run after it only to  
see that the vision has escaped and  
it's just your own two legs that give  
way to the disillusion as you catch  
yourself before your fall and then  
step twice to assure your balance.  
But you're fine. Assert your control  
as you tightrope with relevéed  
feet stage left then stage right  
and extend your arms upward as if  
you've transfigured into a needle in  
the blink of an eye.

But that needle unravels like an  
onion peel as your spiral out of that  
erect image into a circular, graceful  
mess. And yet, spring up! You  
didn't dissolve into matrix spiral,  
your energy pops up in the air and  
your excitement is evident with the  
flourish of back attitudes before  
your solemnly enter that arabesque.  
Don't stop, but slow down. Slow.  
And soft, like dust in a windowless  
room. It moves so slowly, but moves  
with grace and energy, before you  
melt. Your biological clock, your  
body, melts like a Dalí clock in *The  
Persistence of Memory*. Make your  
movement a continuation of that  
clock's trajectory as it melts off  
the branch and sinuously caresses  
the ground.

Hear everything in the air and  
nothing in your head. Move quickly  
like a gust or slowly like the dust.  
Energy never stops, it's either  
kinetic or potential. Never erase  
the potential. Even when "still," you  
can't be still, for your feet push  
down to the core and your head  
reaches up to the cloud; or you stop  
existing. I move, therefore I am.

Final Showing From the Reggie Wilson Residency

Then up. Thrown like a starfish. "I  
can't be up here," you whisper to  
the ground  
when it's already nearing over

That force—Unimaginable!  
A throw AND a tug, it must be. I  
threw my other self into space into  
freedom and the rope on my pelvis  
tugged me and I felt an intake of  
breath pull up like a yank then I'm  
a cloud and there's roaring at my  
limbs and soft peace that floats at  
the center

I see ground below  
I am slung over cities  
, flung over fields  
, sprung over seas

There's enough space up her for  
ten of me, and in the time it takes  
to fall

I realize I fly  
Nearer to the ground and I'm  
less—to save myself from the force  
of so many of me  
all falling

Plié. And it's already gone.  
Shoulders back as the knee  
presses forward. I'm down, use my  
arm, my arm must pull me around  
and up. Torso cycles over forced  
arch feet

Arms spiraling side left, down.  
Clarissa's yellow presence speeds  
up and pulls me to join her as we  
near the horizon, the sound barrier—  
then Hit it! Break up, fall and slice  
the air a satisfying sweep, coupé  
arm comes over, I'm down—  
"END THIS DANCE!" echoes in  
my ears then the words are in my  
blood and they're pounding against  
my eardrum, in my pulse, in panting  
breaths

Huuuh huh huuuuh huh huhh—  
Pelvis underneath you. Facing  
down. Straight leg parallel.

I imagine that my slowing heart-  
beat  
is dimming the lights  
that my body is letting this all go,  
that it's not being taken away from me

AKRAM

KHAN



## **Yale Dance Theater 2013 Part II: Akram Khan**

**Lecture/Demonstration**

**April 30, 2013**

**8 pm**

**Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School  
177 College Street, New Haven, CT**

This evening's program includes movement material from the following works:

KAASH (2002)

BAHOK (2008)

VERTICAL ROAD (2010)

Choreography by Akram Khan

Rehearsal direction by Eulalia Farro Ayguade and Young Jin Kim of the Akram Khan Company

With music selections by Nitin Sawhney from the Akram Khan Company repertoire

### **Yale Dance Theater**

Caroline Andersson (MC '15), Amymarie K. Bartholomew (DC '13), Lauren Dawson (JE '16), Derek DiMartini (ES '13), Lila Ann Dodge (AFST MA '14), Laura Fridman (BC '15), Molly Haig (DC '14), Karlanna Lewis (LW '15), Indrani Krishnan-Lukomski (JE '15), Elena Light (JE '13), Clarissa Marzán (PC '14), Elizabeth Quander (SY '15), Zoe Reich-Aviles (DC '15), Aren Vastola (BK '14), Cecillia Xie (TC '13)

Faculty Director: Emily Coates

YDT Coordinators: Elena Light, Aren Vastola

YDT Producers: Laurel Durning-Hammond, Yuvika Tolani

This Lecture/Demonstration concludes the second half of Yale Dance Theater's semester-long investigation into the choreography of contemporary artists working today. Part I focused on the work of Brooklyn-based Reggie Wilson; Part II shifts our attention to British-Bangladeshi artist Akram Khan. Over the course of the rehearsal process, YDT dancers document their research on the YDT blog. For more information on the project and to read the dancers' writing visit: <http://ydt.commons.yale.edu/>.

YDT's spring 2013 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College and the Lionel F. Conacher and Joan T. Dea Fund, in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.

We would like to extend special thanks to Susan Cahan, Penelope Laurans, Nina Glickson, Brian Lizotte, Tom Delgado, Nathan Roberts, Kathryn Krier and the UP staff, Paul McKinley, Michael Marsland, Matthew Regan, Pam Patterson, Susan Hart, Alexa Schlieker, May Brantley, the faculty of Theater Studies, Kelly Wuzzardo, Suzannah Holsenbeck, Joan T. Dea and Lionel F. Conacher, Jonathan Edwards College, Bia Oliveira, Akram Khan, and the Akram Khan Company.

## About the Artist

**Akram Khan** is one of the most acclaimed choreographers of his generation working in Britain today. Born in London into a family of Bangladeshi origin, he began dancing at seven and studied with the renowned kathak dancer and teacher Sri Pratap Pawar. Khan began presenting solo performances of his work in the late 1990s, maintaining his commitment to classical kathak as well as developing modern work. He was Choreographer-in-Residence and later Associate Artist at the Southbank Centre London. Khan is currently an Associate Artist of MC2: Grenoble and Sadler's Wells, London in a special international co-operation. *DESH* (2011), Khan's first full-length contemporary solo is a part-autobiographical work which is at once intimate yet epic. Khan's latest contemporary ensemble work *Vertical Road* (2010) and recent creation *Gnosis* (2009), where he combined his classical Indian and contemporary dance roots, received critical acclaim and continue to tour worldwide. Khan's notable company works are *bahok* (2008), originally produced in collaboration with National Ballet of China; *Variations* (2006), a production with London Sinfonietta in celebration of Steve Reich's 70th birthday; *ma* (2004), with text by Hanif Kureishi; *Kaash* (2002), a collaboration with artist Anish Kapoor and composer Nitin Sawhney. Besides his company work, Khan also created duets: *In-I* (2008) with Oscar-winning actress Juliette Binoche, *Sacred Monsters* (2006) with internationally acclaimed dancer Sylvie Guillem, and award-winning *zero degrees* (2005) with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui in collaboration with Antony Gormley and Nitin Sawhney. He recently choreographed a section of the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony. Khan has been the recipient of numerous awards throughout his career including the Laurence Olivier Award, the prestigious ISPA (International Society for the Performing Arts) Distinguished Artist Award, South Bank Sky Arts Award, UK Critics' Circle National Dance Award and The Age Critics' Award (Australia). Khan was awarded an MBE for services to dance in 2005. He is also an Honorary Graduate of Roehampton and De Montfort Universities, and an Honorary Fellow of Trinity Laban.

## About Yale Dance Theater

**Yale Dance Theater** (YDT) is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and/or development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance.

As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. YDT's mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.

This past spring, 2013, Yale Dance Theater became the first dance program at an American university to study the repertory of Akram Khan, staged by two of his former company members. This project has been international in scope, and a momentous step for dance and dance studies in the Ivy League. Two rehearsal directors, Eulalia Ayguade Farro of Spain and Young-Jin Kim of South Korea, spent several weeks living on the Yale campus and leading three-hour rehearsals three times a week. Both of these incredible dancers have received international acclaim, and through their generous teaching we were able to learn excerpts of *kaash* (2002), *bahok* (2008), and *Vertical Road* (2010).

Khan, a renowned Bangladeshi-British choreographer, has crafted a dynamic movement style by drawing upon his roots in classical Kathak dance as well as his experience with contemporary European forms. During the residency program, the dancers of YDT thus studied basic Kathak rhythm and footwork exercises, in addition to the Khan repertory.

It may be impossible to truly communicate the full-body experience of dancing Khan's choreography, with its electric sharpness and ceaseless flow, but hopefully the reader will be able to find glimmers of the movement in these essays; we've tried to create writing that dances.

It was wonderful to hear audience members describe their reactions to Khan's choreography after our lecture-demonstration. The work sparks creativity, and people saw in it "the resilience of the spirit," "an answer to mortality," and "something universal." As Emily Coates, the program's faculty director, once put it: "There are high stakes in this work." As these essays will show, Emily's statement carries great truth; students were spurred to tackle metaphysical questions of being and existence, or even compose poems inspired by the movement in our blog posts.

As an arts-based research initiative, the questions and methods of Yale Dance Theater change with each new project. This year's residency was no exception, and students were pushed to experiment with new forms, new philosophies, and new approaches to investigating dance. For everyone, there was an invigoration of critical thought and an enlivenment of the whole, dancing self. This experience, like Reggie Wilson's preceding residency, was a rediscovery of the unbridled joy to be found in raw physicality, and a reassertion of the creative, cultural, and even spiritual knowledge that comes only from dancing.

To really delve into Khan's work, we had to reformulate our goals as we encountered the reality of learning movement that was entirely new and foreign. We had to abandon the desire to reach answers to preconceived questions and instead grapple with the process—a source of many small frustrations, but ultimately enormous fulfillment. Like the traveler in Khan's *Vertical Road*, embracing this journey becomes a kind of faith. The physical work is unending, and the questions don't have easy answers. Everything has a continuation.

Through committed effort, and full immersion in this choreography, our questions became fascinations, and finally celebrations of human curiosity, imagination, and, of course, movement. In conclusion, I would like to share a short poem by Rumi, as translated by Coleman Barks, whose writings have inspired some of Khan's past work:

You push me into the dance.  
You pull me by the ears  
like the ends of a bow being drawn back.

You crush me in your mouth  
like a piece of bread.  
You have made me into *this*.

What exactly is "*this*" that Rumi writes of? It is another open-ended question, to both ponder and admire. Perhaps the reader can look for her or his own answers in the writings of the dancers on the following pages.

Amymarie Bartholomew  
April 17, 2013  
First Encounters

Karlanna Lewis  
April 19, 2013  
Protect Yourself (Brush Away the Dust)

I have these blisters on my feet now  
(underneath my big toes)  
From twisting, pushing  
trying to hit the or in four  
Sometimes twisting my arms I don't know  
If I've done it right  
Until the explosion of arms  
*right* on the or in four  
Rebounding, I grab  
*something*  
maybe a staff  
or an orb  
of power  
whatever it is, I know  
it's important  
it has weight  
I give it weight  
where it doesn't exist  
between my hands  
gripping the now-heavy air  
with fingers so alive  
you can see them from the audience  
Engaged in a battle (ritual?)  
I'm only half-seeing  
The sweep of my hands against my body  
(the last e in three)  
The extension of my arms, planting my foot  
(*TWO*. Don't forget the head. Without the head it  
looks like  
nothing)  
I feel the energy in every motion  
The way it crackles  
arcing  
sweeping, now barely (briefly) contained  
before brushing across my chest  
dropping to my left  
my hand  
my gaze  
on *and not before* the or in four  
Here at the start  
Breathing, looking left  
Waiting for the drop  
(One)

We grow, doing less, and we are bigger  
doing less—we follow our noses here,  
  
to go there, to a time when we twirled  
our beliefs in our fingers and raised our  
  
curled hands—elbow, palm, unfurl—  
to the clouds. If faith yanks your fingers,  
  
faith, the impatient child who thrashes  
in the mouth of the tiger, the audience  
  
can see him from two thousand years  
away. They taught us to make flowers  
  
and half-flowers, and double flowers,  
and *tak*, our feet answered, and *doom*,  
  
*doom, doom, doom*. The dancers were  
heavy as sound and swift as bells,  
  
and when their bodies snaked stars  
on the marley, we wanted to be birds  
  
or warriors of air—a little more  
vertical, with accents in our triangular  
  
hips to punctuate the hush of our ribs,  
when they melted through their cage.



There is no doubt that the movement we are learning is challenging, but what makes it challenging? On the surface, I would ascribe its difficulty to the sheer speed and intricacy of the choreography, but I think I am grappling with something more. What I am investigating is not only the physical exertion that the movement necessitates, but also the physical economizing that equally facilitates its execution.

I'm realizing that much of my dance experience has vacillated between two philosophical and physical extremes—difficulty and ease. My first training was in ballet, a form that thrives in some ways on insurmountable goals. There is an often-heard maxim in ballet studios that if it is not the difficult way, it is the wrong way. This kind of ideal in training comes up when we talk about necessary physical adjustments as “cheating” to make movement work, such as the slight shift of the hips to the supporting leg in a very high extension to the side, or the small opening of the hip in an arabesque. While this is by no means the only way of teaching ballet, it seems that many of these anatomical realities become “necessary evils,” hence the idea of difficulty by impossibility.

By contrast,  
the

### *Economy of Exertion, Exploration of Energy*

somatic  
practices,  
release techniques, and  
improvisational methods I have  
done in the past—including Gaga,  
Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique,  
and Authentic Movement—focus  
on goals of ease and efficiency in  
breath, alignment, muscle tension,  
and response to gravity.

With both these frameworks in  
mind, I sometimes feel that I am  
“between bodies,” always sort-  
ing out what needs to be working  
and what doesn't. Furthermore,  
how I use and approach my body  
depends very much on the rela-  
tionship between my own goals  
and the purpose of the movement  
I am doing. Efficiency and ease,

challenge and difficulty, both take  
on different meanings for different  
movers and movements.

When we began the Akram Khan  
material, I felt a sense of unrequited  
effort. I tried to imitate the percus-  
sively harsh yet fluidly continuous  
movements of Lali and Young Jin,  
but struggled to approximate them  
with my own body. It was as if I  
were punctuating every sentence  
with an exclamation mark, but not  
actually saying anything, or swing-  
ing a baseball bat and continually  
striking out. I saw the dynamism in  
Lali's and Young Jin's movements,  
but even once I began to grasp the  
mechanics, I was still unsure about  
how to economize my energy. How  
to exert and conserve is my linger-  
ing question.

The use of the term “energy”  
itself in teaching dance is fascinat-  
ing to me, because it is a concept  
that floats between the metaphorical  
and the physical. We sometimes

hear, “You shoot  
the energy from  
your fingertips,” or,

“The energy builds up  
in the legs and then spirals  
through the spine.” In this sense  
it sounds almost magical. At other  
times, energy is a very specific  
physical request, such as, “Not  
so much energy; you won't stop  
turning.” This correction asks for  
efficiency, for less force. Energy is  
mysterious because it refers to both  
the real exertion that accompanies  
movement and its own imaginary  
metaphor—an image that helps the  
dancer know how to move.

As Lali said during one  
rehearsal, you have to conserve  
energy to execute the movement, or  
you will never reach the speed and  
dynamic required. You have to find  
out what needs to work. She said  
that she always thinks about the  
arms—they are never thrown away.  
This is a shift for me as a dancer; I

often think about the work the legs  
are doing moving through space.  
But it's true, the arms are incredibly  
specific (perhaps influenced by the  
intricate mudras, or hand positions,  
of Kathak) and following the arms  
gives the flow of the phrase.

The movements in Vertical Roads  
and Kaash are incredibly dynamic,  
with quick shifts of weight, a con-  
stant grounding in earth, but arm  
gestures that crackle, flow, sizzle,  
twist, and warp—fluent in fire, water,  
and wind. Each movement burns  
color into the air with the precision  
of lightning, and yet when I finish  
the phrase I feel like years went  
by—over and under different ter-  
rains, through architecture that falls  
away before it is even stabilized.  
Perhaps I am romanticizing the  
fusion of Kathak, with its ancient  
and rich history in Bangladesh and  
northern India, with contemporary  
European trends, but I truly feel  
a different sense time and space  
while dancing this choreography,  
feeling hints of a secret story in the  
dynamic rhythms.

Time and energy, as I have writ-  
ten about, converge most impor-  
tantly in counting the dance. The  
counts are more than temporal  
information, i.e. divisions in a blank  
stretch of linear time:

“wuun TWO! threee four one two  
THREE! foour, one TWO! three FOUR!”

The rhythm is dynamic rather  
than metronomic, tangible rather  
than abstract. You hit movement on  
each count with bull's eye accuracy,  
like punctuation rather than a trail-  
ing pause. The counts aren't sub-  
divisions of time chugging along.  
Rather, the counts are creating  
rhythm and dynamic. This is per-  
haps why the choreography's treat-  
ment of time feels so different: Time  
doesn't pass separately from the  
movement that happens within it.

I think of the idea of a blank  
canvas. We can think about painting



as filling the canvas, or we can think about the canvas as bringing the painting into existence. The movements of these dances don't fill time—they make it, shaping its dynamics and its rhythms. Counting becomes a palette of color instead of an incremented ruler.

I feel like time is not outside me while I'm dancing to these counts. The choreography is fast, but I am not racing to fulfill each movement at a certain speed. My task in the dance is to create time, not overcome it. Time is my achievement, not my competitor.

I wrote a blog post yesterday about the Akram Khan material, but it keeps inspiring me to write more and more. In the past I've veered away from overly impressionistic descriptions, but a course I'm currently taking (called Moving Texts) is an exploration of the fruitful interplay and dialogue between dance and creative writing.

Communicating the experience of dance through writing can be difficult; rather than viewing writing as the keyhole of a locked door, an incomplete glimpse of a subjective experience from which the reader is barred, I'm envisioning a photographic aperture. This device allows a small amount of light into a camera lens to create an image.

Writing may not be able to "capture" the ineffable experience of dance, but, like a photograph, it speaks to the experience and frames it in a new way, shedding light on what could easily be passed by. It becomes something new.

Furthermore, dancing and language have been in dialogue in my mind, and the practice of writing about dance helps me form new ways of articulating these perceptions. The dancing is affecting my writing; I can feel the cadence of the rhythms as I write about the choreography, and as I search for synesthetic and imagistic ways to convey what I want to say.

I wanted to write about a piece that we are learning, called Vertical Road, which presents as much kinesthetic challenge as its title implies. This is my response to the first snippet of a phrase:

We stand poised to move, breath quickening slightly to the rattling drum beats that punctuate the air.

"wuunn—TWO!"

Drop to the ground. I'm never ready enough to embrace the jolt—a warrior suddenly reminded of the thousand years of accumulated dust that I am shedding.

The weight shift on three is like a return to the sun, trying to cup a tiny sphere of warmth, a disbelief in the light that my eyes track across the sky after eons of silence in clay vaults.

Wuuunn two threeeee FOUR!

Is a suspension longer than myself, my curved wrists cling to air with a rock-climber's grip—the only break in verticality that keeps me from falling down the waterfall of my own body.

So sudden—

I become aware that I breathe without thinking  
Arms snake up a sparkling trail  
Fireworks burst and the movement lingers in smoke patterns  
Ash that disperses with the wind  
You inhale the gunpowder smell of the last movement

Right as you blaze on to the next  
Everything crackles like fire and lingers like smoke

Each arm circle turns a wheel of a thousand years  
But a twist of the hands  
Caging energy  
Disappears as quickly as embers thrown from a bonfire  
Into the night

Tiny moment of vulnerability  
Dreaming of flowers around my neck

What I thought would be  
An inhalation of perfume  
Awakens me to battle

Sharp shift of weight, supported in a crouching knee, leaning away from clawed hands that fend off danger

Then a swing of the arm that sounds like a roar at myself

*Travelling Vertical Roads*

I.

More often than not, it is not enough just to invoke “momentum” as a quality of movement.

Momentum manifests with qualitative difference depending on the succession of material it passes through; and further (or, the same said a little differently), how that material succeeds itself, how it is succession, how it allows *specific* allowance of momentum and *specific* resistance or deflection of momentum.

In dance, momentum

*Fragments*

concerns mass of the body and gravity of the body,

especially. As long as we are still dealing with live human bodies, it would not be fair—it would not be logical—to say that any genre or instance of dance movement (or, indeed, non-movement) is without mass or gravity (even for those experimenting limited gravity situations... link to come). But we could talk about how mass and gravity are deployed in the body—namely by their

mobilizations, differentially.

Particularly, the mass of the body is not strictly unitary. It is articulated.

By bony structure, but also by other systems—organ, lymph, nervous, muscular, etcetera.

There is necessary consistency to these

systems that structure the body—the possibilities for moving them, moving by way of them, are concrete. But just as the possibilities are concrete, they are also many, and not necessarily all are always available at once. One could say I am a whole city within my skin,

and as the supreme mayor (which, unfortunately or not, I don’t seem to be) I could set speed limits, limit automotive access, install barricades, foreclose houses, bomb subway systems, build monorails, encourage critical mass rides, prohibit panhandling, stun everyone all over with a transcendental firework display—at my “will”.

There is something consistent about the phrase material we have been learning from Akram Khan’s dancers. Maybe we could describe it in terms of the momentous channels in which the composite movements seem to invest the bulk of their *identity* (their respective likeness to self). Is a set of anatomical references enough to characterize this? How can we characterize both the force and the stuff it passes through in order to refine our descriptions of quality of movement?

May 3, 2013

II.

When the term “energy” comes up it tends to point to a limit of explicability, but also to foreclose further specificity.

The term is not un-useful: it comes up so often, particularly in certain circles (certain lineages of dance training in

*On Describing and Comparing Ways of Moving*

conversation with a certain lineage of somatic work and certain cultural milieux...) that this frequency alone indicates an importance to what it maybe fails to elucidate.

To use the term “energy” typically seems to indicate really ‘getting something,’ ‘powerfully,’ but being at a loss as to how to unpack it, at a loss even literally as to how to ‘locate’ it—how to link up an experiential with a classificatory

A dragon of energy  
It loops through the hoop of my left arm  
And births a baby snake that spits out  
A tiny jewel a my feet

The glint directs my gaze downward

Now the movement is water  
My arms stir spirals

Like the current,  
I am no longer a swimmer  
But the sea swimming through itself

In a low crouch I feel my arms moving like mad to pull me back to the surface, my arms wrap around my head and my waist, as tight as holding breath, then

TWO! Triumphant dry and regal  
I fling water from my hands

My head initiates the next step  
Lungs—blowing a bubble larger than myself  
I hold the iridescence by my skin  
Feeling the fragility of film  
As it pulses with my breathing  
I inhale through my elbows

Then shatter the whisper into a crash

The counts quicken and the movement becomes red—  
Streaks of color that reinvigorate my blood  
A reminder:  
We all dance in the sky of a setting sun

I too share colors. When I throw my whole being into the count, I can feel them working.

Space between beats echoes the space between breaths between heartbeats

Dance that sparks me into remembering to live  
I am its rhythms and its colors

Fire that burns no less energetically  
Simply because smoke and ash promise immortality





what exactly, or at least what is the context of, what we are registering as such. Maybe it is not necessary to aim straight for “energy” itself to get more specific—maybe the most room for specificity, for ‘gaining ground’, is along its edges. Where does it happen; what is its trajectory; when does it come; how does my body rearrange when I think I’m feeling what I think these others mean by “energy”?

What I noticed, having studied a little Tai-ji, is that similarly in how Lali and Young Jin have been training us I am nudged toward a stance that encourages a clicking-into-place of viscusly elastic relationship between the planes of the hands, the planes of the head (which is conversely the gaze) and the volume of the chest-to-abdomen zones. This elastic relationship does have to do with a distinct attention to, or technique of, weight shift—what I’ve heard often qualified as “pouring” weight, like water, from one bottom-point or vessel-zone of the body to another. This is only the roughest of sketches of where I might inquire further, but maybe it begins to focus in on this paradox of circuit/circulation: that perhaps the problem of *what is circulating* can be significantly alleviated by bringing more specificity to the relational composition of the elements of the circuit itself: how are the relational dispositions of (anatomically identifiable) elements of the circuit already ‘charge’?

In a split second the floor falls out from under me and a breath escapes my body. Impelled by communal impulse, I inhale deeply and my hands come together, immediately rising over my head. Both phrases, *Vertical Road* and *Bahok*, begin with dynamic movement; both begin with breath.

In Akram’s work, beginnings are of the essence. They are the entrance to the rest of the piece, the first impulse that will carry you through on a wave of inhales and exhales, an ebb and flow of expanding and contracting energy. But to let these waves impel you there the piece, you must achieve a certain intimacy with the steps. As Lali and Young Jin taught us excerpts from Akram’s work, they made sure to start with the basics and go SLOWLY. With each added count, they described the movement richly, showing it over and over and over again to clarify how it should look, how it should feel, how it should unfold from the last breath of energy, and how it should lead into the next. Most importantly however, the slowness of our introduction allowed for a specificity of weight. To do this work, you must know where your weight is at *any* given moment. The freedom of your energy requires that awareness; it requires that intentionality.

When this precise understanding is embodied, the movement can truly be danced. And when it is danced, dynamism and breath take over. The movement can carry you. During our rehearsals, Lali had the habit of making sounds for each movement: a sharp intake of breath, a long

“shhh,” “tak!” At first, the sounds were amusing, but not much more. Then, I reached a turning point. Just a week before our final performance, I felt the phrases seep into my body. I felt the awareness and intentionally that had otherwise evaded me—and when I got there, the sounds made more sense than ever. They weren’t just a personalized soundtrack to accompany the steps, but rather, a vocalization of the ever-present energy, rising and falling to make the breathing body of a movement phrase. That’s how I’ve come to think of Akram’s pieces: as breathing bodies.

In his work, the energy is almost palpable. Dancing these phrases, it’s almost as if the energy instructs *you*. It expands, it compresses, it hits, and it stretches, but it never stops. For this, the sense of rebound is invaluable. Throughout, breath is indispensable. Walking away, those are the two sensations I will remember most from Akram’s work: breath and dynamism.

*Energy. Breath.*

Karlanna Lewis  
May 1, 2013  
Akram Khan's Energy Dancers

If we were only dance—water that's not  
wet, warriors with no shields, nothing  
  
but our primordial feet—their protozoan  
pulse, our flagella-fingers washing away  
  
our features—we could have spun into  
forever on one spring breath, but instead  
  
we were water that transpired into  
air, and our feet stretched into earth,  
  
and our hands blended with sky,  
but once we put words to it, the dance  
  
imprisoned itself into those words  
and nothing more. If my mother  
  
had seen us move, our Kathak rhythm—  
it's good, she would say, and the dance  
  
would have stayed burning in our  
bellies, like the Olympic torch, or  
  
summer sand on your soles, or nothing  
but the sea keeping everyone at bay.

Derek DiMartini  
May 5, 2013

A lot of the posts so far have talked about the way energy works in Akram Khan's choreography, and while I think energy is definitely important in his work, and what distinguishes it from others, I think control is a really important aspect of the energetic qualities in this work.

There is definitely a sense in some modern techniques that the energy is primary and the body is secondary and a result of that energy. Often there is a sense of starting with an energetic impulse that the body then must follow through on. In this situation there is a lag time between the energetic impulse and the completion of the movement, as if the body is always slightly behind and is catching up, a victim to these energetic impulses.

This is not how I experience Akram Khan's work. As a dancer you are not following the energy, but actively shaping it. If you don't, you either fail to capture the essence of the  
move-  
ment,  
or you are  
incredibly late. Yes, different energies are passing through you, but you are cultivating them, sculpting them, sending them out, drawing them back in. The path, even when circular, is direct, and if the energy shoots out of the arms or the hands, you are the one that brings it back in for the next movement. It doesn't happen to you, you MAKE it happen.

So how do you become the master of the energy rather than the victim of it? The answer is not an intuitive one, at least not for me. The control lies in the smallest details. It's not just your arms that cut the air but the outside edge of your forearm turning in. You don't throw your whole upper body back in around in order to achieve the effect of your body spiraling up, you shift your weight very clearly from

**Control**



### 1. Rhythms.

In high school, I choreographed a dance to a metronome. The dancers' stomps pounded out the rhythm of the dance, and at the end one dancer suddenly turned the metronome off. In college I joined the Step Team, and in YDT's Cunningham project we stepped out meters in tandem as we danced to Jennifer's snapping fingers. In Reggie's work we learned a bit of African gumboot dancing and timed our movements to an ill-defined rhythm dependent on our own shifts of weight, the other dancers' pelvises, and sporadic instructions shouted out during the course of the excerpt. And in the Akram Khan project, we stomped out kathak rhythms and meticulously pounded out seven-counts in our heads, using syllables and breath and "shh...TAKI!" to stay in sync. Rhythms are fun because they remind us of a heartbeat. Rhythms are universal.

### 2. Dust

The dancers in Vertical Road were covered in dust. We all wanted to be coated in dust, some of us even joked about buying a bag of flour at Stop&Shop and rolling around in it. It is so rare in serious dance study that one gets to be truly theatrical, which is odd since dance is inherently a visual, performing art meant, for the most part, to entertain. The severe beats, the huge triangle formation, and the fierce movements of Vertical Road made for an incredibly exciting experience both for the dancers and the audience. This sort of unbridled excitement is what is often missing in today's dance that takes itself too seriously, and it is why, I believe, it

is difficult to appreciate and enjoy watching modern dancing, especially without a dance background.

### 3. Learning

I kept thinking about studying dance. Why is this project so groundbreaking? Dance combines music, visual arts, and theatrics. Yalies overwhelmingly flock to music, art history, and theater classes. They watch movies and TV shows regularly, constantly listen to music, and attend concerts out of genuine interest. The two large art museums on campus are some of the best in the country. Why,

### *Dusting Off an Interest in Dance*

then, is dance such a niche? Why is the academic study of dance almost inherently linked with the practice of dance, and why do my friends come see me dance to be supportive, not because of an outside interest in dance? Anybody on the street could name dozens of musical artists and at least name a few famous painters throughout history, but would have trouble placing the name Margot Fonteyn. What is different?

I think it's because the practice of dance today lacks the theatricality, excitement, and accessibility that music and art provide. Choreographers like Akram Khan, paired with growing access to video material through the internet, can change this reality. Akram Khan uses props and stimulating music to actively engage both the audience and dancers. His collaborations (or attempts: see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SM8mk5xAOYI>) with various artists (from Kylie Minogue to the National Ballet of China) show an interest in dance as a universal human practice, not as part of an elite cultural knowledge.

right to left, you look up, and lead with your elbows; but you stay on top of yourself. No matter how fast you can pull back into the lunge, it is actually the snap of the head from left to right that makes that moment sharp. You don't just throw your arms back but curve your hands around, the toss happens mostly in the wrists. You must be in control, and you must be specific. Most of the time I don't feel the space around me as the thing that is holding me up. More often than not I feel like I'm carving the space in the slower parts, or whipping through it and hitting it, digging and sculpting. I'm not floating, I'm not being pulled, and I'm definitely not falling. My weight is firmly under my control, or else I still need to practice.

This is what the dust can do.  
Whenever I started Vertical Road I  
never thought about the pretentious  
meaning I sometimes felt like I had  
to stuff into my movement, or the  
lengthy and circular discussions we  
often had throughout the project.  
I thought of the verse "For dust thou  
art, and unto dust shalt thou return,"  
and thought of the terra cotta war-  
riors, and how the music sounded  
like a heartbeat. I thought about  
being powerful, hoped I would  
remember the steps, and then threw  
myself into a lunge.

thath thirathaka dhuna dhuna  
dhuna dhuna nakithada  
thakita thakita tirathaka  
thakita thakita tirathaka  
dhum dhum dhum dhum  
takithatakitha tharenda kira  
tharenda thakita tharenda  
thakita tharenda thakita  
tharenda that kiradé  
kiradé kiradé kiradé dji-  
djikitha djidjikitha djidjik-  
itha théh thram djidjikitha  
djidjikitha djidjikitha théh  
thram djidjikitha djidjikitha  
djidjikitha dhum

When the world is wild,  
here at its center I remain.  
We perform the Kathak  
Chakkars. Do you feel the  
Earth turn. The Universe  
in rotation. Head catches  
my breath just as I am  
about to loose it. A spring  
that releases. The heart  
of the cyclone they say.  
Oh, the wave at storm!—yet  
beneath its surface an  
unspoken silence awaits:  
the one within Thomas  
Hood's poem. The one  
you can never hear and  
only know.

Thomas Hood

648. Silence

"There is a silence  
where hath been no  
sound,

There is a silence where  
no sound may be,

In the cold grave—under  
the deep, deep sea,

Or

in wide  
desert  
where no life is  
found,

Which hath been mute, and  
still must sleep profound;

...

There the true Silence is, self-  
conscious and alone."

At the heart of Akram Khan's  
choreography, his dancers and his  
art; and from this deepest search  
initiated by Reggie Wilson, I met an  
inner-world, patient and dormant.  
At a time when I nearly dropped my  
arms and left, left loud lectures and

sleepless nights... a semester off  
to find myself. To rekindle with my  
fire that was slowly dying, asphyxi-  
ated by the empty wind of society's  
useless agitation. Just when I  
thought I was treading on surfaces,  
I found the entrance. The entrance  
to my inner-world, the sort of ocean  
in which I have always longed to  
drown. Was it dormant, or rather  
entrapped?

One slow inspiration fills my  
breast. And in a gasp, a shudder  
and the cry of a chalk falling to the  
ground, as it slices through the  
pounding stillness of the air./What  
if Vertical Road's stone soldiers  
dusting away their sleep... were  
nothing more but the lakes of our  
consciousness stirred to waves, at  
last crashing against the rational  
frivolity of our schedules, freed and  
surging through my senses  
in currents?

In my mind these surging cur-  
rents can only be Federico Garcia  
Lorca's Duende.

I remember seeing Vertical Road  
in Marseille, a few years back. I  
shuddered when the lights died.  
And mourned as coats shuffled  
and voices rose. After that I cried  
for a few hours and wrote a lot, I  
could have wept. When the dancers  
left the stage and the lights died,  
something at my core died

too. Something that  
had been build-  
ing up , and up, up

along that Vertical Road until it was  
just suddenly, as a thin thread cut  
sharp, shtak, released. I fell into my  
seat, but something else remained  
hovering above me, undisturbed  
it stayed, continued its journey  
upwards. That night I left behind  
a little dust, it died with the dance  
and there it stayed, beyond time.  
And sometimes I can picture it  
to myself: in the empty theater,  
above the square platform, float-  
ing with the other particles that

*Kathaa Kahe So Kathak*



had been brushed into thin air. Suspended. And so there is this force that charges through Akram Khan's movement; a force so inebriating that it was stirred within me, just by watching it develop. The Duende.

"The Duende is a force not a labour, a struggle not a thought. The Duende is not in the throat, it surges up inside, from the soles of the feet. The mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained, the spirit of the earth. Arrival of the Duende presupposes a radical change to all the old kind of form... generating an almost religious enthusiasm, the Duende that shakes the body of the dancer, a real poetic escape from this world. The duende works on a dancer's body like wind on sand." (Garcia Lorca 1933)

For some time now I have tried to understand, what it is that gives this work so much Duende. Here I have dispersed some thoughts...

-At the end of our representation the audience wanted to know about the presence of Martial arts within these dances. Often I too was tempted to see certain movements as directly inspired from T'ai chi ch'uan. And yet our two professors shook their heads: influenced maybe, but not incorporated.

There must be a link between the two, but then it is not so specific and straightforward:

Indeed, I quickly came to find that Akram Khan's work requires a serenity of the soul, an intense connection of the body and mind: Peace; one drop that lies at the crest of a floating petal.

Our work revolved around the control of breath, of our center, and an intimate understanding of time and space. The choreography is so complex and intricate, so fast that if your mind moves at the same pace, it is hardly possible to comprehend and execute. The dancer must grasp

the quality: melting into water to understand the ways in which it flows, or vice versa, understanding flow to embody water.

As Zeno's paradox: thinking of time as a sandglass, sand grain after sand grain (to pursue the sand/dust and dance analogy). And conceiving of space as quicksand, compact particles, into which you carve your fingers and press against the structure, moving through space and time as if you could touch them:

"... that the flying arrow is at rest, which result follows from the assumption that time is composed of moments ... he says that if everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in locomotion is always in a now, the flying arrow is therefore motionless." (Aristotle *Physics*, 239b.30)

I believe the answer lies at the heart of the Chakkar spins.

Akram Khan's work encapsulates an entire universe, this parallel paradigm that hides within, the vertical at the heart of the cyclone, the vertical at the heart of the Chakkars. The vertical on which all things rotate? Our vertical. Akram Khan's vertical, as he swirls.

In Buddhism, Yoga, T'ai Chi Ch'uan, meditation... all perform—the point to which returns the eye, turn after turn, as the head effortlessly engages the spin—within this state of the mind that requires a single-pointed concentration. Timeless and spaceless.

The Infinite balancing over the fine line of human cognition: an ontological argument?

This Duende. This force.

As I swirl: I keep what Lali once said about rhythms. We were practicing our footwork to the rhythms (which I transcribed in the opening). Somehow we could not maintain the set pace and our speed would systematically accelerate. Lali

told us how that was the nature of rhythms, they will always pick up, men have a tendency to let themselves be carried away by the rhythm, is what she said. The way she phrased it was particular since it implied that the rhythm was the main actor in this process. The man sets the pace, but ultimately the rhythm will take over, carrying away the dancer in its wake. And so, in agency and form I always wonder which comes first.

Names for one part, and language for another: music.

For instance, I was once told that my name suited me, we often say this "I couldn't imagine you with another name!" My next question is if the name suits me or if I suit the name? In which order do these things work. Do I fit the name? Has endlessly affirming "My name is Indrani, I am Indrani" shaped my character, perception and feel. Have the soft vowels, harsh consonants repeated my whole life seeped into my character? I believe in the phenomenology of things. I believe in how every smallest detail of an object feeds into its "being". Each chosen material, and from the humidity of the air to the poem muttered under our breath: every process has a final word in the craft.

Last Summer in Singapore Akram Khan told a masterclass, of which I was lucky to be a part, about thinking in terms of music and rhythms as a quality. We worked on Kathak basics and he taught us about the dance's rigor and its rhythmic counts. We learned a story, which became a melody, and then a rhythm... a footwork, a dance.

And so in this same order of things: recalling a dance through numbers is quite different from being reminded with a rhythm, with a melody, with a story. The intention is absolutely everything and

can change the whole quality of a movement.

Kathak comes from the Sanskrit Katha:story. Katthaka is the storyteller.

This Force again, this force that runs through the story, is the same force that will run through the rhythm and into the movement. And it is a force that burns from within, a narrative, the same tale that has sent the blood rushing through our veins.

The Duende is the destruction of preestablished order. Akram Khan's Art, and I am here reminded too of Reggie Wilson's work, is a reestablishment of the self. It is rejection of time and space and all the knowledge with which we have been infused for so long. (It is a remastered version of the Matrix (mind my humorous propaganda))!

Discovering this space of pure creation was for me such a revolution, because for the first time I exited the "thinking paradigm" /the paradigm of structure and knowledge and all that information as layers of clothes in water, pulling me down/ and instead entered the "feeling paradigm," as a matter of fact, Kathak's related form Abhinaya, which is *bhaav bataanaa* (lit. 'to show *bhaav* or 'feeling'). The Paradigm of a-structurality and imminence. One journey inwards.

During the 16th century, Moghul domination in India tainted traditional Kathak with Persian imports. A slim parallel can be drawn between Kathak's Chakkars and The Sema swirls. The Sema may be an anthropomorphic god for some, a spiritual concept for other. But, for example understanding the Sema (Swirling Dervishes) is another manifestation of the Duende within this art:

The Sema, a "physically active meditation" is the "remembrance of God. When the dervishes turn,

they are focusing their attention on their inner centre and they turn around and around their own centre in this way. In turning, making a pilgrimage to that centre of our their being." And for me, God in Akram Khan's work is a monistic force more than anything else, it is Spinoza's abstract and impersonal, immanent god? For me it is the Duende, it is the life of things.

When the fury of our everyday life keeps our inner ocean at bay, Akram Khan's work is a raw struggle with ourselves. It is a struggle *against* the *external force*, against the authority of structures and rationality. This work is a struggle *with* the *internal force*, and the acceptance/welcoming of an ungraspable irrationality in our existence, in Existence.

"Deus sive Natura" (Spinoza)

I loved Akram Khan's choreography. Although I will not pretend that the motions were not physically demanding and mentally tiring, the lessons I learned were more than one hundred times worthwhile. It was spectacular. Every rehearsal was difficult and eye opening at the same time. The motions were grounded, but in no way hindered or stiff. The body would drop very low to the ground and continue in its journey, in its shift of weight, until the body found itself at a new height. His pieces were lead not only by the types of movements but an overall tone that was both unique to each piece and a marker connecting every phrase. The energy in each rehearsal never ceased to flow. It was constantly in motion, constantly shifting in position and intensity, but it never stopped moving. I learned how to control the energy, releasing it, grasping it, and throwing it. Even the pauses, the points in the piece where the body ceased to move, the energy still buzzed beneath the surface. The analogy used to describe this liquid flow of energy was that of a bouncy ball. A bouncing ball can be thrown with a large amount of force> Once it hits a

Dynamic Action

surface it momentarily pauses as it comes into contact with the wall before it changes direction, but the energy of the original throw never disappears. That is the mentality that I constantly kept while learning this movement. It was flexible, dynamic, and beautiful simultaneously.

## Modes of Thinking, Modes of Doing

Having learned work by both Reggie Wilson and Akram Khan, I feel I can confidently say that they not only have different movement styles, but different approaches to thinking about movement. A different mindset, a different way of interacting with movement, a different way of treating the body. At the end of Reggie's residency at Yale, he asked me if I felt like there was a link between his choreography and his work and the post-modern choreographers we had learned the repertoire of previously (Cunningham, Twyla Tharp). At the time I said no, that his work felt completely different.

However, once we started working with Akram Khan's repertoire, I realized what completely different actually feels like. Akram's work definitely is riddled with difficulties, intricacies and complexities in the execution of his work, but there was a simplicity in the approach. You were working towards something complex, but the thinking and processing of that movement is very direct and straight forward. It was a mode of rehearsal that felt very different from anything we've worked on previously in YDT.

Despite Reggie's insistence in the rehearsal room that we stop thinking about the movement and just do it, the amount of thought in the doing of his work is still immense and complex. The way in which he uses different textures of movement or the way he patterns or sequences simple phrases of movement is complex, and provides a rigor in the body and the mind.

There is no doubt in my mind that Akram's work is rigorous, but it operates within one mode of doing. There takes time to understand stylistically how his movement works, whether that be the way he uses dynamics and energy, the intricacy of the hands, or the consistent sense of circular movement. And while I can't say it's a rigor I mastered, it's a rigor that is contained. The shape and the form of it is clear. It stays within one mode of thinking about movement and one mode of doing movement and it remains there.

Reggie's work is dealing with several modes of thinking and analysis at once; but as a dancer it also deals with several modes of doing. The distinction between the movement in a single phrase of Reggie's work isn't just

a distinction between quality or dynamics, it's a distinction between the way you approach doing the movement. It has to be done, yes, but the way you think about doing one movement will not necessarily help you understand how to navigate the next. In Akram's work, there is a sense that the correction for one movement can be a correction for most of the piece as well, there is an attention to detail that is unique and specific and consistent. Reggie's attention to detail shifts from place to place depending on where he is coming from. In that sense Reggie has a different implementation of dynamic range, one that is born out of the independence of the multiple movement styles he incorporates, whereas Akram's dynamics seem to be born out of the fusion of his movement styles into a singular style.

## When Fluency Falters

Learning repertory from Akram Khan and Reggie Wilson, but particularly from the former, has felt like an intensive language-learning immersion program. I dove into Reggie's unembellished, minimalist (but above all unnaturally natural) world in which the pelvis is at its core before navigating a dynamic space with lightning flashes of power, whirling energy, and glittering details in the fingers and hands. These long, arduous sessions of learning and practice would leave me thinking about the work and the philosophy behind it long after walking out of Broadway Rehearsal Lofts. Hearing the music or reviewing (both theoretical as well as choreographic) material in my suite reminded me of when I would listen to French television programs online or read newspaper articles online to get more practice outside of class.

But after the immersion session is over, in the contexts of both language-learning and YDT-dancing, I'm at a huge loss for what to do. How can I communicate in French to maintain that level of knowledge? How can I continue practicing Akram's style beyond that which I've learned with Lali and Young Jin? I already have holes in my memory about Reggie's choreography and feel anxious about losing Akram's choreography from my memory too.

Language fluency comes and goes in waves. When in France for a week, my Spanish died. But it came back when in Spain. And then in French class, my French came back, too. The environment, and above all the mindset, can help flesh out what may have been feared as forgotten. And I think the same is possible for my inimitable, unbeatable dance experience with YDT. The tide of memory may recede but it will come back because it never really went away to begin with.

But beyond choreographic memory, I think I've developed a more deep-seated knowledge about the choreography, in learning about the creative motivations about it, that I think will last longer than my muscle memory about the choreography, for this deep-seated knowledge doesn't apply to only certain repertory, but also any and all work that I do from now on: with YDT, A Different Drum, or at an open Contemporary class at Steps. My awareness about dynamics, the pelvis,

appendage-related details is so much higher, and I'm slowly improving in the ability to stop being so cerebral in my dancing.

They say if you learn one foreign language well, picking up other languages becomes significantly easier because you've worked that mental muscle. Perhaps one can compare a talented dancer to a polyglot who is well-versed in a couple of corporeal languages and can easily learn others to achieve fluency. I'm still very much in the process of really digging into Contemporary dance, which is my foreign language (or language family since it's such an umbrella term), while Ballet remains my mother tongue. But I'm glad that I've picked up phrases and structures from different corporeal languages to help me adapt more easily to other tongues. I mourn the brief but wonderful time I learning everything I could from Lali and Young Jin, but even if my memory of the work fades, I've gained much more than I will eventually lose to time.

## Sisyphus, the Dancer

As the Akram Khan showing has come and gone, I've been thinking a lot about some of the ideas I mentioned in my last post. I talked about risk, about tension, about Khan's choreography affirming my own existence. I realized that virtually everything I said stands in the face of mortality. I think perhaps that is why I so identify with the Khan movement: each time I complete one of his movements, lunging deep to the ground or thrusting my arms as far away from my chest as I can go, I emerge victorious out of battle with the unknown, with gravity, with all the forces that surround me in this absurd situation we call life.

I emerged from the lecture-demonstration with a strong adrenaline high, as if I had just overcome some great obstacle. After the performance, it was particularly strong, but I had that feeling every time I did these movements in rehearsal too. It reminds me of the myth of Sisyphus, whose punishment for his deceitfulness was an eternity of pushing a stone up a hill. Each time he reached the precipice, the stone would fall back down, never continuing over. It seems tragic, but I prefer the interpretation of French writer Albert Camus, who wrote: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." This is dance—an eternity of improvement, of never-ending happy failures. When I did the Akram Khan movement, I felt as if it was a string of pushes; each one of my movements paralleled Sisyphus's steps up the hill. I often felt as if I might fail, forced to stop from sheer tiredness or shaky muscles. I never did. Each rehearsal, I pushed the stone up the hill; the next day, I would have to start from the bottom again.

Still, at least I get to push the stone up the hill. At least I have a body that can move, that can do (or attempt to do) the virtuosic Khan movements. This session of Yale Dance Theater was not only my third year in the program, but it was my second year performing after tearing the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in my right knee and having surgery to repair it. Each time I squatted to the ground, mimicking Lali's low-placed pelvis or Young Jin's turned-in ankle, I felt a twinge of pain in my knee. Each time I practiced the beginning part of Kaash, literally lunging every two seconds onto my right knee, it hurt.

According to my orthopedist, it's the kind of pain I'll probably have forever, left over from scar tissue and bone misalignment. Doing the Akram Khan movement made me realize that dance might possibly be my ideal pain killer. I can't explain it, but even though I felt pain when practicing the movements in rehearsal (focusing on a single kick or lunge), when we actually did them all together in sequence, I forgot the twinges. My physical pain was erased; it didn't register. Instead, all I could feel was the simultaneity of my head and hand moving together; all I could focus on was moving from point A to point B in the given rhythm. Nothing else mattered. Pain was an afterthought that my mind and body chose to ignore.

I don't know if dance can truly cure pain, but I do think it literalizes the human life force. It deeply engages our bodies and minds, it creates communities, it questions the limits of reality. I can honestly say that I have never felt more alive than after doing Akram Khan's choreography. Thank you to Akram Khan, Lali, Young Jin, Emily, and the members of Yale Dance Theater for providing me with this incredible opportunity to experience such a crazy metaphysical phenomenon. Now I know: dance really is life.



## Does the Mind or the Body Lead the Dance?

My experiences learning Reggie Wilson's choreography and Akram Khan's choreography were different. There was an emphasis on manipulation of time in the Khan choreography that was absent in the Wilson choreography. In the Khan choreography my movements were informed by the counts. The goal is to hit the movement at the same time as the count, not before or after. This creates tension in the movements followed by bursts of sharp or smooth energy. This also forced me to be extremely present in each moment. I could not dance the Khan steps on autopilot. Both the mind and the body are equally exerted, but the mind is the leader in this choreography.

There is more focus on finding the true movement in the Wilson choreography. When I was learning the steps, rather than manipulating my form to fit into time, I listened to my body to find the form. The body is the leader in the Wilson choreography.

A similarity in my experiences of Khan and Wilson choreography is the importance of the mind and body connection. I felt that both forms of choreography required attention to my own thoughts in relation to my body, or my body in relation to my thoughts. For example, in Wilson choreography the pelvis is the key part of any movement. When I danced the steps, I tried to listen to my pelvis to determine how long a movement should take. It takes a given amount of time to transfer my weight from my left foot to my right foot. I can calculate this amount of time by listening to my pelvis.

In my experience of Khan choreography I learned to manipulate my body using my mind. I determined what time I wanted a certain movement to happen, then performed that movement by manipulating my body in time and space. For example, first I decide that I want to shift my body from my left foot to my right foot on the third count of a phrase of four. Then, I count: one, two, shift-three, four. I do not shift at the beginning or end of three, but in the middle of the count.

Both of the ways I just described of shifting my weight from one foot to another require a strong connection between the mind and body. This is what connects all of my experiences of dance. I believe the

connection of the mind and body can only be explored in the artistic art form of dance.



## Migrations and Revelations

Wrapping It All Up, and Untying  
More Loose Ends

What a semester it's been! For me, the opportunity to learn and compare choreographies by Reggie Wilson and Akram Khan has been an unprecedented and unparalleled experience. More than ever before, this session of Yale Dance Theater has provoked numerous questions about the interplay between physical and metaphysical inquiry, conducting dance research, and my personal relationship with dance. I'll walk through all my major questions and discoveries as best I can.

Well before the project began, I was infatuated with its global scope. Here were two acclaimed contemporary choreographers, working in itinerant and diasporic forms that simultaneously drew upon and shaped their own histories, engaging traditions separated across time and space in entirely novel and cutting-edge ways. I was brimming with questions before rehearsals even began, anticipating concerns of cultural fusion, appropriation, synthesis, and influence.

However, when we began working with Reggie, we had to reevaluate the nature of our questions, as well as the information we were pursuing. While I do think there is a place for the kinds of macroscopic questions I was thinking about at the beginning, I had to reformulate my approach to the choreography when I realized that I was overly concerned with my preconceived notions of use and value, and trying to make information pertinent in an academic sense. This is certainly not to say that choreographic research is not an inherently academic pursuit. Rather, it is a process of discovery that often requires us to reconfigure our thoughts, destabilize biases towards static conceptions of information, and form new kinds of connections.

How does one ask questions of choreography? What is it to *know* a dance? I found myself asking such questions a lot, and thinking about the relationship between choreography and information. Information can be in the details of a movement, whether it is Reggie telling us to change direction with the whole pelvis in *Big Brick* or Lali emphasizing the sharp turn of the head that punctuates the *Bahok* phrase.

Additionally, there is a sense of how to inhabit a choreographic world that comes with doing and with discussing. This too can

be a kind of information. Both choreographers have philosophies about the body, space, rhythm, and time that come to light through the efforts of undifferentiated physical-mental work. Sense of flow and use of weight are also important considerations. These are not two parts of a whole, the practical and the theoretical, but rather undivided information that feeds into our own choreographic understanding of an artist's practice.

In the past, I've tended towards a view of looking for information below the surface of the choreography. I used to imagine some kind of implicit knowledge tucked away and inaccessible within the choreography, and it was my job as a thinking dancer to excavate it through practice. However, with these two residencies, I stopped seeing analysis as what I'm left with at the end of the day and started looking at it as an active, all-the-time pursuit. Instead of bypassing initial frustrations (of which there were many) and looking forward to the day when everything would become clear—physically and conceptually—I took moments to breathe and consider what the process of encounter could tell me.

By allowing this paradigm shift, I found it was in struggle, not ease, that I began to understand what I was doing. These residencies pushed me to extend my body with struggle that was not only a matter of capturing a certain aesthetic, but also reconceptualizing my body and myself as a dance. Reggie's eternal question, "Can a body?" was what triggered this realization. To dance in these choreographies has been to discover new bodies, new selves, and new ways of understanding, and I'd like to elaborate on some of these for both artists.

Reggie's work, for me, reveals the dynamic contrast of actualization. It is, as he said, the difference between the words "up" and "down," as they are enacted in the studio versus conceptualized. It is the difference between just jumping and thinking to oneself, "I'm jumping, I'm jumping." There is a complex relationship between doing and speaking; while they seem autonomous, I found that they were mutually informative.

This work was setting oneself into motion, and riding a unique and unstoppable flow. The choreography feels very migratory, never settling in space and time. We dance in *microsync*—working with the time it takes for our own weight to move a certain distance, with a certain force.

The choreography travels; contrast creates a sense of changing place. This is not a domination of space, since we never inhabit or claim it. There is directionality that isn't geographic; we pursue one intention and then veer off towards another. The metaphor that makes sense for me is thinking of topography versus geography.

With Cunningham, we danced in space with no fixed points. This was an uninflected, geographic space, with evenly distributed potential for inhabitation. Space became that in which things take place. With Reggie's choreography, the experience of space was vastly different. I call it topographical because we moved through the terrain of space, encountering various places in our interaction with it. Space and time were not lines of meter to fill; instead, they were forces to be encountered as we travelled through them. Geography is the space we fill, while topography is the space we interact with. Ideologically speaking, this is a departure from the domination or systematization of space that exists in many concert dance forms, from ballet to Cunningham.

Having our sense of space shaped by the movement is something I will return to when discussing Akram Khan, since I think both choreographers engage with space and time in ways that I was not accustomed to.

Time, too, was something set in motion. Rather than arching over us as a series of counts, time was the physical reality that the movement of our bodies necessitated. Time was a process, the trajectory of "travelling through" rather than an arbitrary measurement. Khan's approach to time is similarly related to the dancer's actions, but in a different way.

So, in ontological terms, what is the nature of the body in Reggie's choreography? No matter what I say, I'm sure Reggie would be able to add a "both...and..." While the movements look dramatically different from those of Akram Khan, I find more similarities than differences in comparing the two choreographies. First is the emphasis on contrasts and dynamic, the excitement of doing, truly doing. There are two moments fixed parallel in my mind: The first was Reggie telling us what he didn't want us to do, saying, "I'm jumping, I'm jumping," while frowning in mock concentration. The second was Lali talking about the dynamic shifts in *Vertical Road*, saying, "It only looks good if everyone does it." Here is an activation of the body, necessitating exertion and commitment, a step beyond intention. Taking the extra step, moving beyond my body and my questions as I had them neatly conceptualized, is the fall into new discoveries.

I found that my body, my presence in Reggie's choreography was fuller in a sense

than anything I've done before. The contrasts in dynamic, navigation of complex phrases, and full-bodied movements demanded nothing less. This work, as well as Khan's, has complicated my ideas about body and presence in dance. I cannot say that my mind was "off," since I don't believe that dance is or can be without thought, but self-judging and preemptive evaluation were subsumed into the movement. Our second showing was, as Reggie said once, "me in my full presence."

A recurring issue I've encountered in several of my classes this semester is the overly static nature of traditional metaphysics, the constant and undevelopable nature of being. My experience with both these choreographers has shown me the incontrovertibly physical aspect of the metaphysical (contradictory as it may seem), and how the body in action spurs philosophical discovery on the personal level.

Reggie sought to make this experience personal, and I felt this, sincerely so. Getting into the dance strips away preconceived questions and throws open whole new epistemologies; I must grapple with the "I" that fixes objects for my critical consideration and become immersed instead, realizing that dancing brings "me" into existence in a new way, validating and even creating a presence in time and space.

Like others have written, I felt a similar surge of validation performing the Akram Khan repertory. Rather than travelling through space and time, Khan's choreography gave the empowering sense that I was creating space and time. This assertion lies in the rhythms, the staccato breaths and suspended counts that punctuate the phrases. Linking back to space, rhythm is not a metronomic means of dividing a blank stretch of time here. Instead of marking an imposed, inhabited time, the rhythms are how we *create* time as dancers. I felt my body as a powerful source of gravity, actively warping rather than drifting in the fabric of time.

Viewers commented on the raw energy of the movement, the universality of effort, and even the resistance of mortality. The counts were our key to empowerment, not tools of subservience. When we hit a "wun-*nnn* TWO!" right in the meat of the count, the sensation is tangible, not conceptual.

In an earlier blog post, I wrote about energy, and what that means in dance. In the Khan repertory, this too blurred the line between physical and metaphysical. I described energy as a metaphor for itself, an imagined dynamic force with a very real physical manifestation. Energy is the sounds you follow through a phrase, the economy of exertion found in

efficient physical chain reactions (the Khan movement is all about hits and releases, attacks and suspended withdrawals), and the way your breathing fits into that of those around you.

Going off of breathing, there was a sense of social togetherness in both choreographies. Reggie once mentioned that breath was not an obsession of his, but we became attuned to the paths of each other's pelvises and found unity in our rhythmic chants of "See Line." In the Khan pieces, our unity was in energy, rhythm, and breath. While there was a definite group dynamic in the Cunningham work, I remember that more as a field of synchronized rhythms, independent in time and linked by proximity.

If I felt like a full body in Reggie's work, in Akram's I felt like a "flow body." I imagine the barriers of my skin replaced with an energy that is both diffuse and direct. I assert my presence by letting go of my control. Dean Cahan asked if there were philosophical insights to be drawn from this work, and I think there most definitely are. Akram Khan and Reggie Wilson's choreographies both have a kind of decentralization of the body. In many Western forms, there is a controlled autonomy of the body, a kind of solipsism that puts forth a singular subject who "does a dance." Movements come from the core as a control center, and this muscular action becomes the choreography's focus. Ballet has pull-up, Graham has the contraction, etc.

While Reggie works with the pelvis, it is not a means of controlling the body's movements from a single point. Khan, too, does not conceive of such a control center. Both choreographies are decentralized in their initiations and reactions, which gives them a unique flow. Reggie makes use of weight in the heel, the forearm, the "foreleg" and other extremities. Khan's movements also use the extremities extensively; Lali and Young Jin told us that we could find the flow of a phrase by following the hands, and responding with the rest of the body. The head, too, is not always perched on top of a stacked spine, but sharp and responsive to other movements. It punctuates, rather than navigates. As Lali once said, upon finishing a spitfire phrase that ended with a quick turn of the head, "This is all you see." This was all a part of discovering a new kind of body logic.

In Khan's choreography, I also had to abrogate some of my fixed identity as a single dancer. Instead, I attuned myself to the group, emulating a collective and flowing energy rather than existing as one body dancing with other bodies. Giving up this autonomy ushered in a new way of being, and a new philosophical look at my "self" as a dancer.

While I long resisted understanding dance as energy, instead preferring to treat moving as an anatomical activity, the choreographic idea of energy gave me a key to a new and different understanding of my body and myself—I am not a static entity, and this is paradoxically how I can fully experience dancing.

In conclusion, this two-part residency has left me with much to think about. I will continue to investigate these questions of self, energy, space, time, rhythm, group, flow, and many others as well. It is somewhat ironic that I am ending this year with so many questions when I sought after so many answers at the beginning.









Yale Dance Theater (YDT) is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and/or development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance.

As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. In the final phase of the project, we draw on these writings to develop a print journal. YDT's mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.

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