CHAPTER 20

HAUNTED BY HAMLET
Devising William Forsythe’s Sider

FREYA VASS-RHEE

As the lights dim on a stage, barren except for two door-sized sheets of thick cardboard, two dancers walk to center stage. In the silence, the woman takes up the heavy boards and, grasping one in each hand, begins awkwardly and contemplatively pivoting them into different configurations, while the man lowers himself to the floor, sometimes obstructed or blocked by her boards as he inches tensely through tight, awkward positions (Figure 20.1). Though there is a strong sense of intention, their motivations are unclear. Another man in a balaclava has entered and watches them, maneuvering another cardboard sheet as if it were a measuring tool, a wall, a weapon. Absorbed in their individual tasks, the three suddenly freeze as one; after a long pause, they continue as a fourth performer, also wearing a balaclava, enters to stand in the upstage corner. Partially obscured by a cardboard bearing the words “IN DISARRAY,” he begins speaking in dejected dramatic tones; however, the distance and his deliberately garbled speech muffle his voice, making his words indecipherable. After a while, the man and woman walk off the stage in fading light, followed by their guard. The lights come back up, and a new scene commences as the full ensemble enters with cardboard sheets in their hands. After taking up places, they begin kicking them forward and slamming them against the floor in synchrony, creating a popcorn of rhythm as they cover the space in loose, sometimes counterpointed groupings.

Choreographer William Forsythe does not directly indicate Hamlet as the source of his work Sider, which premiered in 2011 at Dresden’s Festspielhaus Hellerau. A brief, three-sentence program note tells the audience only that the performers are engaging with the rhythms of Elizabethan theater speech, listening via headphones to the soundtrack of “a filmed version of a late 16th century tragedy.” Following Sider’s premiere, however, critic Wiebke Hüster reported that this soundtrack was in fact a filmed production of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. And indeed, indications of Hamlet are scattered throughout the production: the text “IS, AND ISN’T” printed on another board, dancers wearing white ruffs and black velvet breeches over strangely colored practice
attire, and spoken texts that, though unclear, allow brief phrases of Shakespeare’s play to be occasionally understood. *Sider*, however, is not a production, or even a reproduction, of *Hamlet*: the play’s narrative is absent, as are robustly identifiable characters. Instead, shades of *Hamlet*’s text, plot, characters, history, and dramaturgy perfuse the work as a subtle but defining substrate. This did not, however, occur because Forsythe set out to make a work underpinned by *Hamlet*. Instead, *Hamlet* was found to be a nebulous presence accumulating and resonating within the ensemble’s devising process, waiting to be recognized by the choreographer and the Forsythe Company ensemble and, once welcomed, speaking to and through the work in a broad array of manners. As such, the process by which *Sider* was devised, as well the ways in which its connections to *Hamlet* are suffused within the choreography and communicated to the work’s audience, complicate the views espoused by Hutcheon that adaptations are “haunted at all times by their adapted texts.”

This chapter, which reveals how *Hamlet* came to pervade *Sider*, results from my collaborative experience with the ensemble for this and other works as dramaturg and production assistant. *Sider*’s rehearsal and performance archive, captured in real time using The Forsythe Company’s *Piecemaker* software, served as an additional resource. The chapter is further informed by my thinking as a dance researcher on the free-ranging and at times uncanny processes of devised dance dramaturgy, choreography, and *mise en scène*, in which constellations of ideas are brought into resonance with each other.
to render emergent, unpredictable possibilities of thematics, movement, and staging. In my analysis, the resulting performances imbricate audiences in ways that echo deep dramaturgies that Forsythe drew from Hamlet as the work’s whisper was given fuller voice in the studio and the play’s further potentialities were realized and elaborated.

Choreographer William Forsythe is best known for refiguring classical ballet by re-visioning balletic principles and aesthetics as a catalyst for improvisational movement during his directorship of the Ballett Frankfurt (1984–2004). In the second decade of this tenure, and later with his ensemble The Forsythe Company (2005–2015), he continued extending the development of new choreographic approaches, in the process effacing connections to the visual aesthetics of classical ballet to the point of near indiscernibility. Throughout his career, Forsythe has continually derived new choreographic and dramaturgical potentials from ideas and practices inherent in classical ballet. This has involved ongoing and variegated processes of abstraction that amount to what Forsythe terms a “hierarchical collapse” of ballet’s forms, logic, and ideologies. In this abstraction—a word that literally means to draw or pull away from—ballet’s forms, constraints, and their relations are translated into essential fundamentals. These structures and codes of execution are then physically and conceptually interrogated through improvisational operations or modalities, resulting in permutations of traditional, established ballet practice, while simultaneously yielding rich ground for both improvised movement and emergent performance-making strategies.

Written texts have figured in Forsythe’s oeuvre in a variety of ways, with many works featuring verbatim or derived passages of classic or modern texts. These include Tang dynasty poems (From the Most Distant Time, 1978), texts by Yukio Mishima (The Loss of Small Detail, 1991), Emily Brontë and Charles Manson (Endless House, 1999), Edgar Allen Poe (7 to 10 Passages, 2000), Anne Carson (Kammer/Kammer, 2000, also with a text by Douglas Martin, and Decreation, 2003), and the surrealist “Ventriloquist’s Opera,” written by Forsythe for director Peter Sellars (Theatrical Arsenal 2, 2009). In some works, such as Invisible Film (1995) and I don’t believe in outer space (2008), popular songs are also quoted. Forsythe has produced further texts for other works, like the “interrogation” dialogues in both LDC (1985) and Die Befragung des Robert Scott (1986), Artifact’s combinatoric monologues (1984), and the tale of a son’s “arrest” recounted in Three Atmospheric Studies (2005–2006), while texts used in other works including Eidos:Teles (1995) and Yes we can’t (2008/2010) were produced in collaboration with the ensemble. In the first decade of the 2000s, however, Forsythe increasingly focused on the choreographic affordances of the sounds of speech itself. The 2001 work Woolf Phrase has as its basis a set phrase of movement that follows the rhythms of a passage of text from Virginia Woolf’s 1925 Mrs. Dalloway, with the phrase’s rhythm and speech melody serving as internal “music” that guides the execution of the movement.

Such strategies are crucial to Forsythe’s diffused and radically open dramaturgies. Though a handful of Forsythe’s works have had concrete, clearly stated themes, Forsythe primarily desires not to “overdetermine the subject” in his works, preferring instead to construct for his audiences a postdramatic and performative dramaturgical space of potentials that “leaves room for interpretation.” This avoidance
of overdetermining imagery is in keeping with Forsythe’s practice of abstraction when working with texts: eliding representational specifics in favor of what might be termed *dramaturgical deconstruction*, a process by which fundamental themes and ideas are discerned and re-presented as *danced dramaturgies* within the overall composition of his works. However, as will be demonstrated in following, Forsythe does not enact a complete abstraction, but instead mines the seam between concrete representation and obscuration of source. The character of these works evokes an interrogative engagement with meaning, a search for clues indicated by postdramatic theater theoretician Hans-Thies Lehmann:

(P)lay, object and language point simultaneously in different directions of meaning and thus encourage a contemplation that is at once relaxed and rapid [. . . ]. Here everything depends on not understanding immediately. Rather one's perception has to remain open for connections, correspondences and clues at completely unexpected moments, perhaps casting what was said earlier in a different light.9

In the case of Forsythe’s abstracted textuality, these “different directions” become different levels of representation as texts are translated, obfuscated, or couched within unexpected relationships to other facets of the performance. The field of meaning, though radically open, thus bears markers that guide meaning-making in a subtle, often ironic manner.

For most of the Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company’s combined thirty-year history, Forsythe led what is rightly described as a collective of choreographer-dramaturgs. In a 2013 public talk with Elizabeth Lecompte (director of The Wooster Group), he noted how his choreographic practice had altered over time, moving toward less concrete structuring:

You’re trying to adapt to what the performers offer—so you’re trying to find a structure that accommodates [the dancers’] sense of time and composition. . . . People need to try stuff, they need to go like “I don’t feel like moving over there tonight, I feel like it needs to be here now and I’m with my partner” . . . which is important. It might not work, but I also have to allow that to happen in the situation, otherwise it’s going to be. . . . [The works are] living things, they’re alive, like we are.10

Forsythe has long thought of his role within the ensemble not purely as choreographer but as editor, a collaborator working in dialogue with the performers to shape material into its performance form. He also carries out the role of conductor in performance, through strategies of what he terms “live direction”: modulating and energizing individual performances by cueing set scripts of entrances, exits, and transitions based on real-time decisions about the quality of the dancers’ performances and his perceptions of audiences’ attention. As such, the audience is imbricated in the choreographic relationship:
It’s a discussion that has to continue in performance—[The dancers are] going to have to discuss their ideas with you in public, under the stress of the performance—So I’m watching people be dialogic onstage, with each other on one hand but also—it’s a kind of weird triangulation, you have the people you’re working with onstage but you also have the audience. So how do you triangulate your energies . . . balance that demand between feeling an obligation [to the audience] on one hand, but then feeling the demands of the choreographic task, et cetera, et cetera?¹¹

In the danced-dialogic processes of Forsythe’s devising of performances, themes emerge that guide the development of works—which sometimes change substantially over different seasons, or even from performance to performance. As Forsythe has described it, “It’s a bit like a sieve: in that process, what is essential remains, and what isn’t, falls through.”¹² Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling note this only partially expli-
cable characteristic of devising processes, commenting,

Chance or randomness are combined with some unquantifiable, yet persistent, sense of “appropriateness.” Though the work does not yet exist and is unknown in advance of its making, there is nevertheless an assumption that there is a work to be “dis-
covered” or “recognised.” The pattern fits when it fits the pattern. . . . One feels that something is “right” because it fits the model of the already known, already sought; the “found” gesture is only, in fact, seen—or enacted—because it is already learnt, is anticipated, or is being looked for.¹³

Reflecting this view, Forsythe’s devising processes are often deeply uncanny, as if the per-
formance, rather than being crafted to reflect a vision, is instead at first a silent, not-yet-
known presence that slowly materializes within the studio, whispering in a voice at first too faint to be heard, but then becoming undeniable in its existence as a potentiality—a quasi-object waiting to be identified, fleshed out, and amplified. As Sigmund Freud has explained,

[A]n uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between im-
agination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on. It is this factor which contributes not a little to the uncanny effect attaching to magical practices.¹⁴

Such “magical” moments of unexpected materialization and resonance—common to devising practices but always surprising and unsettling—frequently evoke delighted but uneasy laughter in Forsythe’s rehearsals, often accompanied by the singing of the opening notes of the theme from the television show *The Twilight Zone*. The insistent nature of their appearance makes the way forward seem inevitable but not necessarily easily trustable. However, Forsythe, who has a career-long history of following such impulses, actively seeks and welcomes the challenges of the uncanny, the unexpected visitation of the possible. In following, I describe the rehearsal processes that led to the
“Twilight Zone” moment in which Forsythe and the ensemble realized that Hamlet was haunting Sider’s process.

“**This Distracted Globe**”: Finding Hamlet’s Ghost

Rehearsals for the as yet unnamed 2011 Dresden premiere began on April 13, with several company members away on a tour. In a 2013 interview with Jennifer Homans, Forsythe reflected that the initial impulse for the working phase was the idea of inevitability: a new work had to be made by an unavoidable premiere date. According to Forsythe, he had also been reading Sam Weber’s *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan’s Dislocation of Psychoanalysis* at the time, focusing on Freud’s analysis of wishing. The first rehearsal at the Forsythe Company studio in Frankfurt began in a typically casual manner: encouraged by dancer Fabrice Mazliah, Forsythe began what he called a “pre-post-chat”—a humorous mock interview with the dancers, addressing the June 16 premiere as if it had already taken place six months earlier:

**Forsythe**: How was this piece for you?
**Fabrice**: It’s done now already.
**Forsythe**: And how do you feel about the piece?
**Dancer**: Oh, it’s amazing.
**Dancer**: I really like it, we changed everything and at the end we had 2 days to make a whole piece. (laughter)

Aware that the discussion was being captured and notated using the ensemble’s *Piecemaker* software, Forsythe resorted to a familiar way of playing with language, translating words into polyglot, onomatopoeic “language objects.”

**Forsythe**: A piece of pieces.
**Dancer**: Pizza!  
**Forsythe**: Also known as pizzizza. . . A slice of your life. . . What do you remember of the piece?
**Roberta Mosca**: I’ve blocked it out completely. (laughter)
**Forsythe**: Amnesia. An amnesia epidemic . . . macadamnesiac ice cream. Oh, we can’t remember what it will be like. . . What does Mosca mean [in Italian]?
**Roberta**: It’s a fly.
**Forsythe**: Sounds like Moscow. . . A shitty flight to Moscow.

From this dialogue, which was also carried out with the touring group when they returned, emerged a list of over 100 neologisms like *bohemian girl opera, grounded Luft, Fabricabun*, and *victory legumes*. Returning to a mapping process he had used during
the making of ALIE/N A(C)TION in 1992, Forsythe, drawing a rudimentary three-dimensional “globe” on a piece of paper, then told the dancers to map the terms onto paper in any way that made sense to them. The dancers would then choreographically translate their maps into the full space of the room however they individually chose. This process continued for an entire week, over the course of which some dancers altered their map papers by cutting or tearing them, crumpling them to achieve a cloth-like texture, and in one instance even fashioning them into jewelry. The translations into the studio space, which were demonstrated at the end of the period, took on many varied forms as well. Roberta Mosca’s, for example, reflected the preceding dialogue, resulting in what she called “slice of life” and “piazzas”—an imagined topography like a Sumerian village, with narrow alleyways through which she navigated to open spaces where she could move more freely. In discussions following this map work, Forsythe noted how it had served as a useful means to find an aesthetic that could not have been predetermined by either himself or the dancers. Describing the terms and maps as imaginative spaces that had resulted specifically from the ensemble’s joint playful thinking, he encouraged the dancers to explore the maps’ potentials for resonance and meaning: “So this world has come to you [. . .]. Each one of these maps is trying to talk to you—and you have to figure out how it talks, let it talk to you in a different way. Let it talk to you.”

It is here in the idea of the maps’ communication to the dancers that I first discern the as yet unrecognized outline of the ghost of old King Hamlet, who speaks to and is heard only by his son. This dramaturgy, which would develop retroactively, would also have a striking resonance with my dramaturgical research at this point. Without attempting to suggest a theme to Forsythe, I had begun by seeking to flesh out ideas about mapping text into space, first rereading Paul Harris’s essay on Michel Serres’s “topological” approach to philosophy, in which disparate ideas are brought into dialogue with each other through an elastic mapping of their interrelations in conceptual space. Within the essay, Harris discusses Serres’s analysis of Guy de Maupassant’s tale The Horla, in which a chilling presence haunts the narrator, ultimately driving him to madness. Forsythe requested material on The Horla from me; Hamlet, however, was still nowhere in sight.

The following week saw a shift to a different register of physical work. A stack of twenty or so large sheets of thick, stiff cardboard, a material that Forsythe had used in a previous installation piece, had arrived in the studio. The ensemble began working with the seven-foot-tall “boards,” exploring various ways in which they could be held, moved, and organized, and how they influenced movement of the body. Boards were slid, spun, cantilevered, offered to and taken from others, balanced on body surfaces, set into relationships with parts of others’ bodies, and built into formations and allowed to fall, while similar mechanics were also investigated without the boards. Forsythe noted how working with the cardboards highlighted distinct and varied “ways of maintaining a behavior” and encouraged further exploration of the actions, effort, and tempi afforded by the boards’ size, shape, weight, and substance. This investigation would continue throughout the production period, including Forsythe’s facilitation of improvisational modalities (movement tasks based on associative coordination of body parts
or rules governing choices of action), which were permitted to shift and change in fluid manners, rather than being rigidly defined. In dialogues with the ensemble, Forsythe emphasized attention, a key theme in his career-long investigation of choreographic potentials, discussing the interplay between tasks, action, observation, and reaction that underpins the situationality of improvised ensemble performance. He also began offering increasingly oblique instructions, moving toward less logical ideas in order to facilitate less rational modes of improvising together, such as asking two dancers to extrapolate the “future” of another dancer’s movement within their own map structures, and a third dancer to take a “family” role in the improvisation.

This initial period of development was interrupted by two weeks of rehearsals and performance of a different work in Antwerp. During the tour, Forsythe took part in a public talk with Elizabeth Lecompte, director of The Wooster Group, which was performing simultaneously at the deSingel International Arts Campus. During the talk, long-time friends Forsythe and Lecompte noted parallels in ways they have worked over the years—their shared interests in the rhythms of spoken text, usage of in-ear speaker feeds and visual projections—and joking about ideas “stolen” from each others’ productions. In retrospect, it is noteworthy that Lecompte’s 2007 *Hamlet* “channels the ghost” of the 1964 film version directed by John Gielgud, with the ensemble re-performing sections of the work surrounded by projected footage. However, according to Forsythe, he was unaware of this coincidence.

The week following the tour, the ensemble continued exploring physical work with the boards and developing modalities in small and larger groups. In response to one of the dancers trying to jazz dance while carrying a board, Forsythe, in dialogue with the dancers, generated a nonsensical text about selling “jazz boards” and asked them to stamp its rhythm out with their feet in the manner he recalled having seen in performances directed by Einar Schleef in the late 1980s (“...You-could-be-the-on-ly-one-to-own-one-and-it’s-not-so-com-pa-lilly-cated—to-own-one—unliiiike a headbag, orrr a hoo-ray gun, orrr a faaab-blipminist. Oh silly we—we meant to say flah flah flah flah. Solo Josh . . .”). Later, continuing to pursue alternate ways to engage with the rhythms of text, he asked the dancers to “fall into literature,” demonstrating how to fit the rhythms of a passage from his current reading (Albert North Whitehead) to his own stumbling. Asked to supply some texts for the dancers, I gathered a few of Forsythe’s perennial favorites and other potentially useful books from my office—Raymond Roussel’s *Locus Solus*, a collection of Beckett’s plays, and a book of *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* scripts. The latter contained a *Hamlet*-based skit, which caught Forsythe’s eye. Shortly after this work began, he jokingly quipped to the dancers “Oh, we should just do *Hamlet*. Should we do *Hamlet*? We have three weeks . . . .” After laughter all around, and as dancers then stumbled through lines from *Hamlet*, Forsythe quietly mulled over the idea: “I’m ready for a serious rewrite of *Hamlet*. I’m not joking, I think we could actually . . . cause a stir . . . .” Noting the lack of detailed knowledge of the play and language barriers among the multinational troupe, Forsythe carried the humor forward, suggesting in-ear feeds: “Wait, I have Elizabeth Lecompte on my earpiece . . . . Elizabeth Lecompte is trying to talk to me . . . ."
With five weeks remaining before the premiere, there was no reason to think that Forsythe’s lighthearted engagement with *Hamlet* would become productive, given his tendency to project through and aggregate dramaturgical impulses. This moment in the process, though, was in fact the event that would catalyze resonances with the devising work the ensemble had carried out up to this point, offering up potentials for abstracted danced dramaturgies from *Hamlet*’s history, plot, and dramaturgy. Additionally, working with reference to *Hamlet* proffered a means of tapping into the commodity value of Shakespeare, which, as Fischlin and Fortier note, “comes of a presence that graces, by association, the cultural artifacts produced in Shakespeare’s wake.”

Returning a moment later to a more serious register, Forsythe commented, “It’d be great because we need rep for London. . . . It’d be fierce.” From this point forward, the devising process shifted, becoming one of invitation and invocation. As the ensemble worked, extracting, abstracting, amalgamating, and translating physical modalities and objects that had been devised but which as yet had had no grounding, except as experimental modes of generating novel movement, *Hamlet* was both included in the rehearsal process and found to be already resident there. In the end, both *Hamlet* and the initial devisings would be sifted together, with productive linkages remaining and non-essentials falling through the sieve of the devising process.

In the following rehearsal weeks, Forsythe began to assign dancers provisional characters while working with the boards in various ways. Several of the experiments from this period provided the roots of scenes in the final piece. In one instance, Forsythe had Riley Watts press Katja Cheraneva under a board, “resuscitating” her as she read one of Ophelia’s texts. In *Sider*, however, it was Watts who came to be identified with Hamlet, who was violently trapped under a board by a second designated Hamlet, Fabrice Mazliah. The character of Ophelia, in turn, informed the performances of at least two women: Roberta Mosca, moving obliviously through her “Sumerian village” with Mazliah present and in several other group scenes, and Jone San Martin, who in one scene billowed among boards scattered across the stage, gingerly matching the edges of her feet to their edges and angles while tracked by a darkly clad figure (Amancio Gonzales) pushing the boards into new obstructing configurations.

Equally notable, though, are the highly representational modes tried in rehearsal but excluded from performance, for instance an “Ophelia” being carried atop a board as if on a funeral bier. The resulting work instead shies away almost entirely from overt Hamletian imagery in favor of what Lehmann, describing stylistic traits of postdramatic theater, delineates as a “retreat of synthesis”: signs of *Hamlet* are only vaguely present in *Sider*, fading in and out of its choreography and *mise en scène*, their connections and meanings obscured by *Sider*’s lack of narrative trajectory, absence of clearly definable characters, and the indistinctness of references to aspects of Shakespeare’s play. This avoidance was facilitated by the abstractness of *Sider*’s initial impetuses—the dancers’ “map” choreographies, the plain brown cardboard sheets—as well as those of the three key facets that were drawn from *Hamlet* to inform *Sider*’s resonant dramaturgical architecture, which I describe in the following sections.
The overarching physical dramaturgy Forsythe drew from the resonance between *Hamlet* and the ensemble's devising processes transcends the individual play to apply more generally to the dramatic cadences of Elizabethan dramatic speech. In interviews, as well as in *Sider*'s program text, Forsythe stresses the common temporality of the rhythmic development of both Shakespearean speech and early classical ballet. Over the middle and late periods of his *oeuvre*, Shakespeare's stricter early blank verse resolves into an increasingly freer prose through variances in iambic pentameter (inversion, feminine endings) and the inclusion of longer, more complex sentences (hypotaxis) extending beyond the single line or beginning or ending mid-line (enjambment). Around this time, first under the patronage of Catherine de’ Medici and King Louis XIII and later under Louis XIV, ballet was developing into an art of complex, rhythmically poetic physical counterpoint across the body of the dancer and in relation to the accompanying music.

Forsythe’s vocal and physical engagement with Shakespearean and balletic rhythms in *Sider* reflects a further trait of postdramatic theater delineated by Lehmann: “musicalization” of performance, in which the qualities of speech and sound are enhanced and emphasized through various means such as polyglossia (the inclusion of different languages), nonstandard speech registers and extended vocal techniques, language-like utterances, nonlinguistic vocal gestures, and the production of complex soundscores through electronic manipulation and superimposition of components. Shifts in the soundscape across the time spans of works contribute to the emergence of an “independent auditory semiotics,” which, in the case of dance performance, divides both performer and audience attention across the two modes of perception, while simultaneously opening a wide range of new visuo-sonic strategies to the choreographer, who in the process becomes as much a “composer” as a dancemaker.

The comprehensibility of vocal renderings of texts from *Hamlet* varies across *Sider*’s scenes. Later in the initial rehearsal working with *Hamlet*’s text, described earlier, Forsythe deliberately drew on the dancers’ lack of familiarity with *Hamlet* as well as the variety of mother tongues among the ensemble’s members. He asked non-native English speakers to try to produce lines of the text after only glancing at them, made text less intelligible by having dancers jostled on boards while speaking, and encouraged performer David Kern to produce a garbled, unclear rendition of the Ghost’s recounting of his murder at Claudius’s hand. Though Forsythe continued to float the prospect of having *Hamlet*’s text on in-ear speakers, the actual decision to play sections of a filmed version of *Hamlet* through in-ears was not made until two and a half weeks later, two weeks prior to the premiere and after experimentation had yielded several different ways of vocalizing. After Forsythe chose Tony Richardson’s version (which also stars Judy Parfitt as Queen Gertrude and Anthony Hopkins as Claudius) for its vibrant speech and action, a series of sonically variant and rhythmically productive scenes were selected from the film. Movement modalities that had been developed in rehearsal were set to these relatively short scene...
sections, looping the audio track when necessary to provide adequate length. Though half of the ensemble wears balaclavas in performance, no effort is made to completely mask the wires of the in-ear speakers or the bodypacks the dancers wear, and the Hamlet soundtrack is obliquely mentioned in Sider’s brief program text.

In most of Sider’s scenes that include spoken text, the performers garble, mutter, or whisper renderings of Hamlet’s lines. However, the performers’ speech retains rhythmic fidelity to the video rendition. In the opening and closing scenes, for example, Kern, who performs five different characters over the course of the work, stands far upstage, unintelligibly but emphatically muttering sections of Hamlet’s soliloquies, distorting diction and exaggerating intonation (Figure 20.2). Stage miking is carefully adjusted to enable his speech to just reach the auditorium but

**Figure 20.2.** David Kern unintelligibly recites a section of Hamlet’s Act 1, Scene 2, soliloquy in Sider.

Photo: Laurent Paillier.
not to be clearly understandable, prompting the audience to crane its ears and attend closely to his voice. In a later scene, Kern mimes the digging of the grave and Hamlet's contemplation of Yorick's skull as he shifts from one side of a board to another, switching inflections and timbres to play both Hamlet and the first Gravedigger (Act 5, Scene 1). In other scenes, however, text is delivered more distinctly, signaling that the work in question might indeed be *Hamlet* and sustaining a tantalizing oscillation of comprehensibility across the work. In one of two early scenes, Laertes' line, “My dread lord, Your leave and favour to return to France,” is garbled relatively clearly by different performers in three repetitions of its Act 1, Scene 2, section. A few scenes later, Kern prances back and forth across the stage, whirling a board and repeating a lively section of Polonius and Hamlet's dialogue from Act 2, Scene 2 (“My lord, I have news to tell you [. . . ]. The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical [. . . ].”).

*Hamlet’s* text is also used to underpin spoken improvisation in a comical scene that occurs late in the work. During a rehearsal, recalling that Hamlet was a student, Forsythe had asked David Kern, Riley Watts, and Ander Zabala to recite simple equations like “One plus one is two” while holding boards and kicking them forward in the rhythm of their speech. Eventually, the dancers began including algebraic formulations—1A, 2B, and so forth—and then, with Forsythe's encouragement, playing on the obvious pun potentials of the soliloquy lines “To be or not to be” and “O, that this too solid flesh would melt.” In performance, these three “mathematicians” wear balaclavas, black velvet breeches, and floppy plastic neck ruffs as they kick their way through a pompous improvised argument of calculative logic: “2B. . . . No, not 2 but 4, 2 plus 2 is 4. . . . Therefore, 4 is before B? . . . Maybe, but 2 B is not 2 C. . . . Oh, I see, but 2 comes before 4. . . . What was the question?” Their spoken lines and coordinated kicks counterpoint and compete with the nonsensical “jazz boards” text intoned and stamped out by the remaining dancers, who sweep slowly in a line around the stage like a human clock arm.

Focusing on the rhythmic and prosodic “music” of Shakespearean speech also afforded Forsythe a new means to extend his investigation of spoken text as a form of soundscore, as described in the opening of this chapter. However, whereas the text's rhythm and prosody guided the execution of *Woolf Phrase*’s set fundamental dance phrase and its improvised variations, *Sider* explored a far wider variety of choreomusical relationships. As noted, at no time during the slightly over one-hour-long piece does the audience hear the video soundtrack. Instead, in addition to the speaking dancers and their footfall, they hear Tom Willems’ score—a tense, irregular bass ostinato pulse for most of *Sider*’s first half, followed by scenes underscored by heavy synthesized crescendi, quiet evocative atmospheres, or no accompaniment. In *Sider*’s scenes that do include in-ear soundscore feed, the synchrony of the dancers’ actions indicates the soundtrack in several ways. In *Sider*’s second scene, for example, the ensemble silently takes up positions onstage with boards and then begins kicking them forward through the stage space in tight synchrony, with the sounds
of their feet and the punctuating slams of the boards against the floor (which mark the ends of sentences) closely echoing Williamson and Parfitt’s accelerating argument as Hamlet berates his mother following Polonius’s stabbing (3.4). The dialogue heard by the dancers is rendered to the audience as percussive blows of coordinated pattern and emphasis. In the penultimate section of Sider, the ensemble stands behind their boards facing the audience, “playing” the rhythm of the same video scene on the boards’ upper edges with their hands as if the boards were keyed instruments before segueing into the opening of Hamlet’s Act 3, Scene 1, soliloquy, which they eventually also garble in a quiet murmur.

In other scenes, however, rather than echoing the text on their in-ear speakers, duets and trios of dancers move in counterpoint to it, each creating an additional visuo-sonic “voice” through their choices of timing, movement scale, and dynamics. This counterpointed engagement with sound not only contrasts the organization of the unison scenes, but also conflates attempts to discern structure: the variance between dancers’ individual interpretations of the counterpoint produces sequences that are sometimes distinct but sometimes rhythmically reflective of each other. In one such scene, Fabrice Mazliah is shadowed by two “watchmen” (Ander Zabala and Brigel Gjoka) who might be construed as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as he counterpoints and occasionally stumbles to the sound of a section of Claudius’s speech in Act 1, Scene 2. Such scenes could easily be perceived as freely improvised, a view that would be supported by their lack of relation to Willems’s unevenly pulsing score (which the dancers are in fact unable to hear when the in-ear feed is being played). However, the in-ear guidance is made clear in these contrapuntal scenes by Forsythe’s added strategy of giving spoken impromptu directives himself to the dancers via microphone, creating sudden unison freezes or turns of the head, phased restarts, unison claps, and set transitions between modes of movement, such as “formal” (court-balletic) feet and arms in a men’s trio (Figure 20.3). The audience is not informed of this strategy; however, those sitting near enough to the technical desk were likely to hear Forsythe quietly speaking into his microphone.

Just as rhythm pervades the dancers’ physical and vocal performance, Sider’s mise en scène is also rhythmic along several lines. The work is composed in “sonata” form, bracketed at its beginning and end by a repeated scene with the Hamlet-Ophelia pairing of Mazliah and Mosca, respectively followed or preceded by a percussive rhythmic ensemble scene (the board-kicking scene and the boards-as-instruments scene, described in the preceding). Two large group scenes punctuate the range of scenes with smaller casts, and there is an interplay of scenes with and without speaking. Finally, the large tubular light object (created by artist Spencer Finch for Forsythe’s Three Atmospheric Studies) hanging above the stage pulses throughout the work’s first half, obscuring the dancers over and over again as it repeatedly fades to black and snaps back on. Taken together, the changing rhythms of dancing, vocalizations, soundscape, and lighting collide within Sider’s scenes, producing patternings of sight and sound that offer coherence and clarity for only brief, unanticipated moments.
Given the dimensions of the boards, obscuration had been in play as an improvisational strategy since the first rehearsals with them. In one complex task that would become key to two large group scenes in *Sider*, the group improvised with unshared and fluid rule systems within which the boards could be relationally positioned and moved in the space, used to obscure others from one's own view or that of the audience, or both. Forsythe was very pleased with the attention and presence manifested in this modality, noting,

The only thing that saves it from being utter total crap is that I see you looking for someone else. . . . What makes it really interesting [is] if we see you going “Oh I can do this, I can’t do that” and you trying to strategize with the rules—“Oh I have to wait, I have to slow down”—and your thinking processes—that’s interesting because we see you going through something. The boards aren’t interesting at all—you are interesting, going through those processes. . . . As soon as you’re focusing, you come into focus, but then the building [of formations with the boards] comes into focus [as well] because it obscures you sometimes. So you’re obscured and there, and obscured and there, and that way I thought there was a real dilation in the presences. . . .

**Hamlet the Obscure**

**Figure 20.3.** Josh Johnson, Cyril Baldy and Brigel Gjoka producing improvised “formal” feet and arms in *Sider*.

Photo: Julieta Cervantes.
develop the rule, you’ve made a decision and you’re going to have to live with it, and you’re in the situation that you’ve created by making the rules. And that gives a different form of awareness than had it been a really complex choreography. . . . There’s a complexity that no one could choreograph; no one could have traditionally choreographed that situation.

Forsythe linked *Hamlet’s* dramaturgy to this modality through reference to Hamlet’s strategizing and obscuring of his motivations. Seeking to confirm the Ghost’s existence and his belief that Claudius had killed his father, and suspicious that Claudius may be seeking to have him killed as well, Hamlet opts to “put an antic disposition on” in order to deflect attention, as he seeks to establish who among the court are friends and who are foes, also staging the play-within-the-play with the aim of drawing an implicating response from Claudius. In *Sider*’s performance of the rule-system-based scene described earlier, Forsythe shapes the improvisation in real time via microphone, giving directives such as “Find a friend, find an enemy. . . . Keep strategizing, change your rules, keep trying to guess what everyone else is going to do but don’t let them know what you are going to do.” There is a deep linkage here to the practice of ensemble improvisation, which thrives on what Forsythe, citing the poet sage Lao-Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, refers to as the “don’t know mind”—a valuable state of uncertainty and response, which, in improvisation, is maintained through the generation of the unknown, the obscuration of intentions, the surprising action. Inherently subversive, the offering of the unknown and unforeseeable to one’s co-performers heightens attention and injects energy, allowing them, and in turn one’s own responding and responsive self, to be “taken by surprise.”

As with rhythm, *Sider’s* mise en scène and scenic arc are also permeated with instances of obscurity. Scenes follow one after another with no clear throughline, while the *Hamlet*-derived and more abstract characterizations shift among the balaclava-hooded performers, who project a stealthy, calculating mien. The boards are kicked, maneuvered, played as instruments, strewn about the stage, and built into formations, becoming a field of ice floes, a skirt, a castle, a rampart. *Non sequitur* actions occur at random moments, such as abrupt staggering entrances and exits of performers, or Mazlia sitting down to re-tie his shoe in the middle of a duet. The “jazz board” text, spoken loudly by almost the full ensemble, cannot be clearly heard by the audience over the din of the blustering “mathematicians” and Willems’s oddly blithe scoring.

Further, in one striking ensemble scene, Forsythe extends the dramaturgy of obscurity to include himself as live director and co-performer. In this scene, as the ensemble again interacts with boards, Forsythe “plays Hamlet” himself by giving the ensemble a new and maddeningly high-speed, confusing stream of absurd, contrary, and even impossible directives over the microphone for each performance. Examples include asking them to move northward (in an unfamiliar theater), to lie down while jumping, to form a sandwich of boards with all of their shoes inside, or telling them to leave the stage but then immediately demanding that they come back, then leave again, and so on. As he points out, this also puts the entire ensemble into the role of Hamlet: hearing voices and not knowing the right thing to do.
Abstracted Analogies

The duplicity of *Hamlet*'s characters’ obscuring behavior, Forsythe noted, is paralleled by linguistic structures of analogy found throughout Shakespeare’s play. In a further resonance, Forsythe viewed these as linking to an idea that has long been central to his approach to ballet. In his CD-ROM, *Improvisation Technologies: A Tool for the Analytic Dance Eye*, Forsythe describes the principle of kinetic isometry as “ways of imagining the geometric relationships between different parts of the body as they move.” In other words, kinetic isometries describe parallels in the form, trajectory, or dynamics of body parts, such as the upward sweep of a curved arm and leg in the ballet step *attitude piqué*. In Forsythe’s improvisational aesthetic, this principle opens each danced moment to manifold anal-ogical options—a field of possibility and choice in which, essentially, the “don’t know mind” thinks through the body.

This thought underpinned a further deepening and resonant interweaving of Sider’s danced dramaturgies late in the rehearsal process. Three weeks prior to the premiere, Forsythe noted that *Hamlet*'s Act 2, Scene 2 soliloquy, in addition to being a meta-theatrical commentary, contains this passage:

> What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her? What would he do, Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have?

The analogous relationships couched in these lines—of the Player to Hecuba and of Hamlet to the Player—though seemingly obvious at face value, are not as straightforward as they appear. Nonetheless, they offered a productive textual rhythm and dramaturgical impulse to Forsythe, who reminded the dancers of an analogical improvisational strategy used earlier by the Ballett Frankfurt ensemble, known as “where it is/where it was.” He drew a further parallel between *Hamlet*—a revenge play—and the first section of his *Three Atmospheric Studies*, recalling scenes in which the dancers, enacting a mother’s fragmented memory of a wartime event, worked with a “model of retribution” in the form of a partnering task referred to as “you do to me, I do to you.” He pointed out the similarities of both of these improvisational modes to the analogic oppositions in the most famous of lines from *Hamlet*, “To be or not to be,” reducing Hamlet’s expressed dilemma to the formulation “is, and isn’t” and noting that this statement also reflects the ghostly status of Hamlet’s father. Similar textual parallels developed in a subsequent rehearsal were used as ten projections that appeared at seemingly random moments on the black back wall during *Sider*. These included *she is to them as they are to us, he is to that as this is to him, these are to him as they are to us, what are these to them?* and—at *Sider*’s close—*they were, and they weren’t*. As Forsythe explained in a talk with Jennifer Homans, these texts also function as a meta-theatrical device, imbricating the audience as participants in the performance event:
Everybody’s busy interpreting—So I thought what if I said, in a kind of very very abstracted way … *I am to you as you are to her*—What does that mean? Like that, and so it brings up a question as opposed to a subject. . . . You’re asking what is my relationship to this person onstage? . . . I try to triangulate the audience into the Spiel [play].

Finally, two weeks before the premiere, Forsythe developed a trio with Ester Balfe, Ander Zabala, and Brigel Gjoka, asking Balfé to improvise using her map material while Zabala and Gjoka, referred to in rehearsal as “guards,” were to remain as close to her as possible and attempt to wrongly predict her actions. As she moved decisively but unpredictably, with her partners aiming to stay near but not be hit by her as she moved, Forsythe recited another more strongly rhythmical analogical structure from Act 5, Scene 2, via the dancers’ in-ears, asking them to use its rhythms and prosodic rise and fall to guide their timings and movement choices in a manner similar to the use of text in *Woolf Phrase*:

> If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be.

By tasking the men with risky predictive decisions, this “avoidance trio” obliquely reflects the idea of the “inevitable” that Forsythe cites as the starting concept of the work, as well as dramaturgies within *Hamlet*: Claudius’s attempted avoidance of Hamlet’s retribution, Gertrude’s avoidance of Hamlet’s wrath, and Hamlet’s avoidance of detection as he seeks to vindicate his suspicions about Claudius’s role in his father’s demise. This is an especially lucid example of how the broader constellation of informing concepts—rhythm, obscuration, strategy, avoidance, analogy—coalesced within *Sider*’s task-based improvisational modes, corroborating dancer Dana Caspersen’s reflection that “every point within [Forsythe’s pieces] contains the essence of the whole.”

In Richardson’s filmed *Hamlet*, the ghost of Hamlet’s father manifests to the audience as a ringing resonance and a blinding light, its voice a low and echoing murmur that fades in and out when it speaks. Apprehending his father’s form, Hamlet is struck by an awful uncertainty about whether he can believe what he apprehends and how to react. Frustrated by events he cannot or does not want to understand, his way forward is to try to determine the truth of the Ghost’s message. In *Sider*, Hamlet resonates and whispers like the voice of the Ghost, growing at times clearer and at others fainter, hinting that Shakespeare’s play is indeed at the heart of the piece. However, the pervasiveness and manifold forms of this presence, couched in the danced dramaturgies of the work, remained the privileged domain of the choreographer and those who performed the work.

In this, *Sider* remains obscure, leaving its audience, like Hamlet, not knowing what to do in an interpretive sense. Forsythe is fond of recounting a story from early in his career in which a woman told him that she was unsure how to approach his works and asked for his advice. His reply: “Just watch.” Given *Sider*’s elusive Shakespearean dramaturgies,
his comment might be aptly amended to: mark the ghost of Hamlet and the haunting resonances that emerge, shimmer, and fade into obscurity as Sider speaks to you.

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank Robert Shaughnessy for his supportive insight and William Forsythe for clarifying communications.

Notes

1. “Sohlenquietschen frei nach Shakespeare,” Deutschlandfunk Radio, June 17, 2011. In actuality, scenes were selected from Tony Richardson’s 1969 production, with Nicol Williamson in the title role and Old Hamlet represented as an unseen echoing ghost.
3. Developed in 2008 by Forsythe Company dancer David Kern, Piecemaker is a tool for capturing and cataloging rehearsal processes in real time by time-stamping events with descriptions as they unfold. During this period, the author was responsible for recording and cataloging. See https://github.com/motionbank.
4. Forsythe has, however, periodically returned to his earlier, more classical choreographic style, for example in works such as Opus 31 (1998), Pas/Parts (1999), the solo Two Part Invention (2009), the duet Rearray (2011), and Blake Works (2016).
6. As Forsythe clarifies, however, in numerous cases the performers vary set texts in performance. Email correspondence, September 5, 2017.
7. Prue Lang, who originated one of the two roles in Woolf Phrase, provides a detailed description of this process in her essay “Thinking, Motion and Language,” http://sarma.be/docs/2970 (originally published in German in Gerald Siegmund, ed., William Forsythe: Denken in Bewegung [Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2004]).
11. Forsythe and Lecompte, public discussion, 2011.
15. Forsythe’s term for the results of this method, which he first used when developing Sleepers Guts (1996). Email correspondence, September 5, 2017.
16. Forsythe had recently visited in the ensemble’s lager and had found materials from ALIE/NA(C)TION that had also been predicated on mapping (author’s fieldnotes). See also


18. Forsythe and Lecompte, public discussion, 2011.


20. William Forsythe, telephone discussion with the author, October 26, 2015.


22. It is important to note that this and other descriptions of the dancers’ tasks are general sketches of the improvisational modes. In addition to the modes being refined by additional suggestions in actual practice, the dancers were also at liberty to elaborate their own idiosyncratic relationships to the modes while performing them. This level of individual input largely occurred without verbal communication with others, including Forsythe.

23. In his 2003 work Decreation, Forsythe also “fragmented” the principal characters of Anne Carson’s novel The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos, distributing the speaking roles of the wife, the husband, his lover, and the story’s narrator across different members of the ensemble.


27. Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, 91.

28. Billy Bultheel and Elizabeth Waterhouse, engaged as dramaturgical assistants, helped isolate scenes within the film that offered a range of different rhythms and timbres.

29. This in-ear audio score was “played” live during each performance by ensemble composer and repetiteur David Morrow.

30. The Forsythe Company’s full program quote for Sider:

   The rhythmical inflections of Elizabethan theater, like those of classical dance, have been sustained by a tradition of transmission from performer to performer for over 400 years. In Sider, these intricate patterns of speech are communicated to the performers via the sound-track of a filmed version of a late 16th century tragedy. The adherence of the performers’ actions to this vocal score instigates disquieting configurations of incongruous musicality that underscore the drama’s themes of analogy and obscuration.


32. In Richardson’s filmed version, the text elides several lines.

33. Like many of Forsythe’s works, Sider is structured as a set order of improvisational modalities, entrances and exits, and cued transitions between “scenes.” Scene length, however, is determined in real time by Forsythe, who “live directs” each performance by prompting the stage manager to cue entrances from the wings, using a small handheld...
light to cue transitions onstage, cueing sound or light changes, or—as for Sider’s ensemble and a few individual roles in earlier works—through use of in-ear speakers. The length of Sider varied from performance to performance due to Forsythe’s live direction. However, the piece’s typical running time was one hour, six minutes, with variance of seldom more than two minutes.


35. “Watchmen,” the term used in rehearsal and performance for this scene of Sider, may be a reference to the DC comic book series published in 1986–1987 and adapted as a film in 2009. Forsythe never made this connection explicit to me; however, there are uncanny parallels between the plots of Watchmen and Hamlet.

36. Forsythe, who has commented on his role as an additional performer in his works in several interviews, resolutely refused to work in enclosed technical booths during this and many other works, instead cueing and “conducting” performances in full view and within earshot of spectators seated at the back of auditoriums. It is worth questioning whether his performance was meant to be part of the audience’s experience.


39. In one memorable instance, Forsythe instructed the dancers via in-ears to become intensely interested in Fabrice Mazliah and follow him as closely as possible around the stage, then told them to be dismissive of him, saying “Just leave him—just say ‘Fuck you, Fabrice!’” Onstage, Fabrice turned and shouted, “Fuck you!” at the ensemble, as those of us listening to the in-ear feed of soundtrack and Forsythe’s instructions choked back laughter.


41. As Alex Newell points out, Hamlet confounds the Player’s very real tears with his acting the role of Hecuba, while simultaneously equating his own situation with that of Hecuba. The soliloquy’s analogical questions reflect an “intellectual confusion in the heat of emotion,” blurring distinctions not only between the Player as performer and as private person, but also between the relation between life and art more generally. The Soliloquies in Hamlet: The Structural Design (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), 60–66.

42. Quoted in “On Ballet.”


Bibliography
