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Dramaturg's note:

Still failing after all these years: William Forsythe's *Yes We Can't*

Dr Freya Vass-Rhee

(Published in English, German, Greek, French, Spanish, and Italian)

William Forsythe once joked with the ensemble that the title of this work means “Yes we can’t make up our minds how this piece should be.” An unrelentingly restless dramaturg, Forsythe is virtually obsessed with change, with asking what *e/se* something can be. Barbara Johnson’s essay “Nothing Fails Like Success,” long a touchstone text for Forsythe, argues for the prioritization of the thrill of intellectual discovery over the content discovered. Johnson’s critique of the institutionalization of analytical approaches simultaneously delineates the productive space of choreographic research within which Forsythe chooses to work.

The version of *Yes We Can't* presented in Antwerp, which was created in Barcelona in April 2010, is actually a complete reworking of the original production of *Yes We Can't*, which premiered in Dresden in March 2008 and was subsequently performed in several other cities. Though the two versions are dramaturgically distinct, they are linked to each other, as well as to numerous other Forsythe works dating back over 25 years, by return engagements with the idea of failure.

The original *Yes We Can't* was in fact spawned by a technological failure. A prototype device, constructed of conveyor belts on which text could be inscribed, had been developed to serve as choreographic impetus for the 2008 premiere. Though the device functioned during initial testing, it malfunctioned in rehearsal due to the effects of gravity on its parts over sustained periods. Working with partial reference to the prototype’s failure, Forsythe developed a wry mixture of physical and verbal non sequitur which explored meaning-making as an emergent factor of production and reception, as well as the deficit produced when dance is translated into discourse: yes, we can’t turn dancing into language because of the losses which occur in the process.

The device’s failure demonstrates a striking similarity to the physical dysfunction that inheres but is typically masked in classical ballet. Like all physical technologies, bodies in motion are subject to the vicissitudes of the interaction of performative demand and the limits of the performing device – in this case, the body of the mover. In spite of these constraints, or perhaps as a result of them, our fascination with limits leads us to push performance to the point of failure.

As Forsythe has noted, balletic steps and poses are idealized conceptual constructs whose translation onto bodies in space and time renders them realizable only as temporarily sustainable approximations. The classical dancer thus moves within a time-space laden with errors, aiming to perform perfectly but instead pragmatically “failing well,” compartmentalizing the physical and psychological effects of mishap in order to sustain illusion. In his 1986 work *Die Befragung von Robert Scott* (The Questioning of Robert Scott), Forsythe drew an explicit parallel between this inherent balletic failure and another technologically determined failure: Scott’s expedition to the South Pole

which, in spite of a highly trained crew and the most advanced equipment of the age, ended unsuccessfully and ultimately resulted in the demise of the explorers.

In *Robert Scott*, the equation of fallible actor plus physical world served as a wellspring for the proliferation of resultant movement. The current version of *Yes We Can't* reprises Forsythe's engagement with the idea of "failing well" by performatively exposing our relationship with shortcomings and making it the overt subject of the work. Out of these dance-making processes emerged new questions – Why are we intrigued by the precariousness of performance? Does good failure constitute success? What is the value of the best of one's worst? From these questions arose new choreographic propositions, which, like all research results, point toward more questions. And which offer the restless mind a new springboard for thinking otherwise. Can we say that this will be Forsythe's last engagement with failure? Yes, we can't.