Citation for published version


DOI

Link to record in KAR

http://kar.kent.ac.uk/68484/

Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version. Users are advised to check http://kar.kent.ac.uk for the status of the paper. Users should always cite the published version of record.

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact: researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF POETRY AND THE VERY, VERY GOOD IDEA

FREYA VASS

If you have only looked at the exterior of classical dance, how can you say what the limits of the representation of ballet are?

I ain’t sayin’ I’m better, no better than u

But if u want 2 play with me, u better learn the rules.

CONFESSIONS OF A KICK-ASS BALLERINA

Like so many little American girls, I was enrolled in dance classes to ostensibly help me learn to be graceful, poised, musical, and disciplined. Jennifer Fisher speaks of two ways that girls come to ballet—the “princess” and the “tomboy” route—and I was definitely the latter. I loved the logic of rules, rhythm, and form in my ballet and tap classes; much more than that, though, I relished the speed and
trajectory. Delicacy and decorum were curious and nice enough, pointe shoes and
tutus were weird and fun, adagio was boring and frustrating, but the feeling of moving
was intoxicating. Corrections in ballet class seemed intended to hem in that feeling:
be correct, careful, softer, don’t throw it away. I bore up under them, did my best, and
waited for the good stuff: the turns, the allegros, and the big jumps.

Meanwhile, my technique improved. Later at advanced levels, teachers
revealed ballet technique as a practice of expansion, stretch, and deep awareness of
the body and its energies. The framework of picture-book form came into dialogue
with possibilities of dynamic range, reach, and chance-taking. I revealed in this elastic
play and testing of limits, dancing with annoying energy. The other girls rolled their
eyes and said I was “too much.” But the boys and I cut up in class together, trying to
outdo each other and ourselves and joking privately about the girls with “Gisellitis.”
We kicked ass in ballet class and it seemed like we were having a much better time
than they were. As a professional dancer, I was delicate only insofar as necessary,
aspiring more to be a Snow than a Swan Queen, more a Kitri than a Sylphide. The
classics were a necessary part of company repertories, but the drive and sweep of
works by Balanchine and “modern” ballets that today might be called contemporary
were what I relished.

In 1983, two years out of ballet school and into the profession, I was
astonished and a bit baffled by Forsythe’s Say Bye Bye (1980), with its huge abstract
car and suited men partnering women in black dresses and heels Apache-style, diving,
flailing and screaming to a sound collage of Little Richard, Roberto Delgado and
electronic sound. Five years later at the Schauspielhaus in Frankfurt, I saw a mixed
program including In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated (1987) and The Vile Parody of
Address (1988); the following morning, I watched the company rehearse Forsythe’s
raucous musical Isabelle’s Dance (1986). The Ballett Frankfurt became my dream company, with the Dutch National Ballet in second place because their diverse repertory included Forsythe works. I began hanging out in Frankfurt like many others, watching the company work and perform and hoping for a chance to dance with them.

I continued to follow the company after I stopped dancing, noticing that as the repertoire continued to expand, ballet seemed to be less and less in evidence. When I read that Forsythe, discussing his staging of darkness in 1995, said “I like to hide, to make uncertain what takes place onstage (. . .) and to extend what I call the poetry of disappearance,” I wondered whether ballet itself was also disappearing in his works. A decade later, having been invited to work with The Forsythe Company as an embedded dramaturg while researching the ensemble, I found that for Forsythe, ballet remained a body of physical knowledge that harbors seemingly innumerable concepts to explore through movement. As in 1995, it was still "a very, very good idea, which gets pooh-poohed by one group of people, and overinvested by another.”

Below, I first reflect on three ideas about energetic practice that underpin perceptions of classical and later forms of ballet. Following this, I track the distance covered by Forsythe with the Ballett Frankfurt (1984-2004) and The Forsythe Company (2005-2015) since the mid-1990s, citing examples from performances and the ensembles’ embodied research processes to discuss how Forsythe’s later oeuvre, despite the disappearance of its classical poetics, remains deeply informed by aspects of ballet practice that are contingent on, but independent from, its visual and temporal aesthetics.

POETRY’S DISAPPEARANCE:
ATTACK, SPREZZATURA, FIERCENESS
When writing about ballet, particularly about the performance of female dancers, critics frequently refer to “attack,” which dance scholar Anna Paskevska describes as the conscious harnessing of potential energy and its releasing transformation into movement. As a desirable performance quality, attack is often a facet of classical roles linked to narratives of otherness: Kitri’s fiery exoticism in Don Quixote, animals or magical creatures like the Firebird, or evil characters like Sleeping Beauty’s Carabosse or Swan Lake’s von Rothbart. Most commonly called for in petit and grand allegro, attack provides a means to display versatility in double ballerina roles, for example the Black Swan’s sharpness in contrast to the Swan Queen’s melting lyricism, or the way that Kitri’s variation in the Kingdom of the Dryads sparkles with a restrained dynamic that links the dream world with the ballet’s stereotyped Spain. The idea of attack is intrinsically linked to Balanchine, who taught his company to dance “on top of the beat” by anticipating rather than reacting to music This renders positions cleanly finished on accents so that they can be held or further extended. Softer and more lyrical moments in Balanchine’s choreography provide contrast and counterbalance, framing and offsetting attack’s impact and enhancing a dynamic of “coolness” that Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Sally Banes have traced to black and jazz aesthetics.

More generally, attack—the execution of movements with energy and gusto—is a determined plunge into and through movement, a curated engagement of power and intention carried out within a technique defined by restraint and careful attention to form and music. Not all instances of attack are big, bold, or fast initiation of steps;
the “peeling” of a foot from fifth position into coupé to initiate a développé can be a microcosm of impact, while a slow relevé failli or the arcing of an attitude renversé offer opportunities for more sustained lushness. Attack is in essence an artistic timbre, a distinct and pervasive facet of virtuosity that manifests as a discriminating approach to the modulation of effort and the display of commitment to movement. Attack manifests as a perceptible quality through durative re-presentation; a single instance does not register as such and can even call attention to its lack in an overall performance. Dynamic by definition, it relies on contrasts of speed and effort, and occasionally on calculated surprise for its impact. In rehearsal, dancers and coaches negotiate attack on a step-by-step basis in reference to the style, work, role, and variation at hand, calibrating its strength and contours to the specific performance venue as well when necessary. Too much attack might be deemed too “pointed” or “blatant,” as in Judith Mackrell’s 2007 evaluation of Gillian Murphy’s Black Swan;” too little and the dancing appears “soft,” as in Alastair Macaulay’s assessment of the Bolshoi’s 2014 performance of Balanchine’s Jewels, or the role or the work judged as “flat,” as an anonymous reviewer deemed a 2015 performance of Agon by Dance Theater of Harlem.

With the exception of tragic figures and ballet’s bad guys, the classical/neoclassical ideal is dancing that is performed with lightness, precision, and evident pleasure. In this context, attack reads as abandon and sometimes as “throwaway” bravura. Heidi Gilpin, Forsythe’s dramaturg in the late 1980s and early 1990s, highlights this constellation of qualities as a general characteristic of movement performance and a specific feature of classical ballet, noting in Forsythe’s works of the period “an overwhelming feeling of sprezzatura, of doing something for the sheer pleasure of doing it and intoxicating everyone who witnesses it to consider
things in a different light.” Renaissance courtier and author Baldassare Castiglione coined the term *sprezzatura* to capture the strategic disguise of thought and effort in speech or action, which he considered to be not just the ultimate demonstration of courtly grace but also a means by which shortcomings and intentions could be strategically obfuscated:

But having already considered many times from whence this grace is born, leaving aside those who have it from the stars, I find an absolutely universal rule which seems to me more valuable than any other in human things that are done or said, and that is to avoid as much as possible, as if a rough and dangerous rock, affectation; and perhaps to coin a new word, use in all things a certain *sprezzatura* that hides craft and shows that what one does and says is done without effort and almost without thinking. From this, I believe, grace is verily derived; because everyone knows the difficulty of rare and well done things, and in this, facility generates immense marveling; though to the contrary, straining, one might say pulling at the hair, gives total disgrace and causes each thing to be little esteemed, however great it may be."

Though commonly translated as nonchalance or disdain, at root *sprezzatura* (*dis*-prezzare) connotes a contravention of cost—a de-pricing/de-prizing strategy of making the effortful look delightfully effortless which, paradoxically, increases value through a poetics of mystery and awe. Ballet’s contrived ease, the gently inclined heads and sweeping draped robes in Raphael’s paintings, Glenn Gould humming his way through Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, and the artful imperfection of loosely bound hair or a turned up jacket collar all belie the actual thought and effort behind the results. As an engagement with society, *sprezzatura* commands from a position of seeming *dis*engagement with intention; an expression of competence, confidence, and
self-pleasure that takes liberties with mores of restraint and humility.

Like attack, *sprezzatura* also inflects along lines of character, age, gender, class, and emotional state in classical ballets. The poetics of the ballerina and *danseur noble* are counterpointed by the jagged, rougher musculature of lower class or supernatural characters—bumpkins, evil fairies, hags, or monsters—or are subsumed in bouts of passion or madness. However, even in the case of ballet’s rougher characters, the form’s generalized lightness of footfall, softness of *port de bras*, curving arch and inclination of the head and torso in *épaulement*, and insouciant choreomusical *cantilena* (literally “little song”) convince us that we are witnessing something marvelously ineffable and easy, rather than the results of extensive training and hard, meticulous physical labor. Though execution in neoclassical ballets is still largely nonchalant in its projected ease and decorous comportment, a more energetic *sprezzatura* comes to the fore. The increased reach, speed, and complexity of the style demands a heightened daring and risk of its dancers, while jazz-inflected elements like jutting hips, cocked wrists, tactical lowerings of carriage, and spatially broader attack strategically transgress the postural and gestural conventions of the classical codex. The result is a vigor that shifts performance from classicism’s firm engagement with balletic conventions towards more responsive, spontaneous execution.

It is in ballets that are considered contemporary that an even more defiantly energetic dynamic emerges, reading as a gutsy, muscular commitment to moving, a possession within the musical moment: a fearless fierceness. The term *fierce* has developed a double sense: its common definition indicates intense, violent, or ferocious aggression, joltingly abrupt or destructive power, and strong heartfelt intensity, while its slang usage, which has been strongly inflected by gay culture,
denotes something “very, very good” in terms of quality, boldness, coolness, or chutzpah. Within drag culture, fierceness plays out as a queer other to white heteronormativity’s restrained composure, a savage self-styling expressed through superlative, over-the-top performativity. Madison Moore’s analysis, which revolves around Tina Turner’s fashion and onstage performance from the late 1960s onward and his experience embodying her, cites fierceness as a specifically queer, black, diva-esque aesthetic tied to “virtuosic styling of the body” in terms not only of dress but also through movement:

By fierceness, I mean a spectacular way of being in the world—a transgressive over-performance of the self through aesthetics. This over-performance works simultaneously to change the dynamics of a room by introducing one’s sartorial, creative presence into the space as well as it is [sic] to crystallize, highlight, and push back against limiting identity categories.

For Moore, the fierce performer is strategically and unapologetically transgressive, a self-actualizing, game-changing force. The intensity and excessive nature of fierce performance, coupled with the unbridled generosity with which it is offered, renders it beyond resistance:

fierceness emerges as a constant flux that pushes boundaries because of its sheer force. When something is moving, say a falling object out of the sky [sic], one is inclined to move out of the way because the object falls with such force that one could be injured if hit. Fierceness—in this case Tina Turner—is that falling object. Fierceness is cognizant of its own force, of its own disruptive strategy.

By contrasting the savage action and vocality of “the hardest working woman in show business” with Diana Ross’s contemporaneous cool, fluid demureness, Moore
highlights Turner’s exultant, excessive flesh-and-bone expressivity, her jubilant revelry in her identity and impact, and how this manifested as an eruptive flouting of propriety through her sweat, hyperkineticism, and unbridled pleasure. Despite her performative generosity, however, she remains self-possessed, her own woman; like sprezzatura, Turner’s fierceness is also a mask, but one which instead of seeking to dazzle or obfuscate effort “draws attention to the fact that it simultaneously is and is not a mask.”

In acknowledging the felt experience of movement and performance without seeking to deny the effort through which it manifests, balletic fierceness reveals the practice’s excessive embodied intensity, rather than obscuring it. The fierce dancer moves like they mean it, projecting a self-assurance that is rooted in their expertise, strength, fearlessness, power, and identity. Whether in music, fashion, or dance, however, fierceness does not exist in a vacuum but is deeply dependent on convention for its counterposition. As such, contemporary ballet’s fierce aesthetic of excess in form, intention, and energy are anything but iconoclastic. Ballet’s historical conventions of movement and decorum have provided an elastic foundation for choreographic thought and change over and beyond the twentieth century, and the shift toward fierceness in ballet performance, rather than a subversion of codes, is instead a move towards ownership and expression of the lived experience of dancing ballet. As a bodied expression of expertise and confidence that manifests both as self-possession and as an excess of energy, movement, and style at or seemingly over the brink of control, fierceness demands a register of virtuosity that makes it possible not just to navigate but to triumphantly and unapologetically work it, displaying performative opulence through the showing of muscle, heat, skill and will.

Additionally, though, the contemporary dancer also displays a fierce pleasure
in motion. Writing on expert performance in sport and dance, Jonathan Cole and Barbara Montero claim that dancing provides aesthetic pleasure not only through moving in ways that feel “right” (e.g. beautifully or gracefully) but also through the immersive experience of perceiving one’s own movement. Moving expertly affords the affective proprioceptive experience of “the successful translation of intention into action...the simple ineffable pleasure of, and of being in, action.”

Though Cole and Montero emphasize that some movement pleasure may arise from a sensed assurance that intended movements will occur as planned, expert balletic skill affords a specifically performative leeway: the dancer addresses the technical framework while optimizing their energetic immersion and pleasure within choreographic structures that challenge them to tap their skills to the fullest, to take and respond to risks, and to both lose and find themselves in the moment.

[Insert Vass-Rhee-Fig 1 here]

Is contemporary ballet classical ballet’s queer other by virtue of its fierceness? Or, evoking Fisher’s observation that the genre of ballet inverts Peggy Phelan’s marked/unmarked gender categorization, is the contemporary genre a shift of ballet’s feminine aesthetics towards the “macho” or the autonomous “maverick”? Contra to Foucault, the fierce body of the drag queen is no more “docile” than is that of the expert performer of ballet. Each performs both within and beyond established corporeal standards of display and embodied experience, in contingent but transgressive dialogue with normative representations of their respective domains, testing the restraining power of norms by performing beyond convention and expectation. Crucially, however, contemporary approaches to ballet both enable and reveal what sprezzatura conceals: the skill, resolve, daring, and extravagant physicality of both its female and male practitioners, which manifests in
choreography that permits women to both display and own athleticism and grit, and men flamboyant grace and sensuality. In the process, classicism’s illusory poetics of effortless skill and graciousness does not so much disappear as become both a counterpole to and a facet of this fierce other. Fully committed energy and attention to form pervade both earlier and later ballet styles; when unbridled and displayed as fierceness, the “too much” of bold physical engagement and pleasure in moving might eclipse and transgress perceived notions of decorum and propriety. But the fierce dancer was always there behind the veneer of the classical, sharply attuned to and relishing the body’s energies, times, and spaces, and the “very, very good idea” of ballet.

(STILL) THE VERY, VERY GOOD IDEA

What happened, then, when Forsythe’s choreographic style diverged from the “whackathon” aesthetics of Steptext, New Sleep, and In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated and ballet appeared to be disappearing? Throughout the 1990s, Forsythe continued to make new “ballet ballets,” including a cycle created in 1995-96 designated as “Six Counter Points” made up of The The (co-choreographed with Dana Caspersen), Duo, Trio, Four Point Counter, Approximate Sonata, and The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude (the latter two under the heading “Two Ballets in the Manner of the Late 20th Century”); Opus 31 for the Ballett Frankfurt (1998); and Pas/Parts for the Paris Opera Ballet (1999, recently revived as Pas/Parts 2016 and Pas/Parts 2018 for the San Francisco Ballet and Boston Ballet, respectively). During
the early 1990s, however, Sulcas noted a change in the presence of balletic form as Forsythe “moved away from recontextualizing classical dance and toward finding new ways of generating movement.” As she notes, *The Loss of Small Detail* (1991 version)

perhaps marked the moment of creative change in its setting of a first half (*the second detail*) motivated by balletic certainties, and a second informed by notions of disintegration and dissolution…Looking like a ballet turned inside out, it offers—as do *As a Garden in This Setting* and the haunting *Quintett* (1993)—the boneless bodies of the dancers in a continually dissolving and evolving movement that can be centered on or refracted from one body part to another, calling up some sort of archaic moment of predance.

In *Quintett*, she similarly notes that “balletic form is visible but the steps themselves are not, as if their dynamics have been erased, leaving mere vestiges of their shapes.”

while in other works of this period, like *Sleepers Guts* (1996), *Hypothetical Stream* (1997), and *small void* (1998),

the slippery, dislocated, densely coordinated movement style may initially appear to have little to do with ballet’s formal positions and clear lines, but his dancers’ classically trained bodies hold that clarity and articulation within the movement, keeping ballet as a shimmering, elusive physical presence—a reference point to which he constantly returns.

By focusing on the visual form of Forsythe’s works, these views elide the choreographic research processes that catalyzed this changed aesthetic. Paradoxically, the continuation of Forsythe’s exploration of classical ballet’s inhering mechanics, concepts, and potentials did not require reliance on the form’s canonical codex—its recognized and named positions and steps. Instead, his further interrogation of the
balletic coalesced around aspects of ballet practice that the aesthetics of *sprezzatura* largely masks or deliberately hides. Beyond a system of generating corporeal lines, curves, and rhythms, classical ballet is an illusory art form. As it developed, it increasingly exploited the predictably fallible optics of biological motion, enhancing perceptions of lightness and length of line while simultaneously hiding the dancers’ efforts and intentions in the process. When the codex is stripped away, what remains is a specific, highly intensified attentiveness to movement, Cartesian and imagined spaces, metered and durational time, and corporeal experience. What drew Forsythe’s interest early in his career—the “evolution of form,” and the ways it can emerge when the forms and limits of positions and phrases are not considered as such—continued to drive the ensemble’s inquiry forward even as the movement and timescales produced resembled those of ballet less and less.

Over the first decade of the Ballett Frankfurt, the company’s research fostered development of the ability to sustain attention to compound tasks, in terms of both the movements of the “many-timed body” and its geometrically inscriptive response to streams of visual, sonic, and tactile information in the environment. Through classical ballet’s complex extra-daily mechanics of posture, rotation, gesture, and displacement, and despite the habituating tendencies it shares with all repetitive movement practices, the technique is also a *de facto* somatic practice of intense, fine-grained, and multicentric corporeal awareness. Over the Ballett Frankfurt’s second decade and with The Forsythe Company, Forsythe continued to isolate and extrapolate additional specifics of ballet technique—sometimes inadvertently discovering these to be in play when least expected. During this period, the ensemble’s earlier visual-configurative explorations opened into an increased sensory-perceptual focus on, as Eugenia Ropa notes, “the overall cognitive experience
which yields the thinking body…which directly translates the synesthetic experience into a kinesthetic mode.” In this investigative and highly personal register of danced research, ballet nonetheless remained crucial to the ensemble as a common system of reference and understanding. Following the premiere of *Heterotopia* in 2006, Forsythe commented in rehearsal that

> Most interesting for me is when the dancers are aware of the states of the body…The work of 20 years has been about getting rid of a nomination, a system of naming – The principal is not to show what you know about something but instead what we don’t know…Just be aware of where you become obedient to your own history; knowledge of obedience is important because it underpins knowledge of the other – I’d prefer we leave history aside and do instead something that doesn’t exist, that only exists through you.”

An evening-length performance-installation work staged across two large spaces separated by a large floor-to-ceiling screen, *Heterotopia* is a study in attention and response to form and sound in which numerous strands of Forsythe’s later research coalesced. In the space Forsythe referred to as the “orchestra,” audience members could move freely around the perimeter of a large, uneven configuration of tables (those used in *One Flat Thing, reproduced*), some upended or littered with large foam alphabet letters. Dancers appeared and disappeared from underneath the tables or out of the audience, “conducting” and responding to each other with movement but also with animal and language-like vocalizations. Their voices and footfall, the sounds of moving tables, and composer Thom Willems’ understated soundscore of drones, swoops, and knocking rattles were transmitted via a speaker to the second space, where audience members could stand or sit on risers to watch a
further succession of scenes running simultaneously on an expanse of Marley floor with only an upright piano and the transmitting speaker in one corner."

[Insert Vass-Rhee-Fig 2 here]

As Forsythe commented, *Heterotopia* provides performance structures that permit “the inheritance of musicality of dancers to be the guiding musical structure of the piece.” Like many later Forsythe ballets, *Heterotopia*’s soundtrack lacks concrete rhythmic and melodic signposts for orientation in time and thereby coordination with other performers. Some works from the Ballett Frankfurt period similarly involve repetitive minimalistic musical scores without easily distinguishable structures (with dancers navigating by reading “clock time” displayed on digital monitors placed in the wings), while others from the mid and late 1990s, including *Duo* (1996) and part 1 of *Three Atmospheric Studies* (2005-6), rely on “breath scores” consisting of vocally and corporeally generated sounds. When known and anticipated musical structures of rhythm, melody, or volume no longer predetermine the execution of steps, time becomes unmoored and dancing is freed to shift to a fully responsive mode that reveals the dancerly skill of spatio-temporal engagement. Group coordination also necessarily occurs along different lines which, in Forsythe’s work, spun out into an array of investigations of the principle of counterpoint, not only in choreographies like *The The* (1995, choreographed with Dana Caspersen), *Woolf Phrase* (2001), *N.N.N.N.* (2002) *One Flat Thing, reproduced* (2000), and *Sider* (2011) but also in performance installation works like *Antipodes I/II* (2006) and *Black Flags* (2014).

Many of *Heterotopia*’s widely varying scenes are also radical meditations on the perception, conveyance, and translation of form. During rehearsals, Forsythe was highly interested in the way that not only gesture but also vocal intonation and prosody (speech melody) carry meaning that interfaces with but exceeds word
utterances. As Forsythe noted, when we hear and/or see conversations in languages we do not speak, we are nonetheless able to derive highly accurate interpretations of the tenor and timbre of discussions despite not necessarily knowing precisely what is being discussed. Dance teachers and dancers use this vocal information every day in class, describing intentions and outcomes in the nearly universal onomatopoeia of “AAAAAND one AAND two” (or “YYYYYY un YY deux” or “ИИИИ ИИ раз ИИ два”) that guides exercises and steps. In *Heterotopia*, dancers read a constant rearrangement of individual letters and nonsensical words, translating these into physical and vocal architectures and feeding them back into the performance space as additional sources of form. The attentional “score” of each scene is clearly specified; each dancer knows who or what they are to watch and/or listen to at what time, as well as whose movements and/or vocalizations they are conducting with their sounds and actions. Modes of response are also clearly delineated: in one scene, three women translate a man’s solo and its vocal prompt into specifically oblique angles of their arms and upper bodies, while in another the caws of bleats of two performers imitating a crow and a goat counterpoint three loudly but unintelligibly arguing dancers who perform an acrobatic trio in and above a hole between the tables. The webs of complex counterpoint linking the performers, together with their fierce attention to each other and to the objects in their environment, heighten audience attention and draw their focus around the space and between the rooms as they try to decipher the connections made possible and even necessary by the lack of orientating music.

*Heterotopia* and other later works created for The Forsythe Company also explore and engage with the limits of sensing, as did earlier Forsythe works that interrogated ballet’s typically easy-on-the-eyes-and-ears staging and choreography. In
some early works, Forsythe’s stage space opens back into the wings and performers dance beyond the proscenium arch, visible only to spectators at one extreme side of the auditorium or the other; in other works, the audience’s ability to see or hear is diminished through onstage darkness or bleaching light, obstructing walls or heavy snow, whispered text or overwhelming sonic din. In these later works, Forsythe and the ensemble’s sensory research has less to do with scenography and more with the limits of sensing itself. In Forsythe’s 7 to 10 Passages (2000), which premiered shortly after One Flat Thing, reproduced, a line of dancers advances downstage at a glacial pace, internally refracting only the initializations of movements from the “Tuna” phrase that had served as movement material in three works since 1985 and which would later inform several others. In one scene from Heterotopia, two women twine slowly on the floor, each keeping their view of any part of the other’s body steadily at the edge of vision; in another, a dancer “looks” backward through imagined eyes in her palms and heels but avoids actual eye contact with her sought partner, who strategically maneuvers her by coming into her peripheral view. In another, a dancer’s improvisation is motivated by regions of heat or coolness she perceives in the air of the stage space, which she can also generate through friction or transport elsewhere. The eclectic dramaturgy of I don’t believe in outer space (2008), a darkly Lynchian ode to the embodied experience of life in the face of impending death, is summatively motivated by the deep corporeal sensing that is the realm of dancers whose meticulous training has put them into intimate relation with their bodies and sensations. For this work, the ensemble first spent time exploring their own apartments blindfolded, bringing not only movement material back to the studio but also impressions of enhanced tactility, fear, and reawakened memories. Forsythe responded that the experience was
just like barre; checking in with the body and observing what you're feeling in the body as you work…These things are somatic but are also connected to emotions which have names…You are memorizing the architecture of your environment but you are noticing yourself; subtraction (of the visual channel) adds something to the process."

Above all, though, Forsythe’s later engagement with the balletic plumbs the depth of corporeal attention, awareness, and experience engendered by ballet practice as a result of its system of formal and temporal constraints. “As a dancer, you must only acquire awareness,” Forsythe told the ensemble in a 2006 rehearsal; “Don’t leave any part of your body out of the conversation. Don’t ever make positions, its always the generation of a dialogue with what’s happening elsewhere.” This “elsewhere” might be the body or voice of another performer, as described above, or it might be an extensive or refractive engagement with the individual body’s own sub-forms, multi-temporality, and manifold ways of sensing: vision, hearing, proprioception, tactility, the feeling of the skin stretching across the back, shoulders and hands, of blood moving in the fingers and palms. This perception-based rather than form-based approach to movement generation requires a shift of attention from form to attention itself: “Don’t look; feel, feel, feel,” Forsythe encouraged the ensemble; “Sensation, not observation; observe your sensations.” In a 2006 rehearsal for Ricercar (2003), while guiding one of the dancers to focus on following through the impulse of shape of her fingers Forsythe exhorted her to

see it, see it, see it – that’s it! That’s what I’ve always wanted from you…What you do is what you feel, what you see is what you know, what you feel is what you do. You don’t know what will happen, you just follow; you have to see it, see see see see…It’s all in the present, you’re just feeling
it…You really have to see the body (. . .) Stop determining what the dancing will be like…Have a deep experience of dancing.\textsuperscript{50}

In words as well as movement, Forsythe continually noted how such observations parallel and reflect the counterpointed relation between the staccato movements of \textit{petit batterie} and the \textit{cantilena} flow of \textit{port de bras} and \textit{épaulement}. Further though, via this deeply sensed engagement with balletic attention to movement, the ensemble extended these relations beyond the visual to the sonic, “amplifying” the sensation of movements into vocal sound by refracting them through and into the trunk, larynx, and mouth. Through this translation, the dancing produced was truly audiovisual. In \textit{Decreation} (2003), scaled-up shearing countertorsions of \textit{épaulement} wring voices from bodies, not through torturous physical over-torquing but through the performers closely “listening” to the sensations of muscle, skin and viscera and reflecting these with the voice. In the performance-installation \textit{You made me a monster} (2005), which is also performed as a solo called \textit{Monster partitur} (Monster score), dancers “read” the shapes and contours of twisted tableaus of paper skeleton parts and shadow drawings and “sing” out this score with both voice and body. The vocalizations are processed via a Max/MSP sound interface and fed back into the performance environment, providing a soundscore element to which the performers respond. \textit{Monster}, like ballet practice, thus involves dancerly attention to form both within and outside the body; its dancers express the sensed movement and sound as both sound and motion.

A 2018 YouTube video shows the final curtain call of Forsythe’s \textit{Playlist} (\textit{Track 1, 2}), a “ballet ballet” newly created for the male ensemble of the English National Ballet.\textsuperscript{51} The company and audience whoop and clap in rhythm to Lion
Babe’s throbbing “Impossible” (Jax Jones Remix) as the men none-too-decorously pull out all the stops, barreling through coupé jetés into deep bravura lunges, throwing off back aerial flips with a fist pump, double tour jetés, and a stage-full of a la seconde turns with every possible flashy finish. The curtain goes down and there are high-fives, hugs, and victory shouts. The mood is exultant, triumphant—fierce.

But though this encore may appear to be just the “boys” showing off tricks, it is an expression of things fundamental to Forsythe’s approach: facility, energy, courage, and a “fierce joy” in dancing. When Forsythe, as he often does, tells rehearsing dancers to “show me everything you know about dance,” he wants to see more than technique: their accumulated experience and knowledge, the states evoked by the choreographic tasks at hand, and the way that the dancers feel about what they do. Over his career, he and dancers with whom he works have come to know different things about ballet in different ways. His works have changed responsively over time as a result, as have the methods by which he has further explored the “very, very good idea” of balletic practice. As the diverse approaches in his later works evidence, balletic fierceness manifests as physical dynamics but at its heart is a deep, curious, and daring investigation of skill, awareness, possibility, and power. By showing rather than hiding the work and pleasure of dancing, contemporary ballet foregrounds this as a subject.

[Vass-Rhee Fig 1]: Stephen Galloway in Behind the China Dogs (1988). [Credit line: Photo © Gert Weigelt]
Ma avendo io già più volte pensato meco onde nasca questa grazia, lasciando quelli che dalle stelle l’hanno, trovo una regola universalissima, la qual mi par valer circa questo in tutte le cose umane che si facciano o dicano piü che alcuna altra, e ciù è fuggir quanto più si po, e come un asperissimo e pericoloso scoglio, la affettazione; e, perdì forse una nova parola, usar in ogni cosa una certa sprezzatura, che nasconda l’arte e dimosti ciò che si fa e dice venir fatto senza fatica e quasi senza pensarsi. Da questo credo io che derivi assai la grazia; perché delle cose rare e ben fatte ognun sa la difficoltà, onde in esse la facilità genera grandissima maraviglia; e per lo contrario il sforzare e, come si dice, tirar per i capegli dà somma disgrazia e fa estimar poco ogni cosa, per grande ch’ella si sia.

4. With the exception of early periods of new creations, the Ballett Frankfurt had an “open door” policy that allowed visiting dancers to take company class and work in the back of the room during rehearsals, space permitting. This policy also served as a means for Forsythe to informally audition dancers.
7. In this essay, the term “ballet” is used in reference to ballet techniques and contingent ideas developed therefrom, rather than the genre. Dana Caspersen useful distinguishes this as “the practice of the balletic” (emphasis original). Turkenich, Uri, “Interview with Dana Caspersen,” August 22, 2013, accessed August 30, 2018. https://danceinterviews.wordpress.com/2013/08/22/interview-with-dana-caspersen/
15. Castiglione, Baldasar, Il libro del Cortegiano (1528), Preti, Giulio, ed. (Torino: Einaudi, 1960), 44-5. Author’s translation from the original.

[Credit line: Photo © Stephan Burianek]
that and said, dammit, we’re doing ba...

Author’s fieldnotes, Forsythe Company rehearsal, 26 October 2006.

Performances of Heterotopia lasted around 85 minutes, with variance due to Forsythe’s use of “live direction,” in which decisions on when to cue scene changes were made in response to the performance’s dynamic and audience attentiveness.

This second space was originally set up as the studio for company class; Forsythe, however, decided two days before the premiere to have scenes running in parallel across both spaces.


Works using offstage digital clock time displays include Die Befragung des Robert Scott (1986), Limb’s Theorem parts 1 and 3 (1990), and the second version of The Loss of Small Detail (1991). I am grateful to former Ballett Frankfurt dancer Antony Rizzi for confirmation.


One Flat Thing, reproduced was premiered February 2, 2000 in Frankfurt as part 2 of a full-length evening titled Die Befragung des Robert Scott. 7 to 10 Passages premiered on February 23, 2000 in Brussels on a mixed bill with Jacopo Godani’s Kid Dynamo and One Flat Thing, reproduced. Ballett Frankfurt website, accessed 8 April 2003. (NOTE TO EDITORS: THIS WEBSITE IS NOT ARCHIVED ONLINE)


Author’s fieldnotes, Forsythe Company rehearsal, 11 August 2006.

Author’s fieldnotes, rehearsal, 24 September 2006.

Author’s fieldnotes, rehearsal, 16 August 2006.


Dana Caspersen, quoted from interview with Donald Hutera, Dance Umbrella News, 2001, archived at http://www.balletdance.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=21488&view=next&amp;sid=50b540de9725d971af40bc870fd88a0a