CHAPTER 30

**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?[[1]](#endnote-1)

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

But if u want 2 play with me, u better learn the rules.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**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.[[3]](#endnote-3) I loved the logic of rules, rhythm, and form in my ballet and tap classes; much more than that, though, I adored amplitude, trajectory and speed. 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 reveled 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 when required, 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 sweep and drive of works by George 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 William 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).[[4]](#endnote-4) The Ballett Frankfurt became my dream company, with the Dutch National Ballet in second place because their diverse repertory included Forsythe works. Like many others I began hanging out in Frankfurt, 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.[[5]](#endnote-5) 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 was still a body of physical knowledge harboring seemingly innumerable concepts to explore through movement. As in 1995, it remained “a very, very good idea, which gets pooh-poohed by one group of people, and overinvested by another.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Below, I first reflect on three ideas about energetic practice that underpin perceptions of classical and later forms of ballet.[[7]](#endnote-7) 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.[[8]](#endnote-8) 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 also intrinsically linked to Balanchine, who taught his company to dance “on top of the beat” by anticipating rather than reacting to music.[[9]](#endnote-9) This renders positions cleanly finished on accents so that they can be held or further extended. Softer, 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.[[10]](#endnote-10)

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, though; the “peeling” of a foot from fifth position into *coup*é to initiate a développé can be a microcosm of impact, while a slow relevé faillí or the arcing of an *attitude renvers*é 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 to the display of commitment to movement. Attack manifests as a perceptible quality through durative re-presentation; dynamic by definition, it relies on contrasts of speed and effort, and occasionally on calculated surprise for its impact, but a single instance does not register as such and can even call attention to its lack in an overall performance. 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 force 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;[[11]](#endnote-11) too little and the dancing appears “soft,” as in Alastair Macaulay’s assessment of the Bolshoi’s 2014 performance of Balanchine’s *Jewels*,[[12]](#endnote-12) or the role or work judged as “flat,” as an anonymous reviewer deemed a 2015 performance of *Agon* by Dance Theater of Harlem.[[13]](#endnote-13)

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.”[[14]](#endnote-14) 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 it were a rough and dangerous rock, affectation; and to perhaps 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 truly 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.[[15]](#endnote-15)

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 blithely 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 a demonstration of expertise, *sprezzatura* evokes a transcendence of human limitation that, as Peter DeSa Wiggins claims of an erotic love poem by John Donne, can even border on “genuine *contemptus mundi.*”[[16]](#endnote-16) 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 muscularity of lower class or supernatural characters—bumpkins, evil fairies, hags, or monsters—or are subsumed in bouts of passion or insanity. However, even in the case of ballet’s rougher and madder 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 broader spatial reach 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.[[17]](#endnote-17)

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.[[18]](#endnote-18) 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”[[19]](#endnote-19) 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.[[20]](#endnote-20)

For Moore, the fierce performer is strategically and unapologetically transgressive, a self-actualizing, game-changing force that “(i)nstead of asking for permission to exist…seizes that permission and places a lien on it.”[[21]](#endnote-21) 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.[[22]](#endnote-22)

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.[[23]](#endnote-23) 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.”[[24]](#endnote-24)

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 not only in their expertise but also in their 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 capability 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, passion, 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.”[[25]](#endnote-25) 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 also 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.[[26]](#endnote-26)

**[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”?[[27]](#endnote-27) Contra to Foucault, the fierce body of the drag queen is no more “docile” than is that of the expert performer of ballet.[[28]](#endnote-28) 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 not only enable but also reveal what *sprezzatura* conceals: the skill, resolve, daring, and extravagant physicality of both its female and male practitioners, which manifest in choreography that permits women to 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 reveling in 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?[[29]](#endnote-29)Throughout the 1990s, Forsythe continued to make new “ballet ballets,” including a cycle created in 1995-96 designated as “Six Counter Points” and 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”);[[30]](#endnote-30) *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).[[31]](#endnote-31) During the early 1990s, however, Roslyn 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.”[[32]](#endnote-32) As she further observed, *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.[[33]](#endnote-33)

In *Quintett*, she similarly highlighted how “balletic form is visible but the steps themselves are not, as if their dynamics have been erased, leaving mere vestiges of their shapes.”[[34]](#endnote-34) In other works of this period, like *Sleepers Guts* (1996), *Hypothetical Stream* (1997), and *small void* (1998), she comments that

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.[[35]](#endnote-35)

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.[[36]](#endnote-36) When the codex is stripped away, what remains is 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.[[37]](#endnote-37)

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”[[38]](#endnote-38) and its geometrically inscriptive response to streams of visual, sonic, and tactile information in the environment.[[39]](#endnote-39) 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. Throughout 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.[[40]](#endnote-40) 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.”[[41]](#endnote-41) 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.[[42]](#endnote-42)

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.[[43]](#endnote-43) 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 nonsensical words composed and recomposed from large black 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 based on the letter configurations. 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 succession of scenes running simultaneously on an expanse of Marley floor with only an upright piano and the transmitting speaker in one corner.[[44]](#endnote-44)

**[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.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Like many later Forsythe ballets, *Heterotopia*’s soundtrack lacks concrete rhythmic and melodic signposts for orientation in time and thereby for 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.[[46]](#endnote-46) 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),[[47]](#endnote-47) 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 “ИИИИИ *раз* ИИ *два”*) that guides exercises and steps. In *Heterotopia*, dancers read a constant rearrangement of individual letters and nonce 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 and bleats of two performers imitating a crow and a goat counterpoint three loudly but unintelligibly arguing dancers who perform a slow, 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 out 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 is diminished through onstage darkness or bleaching light, obstructing walls or heavy snow, while hearing is problematized by 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*,[[48]](#endnote-48) 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.[[49]](#endnote-49) 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 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.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Above all, though, Forsythe’s later engagements with the balletic plumb the depths 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, it’s always the generation of a dialogue with what’s happening elsewhere.”[[51]](#endnote-51) 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*.”[[52]](#endnote-52) 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.[[53]](#endnote-53)

In words as well as movement, Forsythe continually noted how such observations parallel and reflect the counterpointed relation between the staccato movements of *petit batterie* and the simultaneous *cantilena* flow of *port de bras* and *épaulement*. Further though, via this profound sensing 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 *Decreation* (2003), scaled-up shearing countertorsions of *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 and amplifying these vocally. In the performance-installation *You made me a monster* (2005), which is also performed as a solo called *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 an additional soundscore element to which the performers respond. *Monster*, like ballet practice, thus involves dancerly attention to form both within and outside the body; its dancers express what they see, hear, and feel as both sound and motion.

**[Insert Vass-Rhee-Fig 3 here]**

A 2018 YouTube video shows the final curtain call of Forsythe’s *Playlist (Track 1, 2)*, a “ballet ballet” newly created for the male ensemble of the English National Ballet.[[54]](#endnote-54) 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.

Though this encore may appear to be just the “boys” showing off tricks, it is an embodied expression of things fundamental to Forsythe’s approach: facility, energy, courage, and a “fierce joy” in dancing.[[55]](#endnote-55) 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 and made possible by the choreographic tasks at hand, and the way that the dancers feel about what they do.[[56]](#endnote-56) 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.[[57]](#endnote-57) As the approaches in his later works evidence, balletic fierceness manifests as physical dynamics but is at its heart a deep, curious, and daring investigation of skill, awareness, possibility, and power. By showing rather than hiding the work and the pleasure of dancing, contemporary ballet foregrounds this as a subject.

**Image Credits**

[Vass-Rhee Fig 1]: Stephen Galloway in *Behind the China Dogs* (1988), performed by the Ballett Frankfurt. [Credit line: Photo © Gert Weigelt]

[Vass-Rhee Fig 2]: David Kern, Francesca Caroti, Ander Zabala (foreground), Jone San Martin, and Christopher Roman (background) in *Heterotopia* (2006). [Credit line: Photo © Stephan Burianek]

[Vass-Rhee Fig 3]: Yasutake Shimaji, Parvaneh Scharafali, and Fabrice Mazliah in *Decreation*. [Credit line: Photo © Julieta Cervantes]

**Notes**

1. Sulcas, Roslyn, “William Forsythe: Channels for the desire to dance,” *Dance Magazine* (September 1995), 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Prince (Nelson, Prince Roger), “My Name is Prince,” 1992, *Love Symbol* album, Paisley Park, Warner Bros. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Fisher, Jennifer, “Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina as Powerhouse,” *Dance Research Journal* 39, no. 1 (2007), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sulcas, Roslyn, “William Forsythe: The poetry of disappearance and the great tradition,” *Dance Theatre Journal* 9, no. 1 (1991), 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Sulcas, “Channels,” 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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 usefully 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/ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Paskevska, Anna, *Ballet Beyond Tradition* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 66-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Denby, Edwin, “In the Abstract (1959-60)” in *Dance Writings* (London: Dance Books, 1986), 465. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Banes, Sally, “Balanchine and Black Dance,” in W*riting Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 53-69; Gottschild, Brenda Dixon, “Stripping the Emperor: George Balanchine and the Americanization of Ballet,” in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 59-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Similarly, Robert Gottlieb compared ballerinas in Peter Martins’ 2007 production of *Sleeping Beauty*, calling Ashley Bouder “a powerhouse technician, and she ate up the role’s challenges, but though she’s learning to tone down her attack, for me she lacks the delicacy, the loveliness, that Aurora demands.” “Martins’ Efficient *Beauty*, A Showcase for New Auroras.” Review of New York City Ballet*, The Observer*, January 22, 2017, accessed March 17, 2018. http://observer.com/2007/01/martins-efficient-ibeautyi-a-showcase-for-new-auroras/ [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. “Bolshoi’s Balanchine, From Stage to Screen,” *The New York Times*, Jan 20, 2014, accessed March 17, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/21/arts/dance/bolshois-balanchine-from-stage-to-screen.html [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “Dance Theatre of Harlem Returns to City Center; Program B,” *The Dance Enthusiast*, April 10, 2015, accessed March 17, 2018. https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/get-involved/reviews/why-audience-reviews/for-artists/view/Dance-Theatre-of-Harlem-Returns-to-City-Center-Program-B-Friday-April-10th-2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Gilpin, Heidi, *Failure, repetition, amputation, and disappearance: Issues of composition in contemporary European movement performance* (doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1993), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Castiglione, Baldasar, *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528), Preti, Giulio, ed. (Torino: Einaudi, 1960), 44-5. Author’s translation from the original:

    *Ma avendo io già piú 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 piú che alcuna altra, e ciò è fuggir quanto piú si po, e come un asperissimo e pericoloso scoglio, la affettazione; e, per dir forse una nova parola, usar in ogni cosa una certa sprezzatura, che nasconda l’arte e dimostri ciò che si fa e dice venir fatto senza fatica e quasi senza pensarvi. Da questo credo io che derivi assai la grazia; perché delle cose rare e ben fatte ognun sa la difficultà, 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.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Wiggins, Peter DeSa, *Donne, Castiglione, and the Poetry of Courtliness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou draw a parallel in this regard to Roger Caillois’ concepts of *ludus*, or controlled play, and *paidia*, improvised or spontaneous play. “In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency, and the Philosophy of Pleasure,” *Dance Research* 30, no. 2 (2012), 107-125. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dalzell, Tom and Victor, Terry, *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 841. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Moore, Madison, “Tina Theory:Notes on Fierceness,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 1 (2012), 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Moore, “Tina Theory,” 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Moore, Madison, “‘I Create My Own Space:’ A Conversation About Fierceness,” in *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2018), 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Moore, “Tina Theory,” 81-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Introduced by announcer in 1971-2 recording of “I Want to Take You Higher,” *Ike and Tina On the Road 1971-2*, documentary produced by Nadya & Bob Gruen, MVD Visual, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Moore, “Tina Theory,” 82-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Cole, Jonathan and Montero, Barbara, “Affective Proprioception,” *Janus Head* 9, no. 2 (2007), 303-304. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cole & Montero, “Affective Proprioception,” 309. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Fisher, Jennifer, “Make it Maverick: Rethinking the ‘Make it Macho’ Strategy for Men in Ballet,” *Dance Chronicle* 30, no. 1 (2007), 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Foucault, Michel, “Docile Bodies,” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977) (orig. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977)). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Witchell, Leigh, “Assimilation,” review of the Kirov Ballet’s all-Forsythe evening, *danceviewtimes*, April 15, 2008, accessed May 29, 2018. http://www.danceviewtimes.com/2008/04/assimilation.html [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See Farrugia-Kriel in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ballett Frankfurt website, www.ballett-frankfurt.de/billytime 2002.htm, accessed 8 April 2003. Equally, Forsythe continued to make “ballet ballets” during his tenure as director of The Forsythe Company, including the solo *Two Part Invention* (2009) and the duet *Rearray* (2011), and has more recently created *Blake Works* for the Paris Opera Ballet (2016), *Playlist (Track 1, 2)* for the English National Ballet (2018), and *Playlist (EP)* for the Boston Ballet (2019). *Duo* (1996) has also been reconceived for two male dancers as *Duo2015* (retitled *Dialogue* for its inclusion in the 2018 program *A Quiet Evening of Dance*), and the principal duet from *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* has recently been reworked for two men and set to music by Azealia Banks as *Pas de Deux Cent Douze* (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Sulcas, “Channels,” 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Sulcas, “Channels,” 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Sulcas, Roslyn, “Using Forms Ingrained in Ballet to Help the Body Move Beyond It,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2001, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Sulcas, Roslyn, “Watching from Paris: 1988-1998,” in *William Forsythe*. *Choreography and Dance* 5, no. 3, Senta Driver, ed. (Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. See for example Jeannerod, Marc, “The representing brain: Neural correlates of motor intention and imagery,” *Behavioral and Brain sciences* 17, no. 2 (1994), 187-202; de'Sperati, Claudio and Stucchi, Natale, “Visual tuning to kinematics of biological motion: the role of eye movements,” *Experimental Brain Research* 105, no. 2 (1995), 254-260; Blakemore, Sarah-Jane. and Decety, Jean, “From the perception of action to the understanding of intention,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 2, no. 8 (2001), 561; Cruse, Holk and Schilling, Malte, “Getting cognitive,” in *The* Neurocognition of Dance*: Mind, Movement and Motor Skills*, ed. Bläsing, Bettina, Puttke, Martin and Schack, Thomas (London: Psychology Press (2010), 53-74; Orgs, Guido, Kirsch, Louise and Haggard, Patrick, “Time perception during apparent biological motion reflects subjective speed of movement, not objective rate of visual stimulation,” *Experimental brain research* 227, no. 2 (2013), 223-229. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Author’s fieldnotes, Forsythe Company rehearsal, August 11 2006. Forsythe: “It’s the dynamic of control and the evolution of forms that are interesting – not the positions. Don’t take the ends of positions but find out what evolves.” [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Kaiser, Paul, “Dance Geometry: William Forsythe in dialogue with Paul Kaiser,” *Performance Research* 4, no. 2 (1999), 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. See Baudoin, Patricia and Gilpin, Heidi, “Proliferation and Perfect Disorder: William Forsythe and the Architecture of Disappearance,” in *Il Disegno che Non Fa il Ritratto: Danza, Architecttura, Notazioni*, vol. II, ed. Marinella Guatterini (Reggio Emilia: Teatri di Reggio Emilia, 1989). Reprinted in *Parallax*, program booklet, Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt, 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. As one instance, Forsythe commented that one of the working modes for *I don’t believe in outer space* (2009) – the dancers’ blindfolded exploration of spaces within their own apartments – was “about putting the body in relation to a clearly defined space, which is a lot like ballet. We reflected on that and said, dammit, we're doing ballet again.” Hawker, Philippa, “Stepping outside the ballet box,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 31, 2012, accessed August 31, 2017. https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/dance/stepping-outside-the-ballet-box-20120730-23a1r.html [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ropa, Eugenia, “Di Laban oggi. Reflessioni sulle teorie labaniane in Forsythe,” in *Forsythe: ieri, oggi, domani*., ed. Guatterini, Marinella (Reggio Emilia: Fondazione i Teatri di Reggio Emilia, 2005), 115. Translation by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Author’s fieldnotes, Forsythe Company rehearsal, 26 October 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Lee, Claire, “Interview: William Forsythe on Foucault’s ‘space of otherness,’” *The Korea Herald*, April 10, 2013, accessed February 16, 2014. http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130410000930 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See Zuniga Shaw in this anthology; see also Shaw, Norah Zuniga, “Synchronous Objects, Choreographic Objects, and the Translation of Dancing Ideas,” in *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography*, Gabriele Klein and Sandra Noeth, Eds. (Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2011), 207-221. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. *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. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. The “Tuna” phrase was central to *Die Befragung des Robert Scott*, *7 to 10 Passages*, and *Wear* (2004). See Siegmund, Gerald, “Of Monsters and Puppets: William Forsythe’s Work After the ‘Robert Scott Complex.’” Steven Spier (Ed.). *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography*. London: Routledge, 2011. 20-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Piecemaker rehearsal notes, 29 September 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Author’s fieldnotes, Forsythe Company rehearsal, 11 August 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Author’s fieldnotes, Forsythe Company rehearsal, 24 September 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Author’s fieldnotes, Forsythe Company rehearsal, 16 August 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. English National Ballet, “Voices of America: Final Encore | English National Ballet.” YouTube video, 0:59. Posted April 24, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpfNHDxADk4 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Dana Caspersen, quoted from interview with Donald Hutera, *Dance Umbrella News*, 2001, archived at http://wwww.ballet-dance.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=21488&view=next&sid=50b540de9725d971af40bc870fd88a0a [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. See Genshaft, Dana, “Finding Inspiration from William Forsythe,” *SF Ballet Blog*, San Francisco Ballet, Jan 14, 2016, accessed Sept 1, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. See Haviland, Linda Caruso, “Every Copy an Original: William Forsythe on Restaging His Ballets,” The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Aug 23, 2013, accessed August 1, 2018. https://www.pewcenterarts.org/post/every-copy-original-william-forsythe-restaging-his-ballets [↑](#endnote-ref-57)