

Hiking the Horizontal



Field Notes from a Choreographer

Liz Lerman

Two Dances: *The Oldest and One Not Yet Made*

My nephew, who is among many other things a writer, asked me about the difference between my earlier work and my newer work. After thinking for a long minute, I said, “I am cursed to always overreach. But in the later work the gap between my ideas and what I am capable of actually producing is smaller. In the early work, the gap was sometimes a chasm.” I know that most artists overreach. That big vision is magnetic, an oasis in the distance during years of insomnia, and often just as illusive. I don’t think this is the provenance of artists. I just think we are foolish/happy and obsessive/persistent enough to keep trying.

Here then are stories about two dances. I consider *New York City Winter*, made in 1974, to be the first dance of my adult life. As a solo, perhaps its scale was such that it didn’t suffer too much from my penchant for overreaching. (By my third dance, I would definitely be in over my head.) *The Matter of Origins* will premiere in fall 2010. Inquiry is a constant companion in both, but does not always appear as a question.

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Author’s Note: *The Matter of Origins* premiered on September 10, 2010, at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at Maryland, College Park.

New York City Winter

When I moved to New York City in 1973, I had saved up enough money from a teaching job in Maryland to live and study for almost a year—live poorly, but live. I was housed in a six-floor walkup with the bathtub in the kitchen, but I had my own room, a lovely loft bed overlooking Second Avenue, and a roommate I could tolerate. I felt as though I had enough money to do what I wanted until I walked past a shop in the East Village that had in the front window a hand-embroidered peasant blouse from Eastern Europe. It cost thirty-five dollars, which in those days and my circumstances was very expensive. I used to walk past it just to visit. But I could not afford it without taking some extra work.

I was studying ballet with Peter Saul and modern with Viola Farber. I took acrobatics mostly with Broadway and television hopefuls who kept me informed about the other aspects of our biz. I also made contact with Daniel Nagrin, who had guest taught in my senior year of college. He asked me to be in his company. I went to see a performance at NYU and watched with interest for a while. The dancers were terrific. The audience, mostly friends of the performers and other dancers, seemed into it too. I, however, struggled. I wasn't finding the things I was looking for in dance performance, as much as I admired the abilities of the performers. My discomfort was about the dancers' inner focus and the nature of the relationships onstage. The dancers were having fun, but the audience was not a part of it.

A very strange thing happened. All winter I had been getting nosebleeds, and in the middle of this concert I felt a small one starting. I held my hand to my nose and continued to watch the dance. I had no tissue with me, and I was seated in the middle of the row. There was no way for me to walk out easily. The dance continued, and the nosebleed stopped. But my hand was caked in blood. As I watched, I slowly licked the blood away. I felt I was inside a ritual of grief and sorrow, of liberation and decision making. I knew I couldn't accept being in this company. I knew that I was looking for something else—something bigger for dance, for the dancers, for the art form. Something that mattered.

Meanwhile, I wanted that embroidered blouse. I had no money. I was miserable in my dance classes, and I couldn't find anything to love in the theater. Then I learned something at my acrobatics class while standing in line waiting for my turn to try to do a backflip (with the teacher's help, always accompanied by a sarcastic remark). The girls were all doing various forms of go-go dancing to make a living. I was intrigued, as you could make thirty-five to fifty dollars a night depending on where you were and what you did. They told me where to go to find out about it.

I went to a building somewhere in midtown and found the office. I met with a woman whom I took to be the secretary, but I realized later she must have had more authority than that. She looked me up and down. I was wearing a black patent-leather raincoat with cherries on it. She made a lewd comment about the cherries. I never wore the raincoat again. But I took the information, and in a few days she called me with my first job.

Go-go dancing was a liberation for me. It was also very subversive. And, I

concluded after my first night, I would learn a lot about performance. Everything that had bothered me at that dance concert at NYU was countered by the go-go experience.

For example, I was by myself. A true soloist making it alone in the complex and slightly dangerous scenes, including the bus ride to New Jersey, the bar, and the late-night return to Manhattan. Perhaps I felt it was a test of my ability to make it alone in the world, but I think the real satisfaction was in the relationship of the dancing to the audience, in the development of a movement vocabulary that worked in this context, in proving my own sexual attractiveness.

What was the relationship to the audience, and why did this interest me so much at the time? For one, and a very important one, I had to focus on the people I was performing for. I couldn't pull the modern dance stare or the inner-directed movement gaze. They demanded a relationship with the dancer. I found this intriguing, challenging, and difficult. And I felt it a worthwhile problem to solve. Over time I developed ways of talking with the guys while I was performing, a dialogue that reached its apex when I was able to get some of the men to actually choreograph my moves. I have always felt less sure of myself in relation to inventiveness. I trace this to my classical roots.

The dancer in me loves my classical training. The choreographer in me has been trying to escape it forever. When my mother was dying, I was thrilled to go back to ballet class. I loved knowing what was expected of me. I loved that my body knew what to do even when I was in such chaos. But when I step into the studio to find movement, develop physical approaches, or just let loose, I almost always have to make myself move away from the classical choices my body makes first.

I remember feeling particularly lousy when I was in high school that I had spent so much time in dance class but couldn't do the popular forms of the day. All I could do was my ballet. It drove me crazy, because whenever I was on the dance floor, people watched expecting me to be able to do anything. And I couldn't. I think I was trying to change that history while I was in the bars, and to do this day I am curious about and envious of true contemporary and pop forms of dance. They have, of course, their own orthodoxy requiring hours of training and practice by people willing to put in the time. I put in my time in the bars in New Jersey over the winter of 1973–74.

I have a complicated relationship to sexuality and dance. Sometimes I think

of it as all context and history. Born midcentury to a woman who hid her own sexuality behind a stoic and aloof intelligence, I grew up in a house where female sexuality was not celebrated or even discussed. (My father did talk often about my ability to have children. This he did both verbally and nonverbally, as he took swipes at my hips while saying “good for childbirth” whenever he felt like it.) I have no memory of learning dance in any way that suggested its sexual potential. So it continues to shock me how often men, in particular, change their tone of voice, their stance, and where they direct their eyes when they learn I am a dancer. Leering and suggestive comments continue, even as I enter my sixties. Go-go dancing was a counterattack to these experiences. It was all about sexuality. And since at that time I was sewing up the wounds from an early marriage and divorce, in some ways it was a comforting place to go.

I am a quick learner. I figured out most of this after only three or four outings. I made enough money to buy the blouse (which I still own), and I noticed that I was trying to figure out how to be the best go-go dancer ever. Always competitive, I was keeping an eye on the appropriate level of this urge. One very mean night in a bar, the guys pulled the shades, began to bang on the tables, and offered me much more money to strip. I left. That was the end of it. I never went back.

Within days of quitting I realized that I might make a dance about the experience and try to pull some of these ideas onto the stage. The dance, which would become *New York City Winter*, was autobiographical. It included some of my ridiculous inner musings as I entered the go-go world. It was self-deprecating. I talked, told stories, and related my experience in dance and text form. I borrowed for the dance all the accoutrements of my real-life experience. I found that very satisfying and felt that, for the first time, stage life and real life were merging. One section of the dance looked at a ballet vocabulary and the slight changes required to reveal the sexual provocation latent in its classical form. I liked that section, as it marked one of the first times I was able to translate an idea to the stage. I think the dance also conveyed my loneliness and my cockiness.

I premiered it at St. Mark’s Church as part of a poetry series that a friend of mine ran. I left New York the next day. I continued to perform the piece for a very long time—my last performance at Dance Theater Workshop was in 1988 when I was one month pregnant. I continued to edit the dance and was

pleased to note that by the sixth year I had cut about six minutes. I decided that if you could keep a dance around long enough, you could count on losing one minute a year.

While making *New York City Winter* I discovered something critical, if quite by accident. It has to do with storytelling and embedding the ideas and points of view inside the action and the telling rather than in the theory. I learned that humor could make an audience stick it out longer. Later, others commented on the quiet feminism that the dance exposed in my work. I didn't set out to make a feminist statement, but I was proud to read that people thought it was there. I was just making a dance that had to be made. The positive response I received about including the very real thoughts, no matter how absurd, inside the mind of the performer showed me that an audience was interested in my brain and my body. And making the dance about this young girl and her quest for acceptance made it okay for the dance to be sexy as well as about ideas.

I stumbled into a few ideas about choreography that are still with me.

Use objects from real life. In my first dance I used the bag and coat I wore at that time, and the original costume I had made for dancing in the bars. (Actually, I made one change in the costume. I cut a big hole in one side of the bra in order to reveal a naked breast on which I painted a happy face during the dance. I did this to accentuate and exaggerate the situation for its hilarity as well as its provocation.) Even the makeup case and the makeup I put on during the dance came from my own daily use. I have continued this practice when and where possible. It connects my life off stage and on in a way that I find comforting, and lets one inform the other.

Tell stories. In one moment in the dance I just stepped forward and began to talk. It was short. Later I talked and moved a little. Later still I talked to a character who was not onstage with me. So the dance had various levels of text.

Recreate images. I was very poor in New York City that winter. When I got home from the bars it was usually around two or three in the morning. My little sixth-floor walkup was freezing. I would light the oven and sit there with a cup of tea to get warm. I used this image at the end of the dance.

When I finished the dance, I felt that I had found a way to reflect back on

my brief stint in New York City. But I still had questions that remain with me to do this day. There seemed to be so many unwritten rules of behavior that the legions of young dancers were expected to keep.

I was feeling a great need and desire to step outside the dance world. I loved my dancing. I still wanted it. But not under these terms. So I said goodbye.

New York City Winter stayed in my active repertory for over a decade. After I last performed it, other dancers took it on. Around the time of its thirtieth anniversary, we revived the piece in a duet version for my fifty-something self and Cassie Meador, a dancer who was then approximately my age when I had choreographed it. We haven't performed this version yet: it proved too confrontational for the dance-festival gala for which it was originally planned. But we're still sitting on an invitation to bring it to a midnight series at home in Washington. So maybe soon the piece will return to its late-night beginnings.

The Matter of Origins

It still amuses and amazes me when things come together in a rehearsal. Such disparate ideas, movement sequences, and images get laid out individually, then connect in ways that completely surprise me. I know I am the person doing it, thinking it, imagining it, ordering it, telling people what to do, and yet so often I feel like I don't really control the situation. Something happens.

I am working on a new piece right now. The signals that convince me that it will become an actual work for the stage come from many different directions. Here is a short synopsis that captures a brief span of time in a rehearsal process where change is constant.

Gordy Kane, from the University of Michigan physics department, comes to one of our "Animated Keynotes" presentations, where the company and I talk and show live excerpts from the Dance Exchange's work. This one features excerpts from *Ferocious Beauty: Genome*. Gordy responds to this dance about genetics by asking, "How about one for physics?" I think, No more science. But then I meet with him and some of his colleagues, and we have a really interesting discussion about beginnings, about matter, about mystery and math. One thing I notice about this meeting is that everyone is on time. I wonder to myself if physicists and dancers have a similar respect for time and all that it can mean. And I challenge them to make an equation that explains how we partner on residencies, which leads to lots of laughing and good

feelings. Then Gordy talks about CERN in Switzerland and its Large Hadron Collider and convinces me that I should make a visit while in Europe later in the spring.

My husband, Jon, and I go to CERN. What a cool place. With its scale, organization, and sense of purpose, I am reminded of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. I get back to the company, we do some rehearsing, and we unearth plenty of physical ideas. A few months later several of us go back to CERN to shoot video, talk to a few people, and try to make enough connections so they will want us and the project. They do, but there is not enough funding around to carry some of our biggest ideas forward, at least not yet.

A key piece of patronage arrives in the form of a commission from Susie Farr of the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. She is the first to step out and say to me, "Make the next piece." She was the first to say to her staff, "Let's find a way to get Liz back onto our stage." Exemplifying a rare breed of presenter-as-patron, Susie's support includes ideas, technical resources, rehearsal space, and a kind of intellectual matchmaking. In preparation, you could see the two of us striding across the large green in the center of the campus as we went to meet faculty who might help in the research; under our umbrellas, marching up one portico after another looking for connections. "Let the dreaming begin," she might be saying, although with Susie the message is more subtle and a bit sly, and tinged with a challenge too: make it well.

I start reading a lot of books on the history of physics, especially in the twentieth century. Dennis Overbye's *Einstein in Love*, David Lindley's *Uncertainty*, and Gino Segrè's *Faust in Copenhagen* are all very engaging, and I find my imagination drawn to the intense group of mostly men described in these books who changed human thinking in such a short amount of time. I learn about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which posits that between position and momentum the more precisely one property is known, the less precisely the other can be known. Like many artists before me, I am fascinated by this paradox and recognize its potential for metaphor and for movement. I think Keith Thompson, an experienced dancer/choreographer who has come to Dance Exchange to be part of this piece, defies the uncertainty principle because when he dances you can see both shape and momentum.

Reading Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's *American Prometheus*, I come across a reference to Edith Warner, who served meals at her teahouse to Robert Op-

penheimer and his Los Alamos colleagues. During a big rehearsal phase I ask the three older women in the company to go in another room with teacups and chairs. They make something. It is all right but I want to fix it immediately, give it more charge. I tell them to put the teacups on their laps, take the gestures from what they made, and see how fast they can do them. The teacups rattle like crazy, and one drops to the floor. I leave them to problem solve. Later they show us a trio that contains one extraordinary event. They make the teacups rattle as they hold them, and suddenly all of Los Alamos and what it meant exists in this one image. I am so grateful.

The idea of tea has now taken hold. After rehearsal we experiment with different ways of staging it, with different dancers taking charge (one group even serves tea and gives massages at the same time). I begin to talk about Act One happening onstage and Act Two as a large-scale tea in the theater lobby, with a possibility of using tables as projection surfaces. I add that an undercurrent to tea is the idea of service, and that idea in this context could encompass who is serving whom, what happens to the experience of being served if the dancers you have just looked up to onstage are now pouring your tea, and how science (or art) is called into the service of utilitarian needs as the main justification for existence. I particularly like the idea of developing material not only for stage but for tables, for small spaces between tables, for video that might accompany the tea projected on walls or on the ceiling or a draped cloth just below the ceiling as a softer reception for the images or as a way to match with the tablecloths.

I often get unsolicited CDs from music publishers, which I love. These usually consist of various composers loosely linked, and the accompanying letter encourages me to think about using some of this music for dance work. One day a CD arrives with a collection of fanfares, and the first selection on it is terrific. I decide to use its energy to try to get the dancers to make the music completely visual. It is fast and furious and it occupies us for a while. Later, when we send our CERN contact a DVD of our process with some footage from our visit, we include one small piece of this fanfare.

At this stage, sometimes structure helps distill ideas, and sometimes it moves the dancing forward. With this in mind, I begin to consider a series of fanfares throughout the piece. I am cleaning up some CDs at home and come across Janacek's *Sinfonietta*, which opens with a big fanfare, and decide to try that too. Jim Ross, my conductor friend, comes to the studio to help us with

the complicated rhythms. We discover that conducting is a little more like choreography than just normal “reading” of the music. In researching, I discover that Janacek wrote this piece for the Sokol Gymnasium and that it premiered one year before Heisenberg first posed his uncertainty principle. I wonder if a structure might be something about fanfares introducing the substance of the piece, or at least various scientific breakthroughs.

Meanwhile, I am trying to discover the right question to ask, so I am doing a lot of research and occasionally getting into the studio with small groups of dancers. We are generating material from a variety of sources. I still think that the concepts will emerge by following my own interest in the particular questions the scientists at CERN are trying to answer. This idea of beginnings begins to morph into questions about endings. If scientists discover what they are looking for, that means the end of the line for some theories. And as they understand the beginning of the universe, they keep wondering about its ending too, or the possibility that it has already ended once before.

Bob Dylan puts out a new CD, and I love a few songs on it that I listen to a lot. One of them makes me think of Jon and me in bed, just looking up at the ceiling, listening to the music, with the smallest of touches going on. I wonder about mattresses in a parking lot with hundreds of old couples of all kinds in various states of sleep, touch, wrapped up together. I think this is another dance. It will be months before I realize that I can just go to work on this image and let it seep and see if it was part of the CERN piece too. I think that the Dylan music and the question of endings are feeding each other and allowing both to stay in my mind. Once I opened up this connection, new structural elements made their way into my planning and our rehearsing.

I start trying to figure out what else besides beginnings is going on with the CERN guys. Matter and antimatter are attractive to me, but because they're overused in the popular press I give them scant attention. Then there is supersymmetry, which at first I dismiss because I don't like symmetry. Then I begin to notice how the scientists use artistic terms to defend their thinking, as they do when they talk about supersymmetry. It is a curious sensation to find art being used to justify ideas. I start to get into this a little with Gordy on e-mail. I explain that symmetry is often a sign of a new choreographer, and it can be a dead giveaway for amateurism of the worst sort. He takes it well, and we exchange some thoughts.

The physicists are looking for a unified theory, which I find odd since I like

chaos so much. I learn that at least part of their reason for this search is to unify the classical model of physics with the quantum world. But I sense their quest for an overarching theory expresses a kind of yearning. I can't be sure about this, but I find the physicists' puzzle begins to underpin my own ongoing musings about accidental beginnings, faith, truth. It's not that I think this dance will "discuss" these ideas, but more that these perceptions may have a hand in its shape.

The Dance Exchange and I help plan a three-day symposium on sustainability and the arts in Houston and are invited to put on two teas in a small art gallery at the University of Houston as our part in the actual implementation. We learn so much about how this tea structure can work and how much to facilitate—not enough rules on the first try, more on the second. We lose some of the chaotic energy by adding rules, and it's a tradeoff I am not sure I want to make.

My daughter, Anna, spends her junior semester abroad in Spain, and soon after the Dance Exchange completes its almost-last tour of the year, I go to see her. We take a road trip through the south of the country. This is fun and inspiring and includes visits to several Islamic sites where symmetry was essential to the art and architecture. I recognize that when symmetry is actually part of life it has a certain magnetic beauty, so I buy a book on Islamic design in which the author suggests that since Islam forbids the depiction of God in art (just as Judaism does), design in this culture turned to mathematics and symmetry to create the imagery for God, as well as for the inner structure of all things. This is just like trying to see inside the atom: if you want to understand the beginning, you should not go backward, but inward. I'm inspired to return to rehearsals and submit all of our phrase work to symmetrical physical statements, which is completely new for me, although not for many choreographers. This makes the movement that has already been constructed look quite different, so we also try setting up tea and other dances around tables in symmetrical fashion. It is all a little odd and makes me think I might structure most of the first act with symmetry in mind.

I know that this piece needs a few "conceptual" scenes, and I am still hunting for them when I come across a long article in the *New York Times* about the Bush administration's reasons for not halting its torture tactics. What officials said was something like, "If we had known that these techniques had begun with the Communist Chinese, we would never have used them." This strikes

me as a strange use of origins for justifying action. And then it happens: in my mind I have an immediate image that might give form to an abstracted idea, in this case torture. (I think this phenomenon happens all the time; what makes it special on this occasion is that I notice.) I translate torture as a quintet for four dancers and a chair: one dancer stands on the chair, and then—without reason or signal—the other three pull the seat away and the person on the chair goes flying. Taking this idea into rehearsal produces a series of great catches and more and more exploration of how to surprise the standing dancer so she does not know when or how the chair will go. The whole thing is very interesting and even more curious when done with a second group in almost complete symmetry. The additional group is minus one key dancer, and the absence paradoxically amplifies the impact of strictly symmetrical patterns. I think that if I can get this all to work I will eventually ask a physicist to explain how we might measure what is happening in terms of velocity, mass, and contact, and thus use the scene to challenge the idea of measurement, which is another theme evolving in the dance.

The justification of torture that runs “If I had known —, then I wouldn’t have —” is interesting to me, so I have the dancers do a long freewrite with this concept as the structuring device for their litanies. As they read them, they add up exquisitely; some are very funny, some so sad, and all are tinged with regret, which draws me in especially, since I have been feeling a lot of regret this year but only talking about it at ritual events like the Seder or New Year’s Eve. I decide to work it a little and see where it goes. This is on my mind when I’m in a phone interview with *Symmetry*, a magazine that covers particle physics. The interviewer asks me what I talk to the physicists about. I reference the regret and then tell her about a conversation I had with Gordy and another physicist at Cook’s Branch in Texas, asking them what it was like when a discovery is made and it disproves your life’s work. What do you do and feel? Do you feel regret? There’s a pause, and the interviewer says, “No one talks about that . . . ever.”

I decide to try the mattress idea with lots of bodies lying down in a row sleeping, and I also decide to try a monologue while lying in bed looking up at the camera. It is a monologue about my beginnings. Right now it is too long for the piece, but it strikes the right tone, and I wonder if most of the spoken language can be delivered this way. What if I put Gordy and his wife, Lois, together, talking upward, or an Islamicist and a supersymmetry theorist

together, talking under the covers and looking up as they float in space? I like the thought and consider that it might be a way to carry the narrative forward.

My monologue:

So you want to know my origins, my beginnings? It's hard to know where to begin. I guess you could start with Catherine the Great, who was great but who was responsible for putting all the Russian Jews in the ghettos, which made my grandfather's grandfather so angry and that must have been where the idea to come to America began, which my grandfather eventually did, bringing with him a love of opera. But then his wife died in the great plague, leaving my father and his twin sister, who were only six months old, which is why I think his relatives who took care of him gave him so much to eat because they felt sorry for him, so they fed him and fed him, and so when he became a soldier he was still unmarried, which is why he went to the classical music room at the USO in San Francisco just before he was shipped out.

In the meantime, my grandfather on the other side left his wife, my grandmother, to become a Rosicrucian in Alaska, which is why she was raising my mother and her sister alone. She wanted them to be very cultured, so she made sure they knew classical music, but she also pressured my mother so much to be smart, and she made her work in the artificial flower store in the Sir Francis Drake Hotel that she ran, and my mother hated that, which is why she was probably so unhappy. This doesn't explain why the man she was supposed to marry was one of the first people to jump off the new Golden Gate Bridge, which is why my mother was still single when she went to be the DJ in the classical music room of the USO in San Francisco.

Now this explains how my older brother came to be, but you have to wait till the war is over to get to my birth. My father was with the ski troops in Italy, and when they won that war they put all these soldiers on boats to send to the Pacific where the statistics for death were quite high, and so the guys all thought they had survived one front only to be killed in the other. So my father always said to me: "You are on this earth because of the bomb."

I think there might be a monologue like this about CERN too, because its existence is due in part to Los Alamos. The monologue could begin with anti-Semitism as well, since the exodus of German scientists between the wars is

an incredible testament to the role of impending doom as a motivating factor for many of the Jewish scientists gathered at Los Alamos. And as the people at the Human Genome Project and the people at CERN like to say, “Big government means big science.” The Manhattan Project taught us that.

I try to figure out how much to tell the staff and dancers as I muse among these ideas. I know that many explorations will give way to further developments, some will disappear altogether, and some may be saved for a later work. I do talk with presenters who are interested in the piece, including Jedediah Wheeler at Montclair State who has an interest in the science work. It is always a pleasure to engage with him as he sees things from an interesting historical perspective and possesses keen artistic sensibility. In this case he asks lots of questions, then ends with his odd and wonderful combination of berating me and encouraging me by saying, “Go back to CERN, keep us in the present.” It is a good idea.

As of this writing, the piece is still eluding a structure. Once it’s found, many of these early ideas will fall away. Meanwhile, the movement metaphors arrive with ease and the dancers are tackling the problems with gusto. Where it ultimately goes I can only surmise. But I have research time ahead in the studio and outside it, and I am still filled with the curious optimism that sometimes partners me as I wander in the trenches of choreography.