Writings on the 2012–13 Performance Season

Choreography by Reggie Wilson and Akram Khan

Contributions by

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Funded by
CPA and the Arts Discretionary Fund
About Yale Dance Theater
Yale Dance Theater (YDT) is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and/or development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance.

As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. In the final phase of the project, we draw on these writings to develop a print journal. YDT's mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.

Faculty Director
Emily Coates

YDT Student Coordinators
Aren Vastola and Karlanna Lewis

YDT's spring 2013 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College and the Lionel F. Conacher and Joan T. Dea Fund, in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.
Akram Khan’s *Kaash* moves like a piston: long quick lunges to the side that plumb impossible depths of *plié*, followed by split-second rebounds to upright. The arms, stabilizing pendulums of support, direct and redirect the legs, supporting the body before the next nosedive toward earth. The phrase comes in three versions: “normal,” “simple,” and “double.” “Normal” includes a whiplashing action in which the arms ripple like a piece of cloth up and around the head, swing forward and out to the left, then swing back to the other side to indicate and retract parallel to the floor before circling and swirling back up around the head to repeat. The head responds accordingly—up, forward and left side, right side, back up to the sky, forward and left, then other side and back skyward. No choreography I have ever danced has made me this dizzy.

Yale Dance Theater (YDT) augments and extends the work being done within the dance studies curriculum. Many of the students involved in YDT have passed through one or more of the dance studies courses, in which we blend studio practice with the study of relevant historical and theoretical contexts, and hone methods of movement research. YDT allows for an even deeper immersion into an artist’s body of work. With our dual focus on the critically acclaimed repertories of Akram Khan and Reggie Wilson, Yale Dance Theater’s spring 2013 project presented a bounty of movement research. While Khan synthesizes his training in classical kathak with contemporary dance, Wilson borrows liberally from postmodern choreographic strategies, dances of the African diaspora and ethnographic methods, in a nod to American artists of the mid-20th century updated for the 21st. Wilson’s phrases are no simpler than Khan’s: 1, 1, 3, 4, 4, 6, 7, 7, 9, 11, 11, 12 one phrase goes, built on the structure of a fractal.

The dancers of YDT gained intimate knowledge of innovations in contemporary dance through learning this work. They also grew stronger as artists. The works’ complexity makes Khan and Wilson the ideal focus for Yale Dance Theater’s inaugural print journal. Since YDT’s inception, we have experimented collectively with research and writing, in response to the choreographic aesthetics under scrutiny. With this project, we agreed on several key tenets: writing does not replace the dancing. The dancing feeds and
directs the language. The best writing vibrates with the same physical and expressive presence as a good dance. Edited and introduced by Karlanna Lewis LW/SOM ’15 and Aren Vastola ’14, the writing that follows energetically responds to the choreography of both Wilson and Khan, respectively.

Dancers practice for innumerable hours to synthesize kinesthetic ideas. The world doesn’t stop spinning, but at least we learn when to expect the vertigo—not to mention how to capture it in words. Read on to see, hear, and feel for yourself.
One of my favorite “Reggie-isms” from our time spent working with Reggie Wilson and his Brooklyn-based Fist and Heel Performance Group is his customary response of “both/and” to any question that demands “either/or.” Is it a step or a stumble? Is it forceful or fluid? Should I be thinking about the elbow or the wrist?

Dancing, when you “just do it” as Reggie so often instructed, inhabits such limits of language, and often baffles attempts at articulation. It is herein that the wonder lies. Yale Dance Theater is devoted to working at the limits, and then pushing past them with its unprecedented fusion of rigorous professional dance experience, creative approaches to arts research, and emphasis on critical writing.

Before coming to Yale during Yale Dance Theater’s inaugural year, I saw my identity in “either/or” terms. Am I a dancer or a scholar? Am I an artist or an academic? Many other members faced similar choices in deciding to come to Yale, fearing that they would need to give up their passion for dance to focus on their studies. Yale Dance Theater gave us all a place to explore our love of dance in new and thought-provoking ways; through YDT, we have studied choreography over the past three years that challenges both our minds and our bodies. So, is the work mental or physical? In the words of Reggie, we’ve come to the conclusion that it is “both/and.”

An integral component of Yale Dance Theater is student writing. While we sometimes have prompts to guide us, the ways in which we write are more often individual and experimental. As a fledgling field in academia, dance scholarship employs a wide array of analytical methods, drawn from critical theory, philosophy, and anthropology among other disciplines. Furthermore, it is a dynamic field that requires blazing new trails of investigation; there is information that can only be gained through movement, and we must dance to discover it! This overlap between arts and humanities makes our process inherently interdisciplinary. As arts researchers we value the voices and creativity of practitioners within academic dialogue, and therefore pursue innovative means to make these voices heard.

As a company we are united in our love of dance, but we are also academically diverse. We have dancers majoring in Chemistry, Theater Studies, Economics, Philosophy, Art History, Mathematics, Psychology,
and numerous other fields. Graduate programs are also represented, from doctoral students in French, to Law students, to Divinity students. These backgrounds inform our approach to research and offer up a panoply of different perspectives, which I am so pleased to finally be able to share with the wider Yale community.

Karlanna and I hope that this student journal will provide another voice to enrich the vibrant and varied world of on-campus publications at Yale; as far as we are aware, this is the first such publication devoted to dance writing. It has been a pleasure to read and assemble this anthology, which we intend to make into an annual publication. Whatever your interest or field of study, I hope you encounter interesting insights and discoveries in the writings of your peers within this volume. Thank you for your support of Yale Dance Theater, and dance studies at Yale more broadly.
A composer, of dances or of music, takes various individual personalities or voices and compiles them together into that fabled greater whole. Together with Aren Vastola, as Student Coordinators of Yale Dance Theater for the 2013–2014 season, our challenge has been to comb through the numerous artful blog posts written by the 2012–2013 Yale Dance Theater company and combine them into a whole that reflects the diversity of dancers’ experiences with resident choreographers Reggie Wilson and dancers of the Akram Khan company, as well as the commonality. Dance is not an individual pursuit, and neither has been this journal.

First, as many of the dancers’ posts illuminate, writing and dancing are arts born of different natures. In dancing, the artist becomes bigger than herself, collaborating with other dancers to make a new whole in this physical and impulsive art. In writing, the artist distills herself into a few words, embarking on this individualistic and thoughtful pursuit with nothing moving beyond a pen or a few clicking keys. If dancing takes the artist out of the self and away from the mind, writing forces the artist to confront the inner in spirit and ask questions of the secret part that dwells in all of our beings. But yet as much as we recognize the disparities between writing and dancing, they are both arts, and share an essential human creativity.

When the artist masters either writing or dancing, the artist reveals something about the nature of human experience, drawing connections that always existed but that, in our busy lives, we may not have noticed. Yet when either writing or dancing is done without skill, they are reduced to hobbies. For an artist, hobbies are anathema. Many people write poems in their bedrooms, but despite the similar actions, the poet might argue that his work is of another world. The dancer cringes when innocent acquaintances ask, “Oh, so dance is your hobby?” No, dance is our art—an essential difference.

Both writing and dancing seek to alter time. Dance exists in four dimensions. Beyond the three physical dimensions, dance occupies the spatial dimension of time. Separating dance from the time in which it exists is impossible. The few minutes, or seconds, of a dance’s arc form an indelible part of dance’s reality-altering ability. Dance compresses a multitude of experiences, stories of humanity, into an evening, defying time’s ordinary, metronomic control.
Writing works the opposite way. If dance works in four dimensions, writing works in two. Writing doesn’t alter time the way dance does, but denies it—an hour of time in dance can be preserved forever on a written page, or it can be read in two minutes—writing escapes the temporal dimension. When humans are limited by time in their daily pursuits, both writing and dancing burst free from limits.

What you will read in this inaugural journal is writing by artists who are dancers first. This project, which was first about dance but merged with the art of writing, doesn’t occupy an identity-less no-man’s land between the two arts. Instead, view this project as a bridge between dance and writing, with feet on both lands but where the view is fullest from the apex in the middle. With many voices meditating on the same dance processes, the writing is no longer individual. As with dance, you can pick out the individual dancers, but sometimes it’s better to let your focus relax to take in the whole feeling of bodies, or voices, in their highest moments. This is not writing that leaps off the page, as the cliché goes, but like the dance, writing that undulates between what we know of our bodies, and what we hope they can be.
Derek, Indrani, Amymarie and Molly practicing
Yale Dance Theater 2013
Part I: Reggie Wilson

Lecture/Demonstration
March 6, 2012
6 pm & 8 pm
Yale University
Stiles-Morse Crescent Theater
19 Tower Parkway

This evening’s program includes movement material from the following works:

N/UM (1989)
GEEREWOL (1989)
the ReVisitation: Big Brick and the Duet (1992, 2012)
(project) Moseses Project (current)

Choreography by Reggie Wilson
Rehearsal assistance by performers of Fist and Heel Performance Group: Dwayne Brown, Paul Hamilton, Raja Feather Kelly, Clement Mensah, and Anna Schon.

With music selections from:

1. Ballad of Mack the Knife by Kurt Weil sung by Lotte Lenya [Germany]
2. Le Renard Aux Grandes Oreilles (1) from the recording Namibie-Chants des bushmen Ju’hoansi [Namibia]
3. Muhogo Wa jang’ombe (W/ Shikamoo Jazz & Twinkling Stars) sung by BiKidude [Zanzibar, Tanzania]
4. Travellers 1,2,3 by Meredith Monk from Book of Days [US]

Yale Dance Theater

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Faculty Director: Emily Coates
YDT Student Coordinators: Elena Light, Aren Vastola
YDT Producers: Laurel Durning-Hammond, Yuvika Tolani

This Lecture/Demonstration concludes the first half of Yale Dance Theater’s semester-long investigation into the choreography of contemporary artists working today. Please join us in late April for Part II, featuring the work of British-Bangladeshi artist Akram Khan. Over the course of the project, the dancers of Yale Dance Theater reflect on the process on the YDT blog. For more information on the project and to read their writing visit: http://ydtp.commons.yale.edu/.
YDT’s spring 2013 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College and the Lionel F. Conacher and Joan T. Dea Fund, in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.

We would like to extend special thanks to Susan Cahan, Penelope Laurans, Nina Glickson, Tom Delgado, Nathan Roberts, Kathryn Krier and the UP staff, Paul McKinley, Michael Marsland, Matt Regan, Pam Patterson, Susan Hart, May Brantley, and Theater Studies.

About the Artist

Reggie Wilson founded his company, Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group, in 1989. He draws from the movement languages of the blues, slave and spiritual cultures of Africans in the Americas and combines them with post-modern elements and his own personal movement style to create what he calls “post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern dances.” His work has been presented nationally and internationally in the United States, Europe, and Africa.

Wilson was the recipient of the 2000-01 Minnesota Dance Alliance’s McKnight National Fellowship. Wilson is also a 2002 BESSIE-New York Dance and Performance Award recipient for his work The Tie-tongued Goat and the Lightning Bug Who Tried to Put Her Foot Down and a 2002 John Simon Guggenheim Fellow. Most recently, in recognition of his creative contributions to the field, Wilson was named a 2009 United States Artists Prudential Fellow and is also the 2009 recipient of the Herb Alpert Award in Dance. Most recently, Wilson received the 2012 Joyce Foundation Award for his new work (project) Moseses Project, premiering 2013 as well as being an inaugural Doris Duke Artist.

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As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. YDT’s mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.
On the first day the 2013 Yale Dance Theater company had the chance to work with Reggie Wilson, he stood in the corner, observing as any professional choreographer does, the dancers he was about to work with warming themselves up. Over the course of his six-week residency at Yale, we learned excerpts from his body of dances spanning from the 1980s through today. These included the gumboot dance, which Reggie created and performed as a student at New York University’s Tisch School of Arts; big brick, originally a dance for four men which we, the men and women of the full YDT company, performed; Reggie’s solo, which we all learned but which remained a solo; the Koch curve, a fractal dance based on the repeating patterns Helge von Koch discovered in snowflakes; the dew wet, a duet; another duet; the finger dance, or the pointing; and “the poses,” or one-two-three. Most of these are not proper names for the dances, which were a sampling of the past twenty-five years of Reggie’s work, but they are how we identified them. Words, for Reggie, were not as meaningful as dancing itself—and with Reggie, we danced, and transcended.

Reggie refers to his work as “post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern dancing,” a term you will read throughout these posts. This mish-mesh of adjectives combined in a mold-breaking way to create a personal and inimitable genre is Reggie through and through. His movement draws on the blues as well as African slave and spiritual cultures in the Americas and the Diaspora, and between broad heritages he adds his own post-modern touches and original style.

Since 1989 Reggie has been infusing Brooklyn with his personal and wide-ranging choreography via his contemporary company, Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group. Wilson refers to this performance tradition as “clapping and stomping, shouting and hollerin’,” a subversive art born out of African spiritual tradition. Enslaved Africans’ traditions
reinvented themselves in the Americas, where drums were
denied but the soulful energies lived on in the new form,
circumventing authorities who dismissed the clapping and
stomping “as merely ‘fist and heel worshipping.’”

Reggie’s has presented his work at venues including Dance
Theater Workshop, Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, UCLA Live,
Contemporary Arts Center (New Orleans), Summerstage
(NYC), Linkfest and Festival e’Nkundleni (Zimbabwe), Dance
Factory (South Africa), Danças na Cidade (Portugal), Festival
Kaay Fecc (Senegal) and The Politics of Ecstasy (Germany).
Reggie has also traveled to research spiritual traditions that
inform his dancing, crossing from the Mississippi Delta (where
his family has roots) to Trinidad and Tobago to all corners
of the African continent. For Reggie, as he told us dancers, his
travels were not just about what he could learn from local cul-
tures, but also about what he could share and transmit in return.

Among Reggie Wilson’s dance mentors are Phyllis Lamhut
and Ohad Naharin. Now that Reggie is inspiring the next gen-
eration, his contributions to dance have been recognized though
awards including Minnesota Dance Alliance’s McKnight
National Fellowship, BESSIE and a Guggenheim Fellowship.
His upcoming work, Moseses Project, some of which YDT danc-
ers had a chance to learn, will premiere in Fall 2013.

Much as his choreographic tradition blends diverse move-
ments, Reggie blended the excerpts he shared with YDT into
a seamless whole: Draft. As a dancer, Reggie rejects the
academic inclination to mark movements inside the mind—he
wanted to see the movement full-on, because only when the
dance bursts out of the mind and into the body does it become
what it has always strived to be. Yet Reggie also draws on
interdisciplinary traditions, from the mathematics in fractals to
literature in Zora Neale Huston’s Moses, Man of the Mountain.
In introducing her work, considering the power of Moses
in Africa, Hurston asks, “[W]ho can talk with God face to face?
Who has the power to command God to go to a peak of moun-
tain and there demand of Him laws with which to govern a
nation?” We all have our Moseses, our leaders, and maybe, for
a winter in Connecticut, Reggie Wilson became a Moses to us.
In a few weeks, I’m up to preach at the church where I intern. The day I’ve been assigned is Transfiguration Sunday, and while I usually keep my church work and religious life to myself, this idea of Transfiguration keeps coming into my head as I think about the work we’ve been doing in YDT.

The Transfiguration, a part of the Christian tradition, is a story about a moment on a mountaintop when some of Jesus’ closest friends see a changed Jesus conversing with Elijah and Moses. I don’t really get the Transfiguration, and I still have no idea what I’m going to say about it in a few weeks. But I keep coming back to the physicality, both within the story and within the word “transfiguration” itself.

For me, the word “transfiguration” seems to describe dance. It’s a changing figure—a body in transition. And it seems particularly apt for Reggie’s work—a transfiguration not just in our bodies in the moment as we perform the movements, but also a transfiguration of our minds in the moment, as we think through and of the movement.

There’s another part of the story that I’ve carried into the studio, and which Reggie’s work and teaching has illuminated for me. The language of the story as told in the book of Luke is very physical, but more than that, it is very definite. Down is DOWN, unequivocally, in a deeply felt and completely committed way. There is no half-assing down, or up, or the experience itself.

In hearing about how Reggie has come to create this movement we’ve started to learn, the theme of transfiguration keeps coming to me. The idea of change and transformation seems to be everywhere. I see it particularly in the way Reggie has sought and learned and gathered different ideas and movement—and then made it his own, transfigured it into something new and individual.
At issue is the assuming, of movement, itself. I could have said “learn” instead of “assume,” but learning is not so straightforward as that: maybe assume reminds that there are palpably various ways to get at the ability to repeat (uniquely individually of course) a given pattern. Concerning this project of writing a blog, to which each student participant in Yale Dance Theater contributes, Reggie encouraged us to start by taking what is “relevant” to us personally, individually, antecedently, as a center point from which to approach our experience of his work: how is, or isn’t, what Reggie does with us relevant, involved with or in conversation with our own values. A critical or investigative stance pivoting on self-recognition. More broadly, he emphasizes as well his intention to offer us an “experience” by his sojourn with YDT: what does he mean? That, rather than just “learn”—what might mean dryly acquire the ability to repeat back what is instructed, we might try to know the time we spend working with him experientially—which would be something more like feeling (in the colloquial sense of a multisensory amalgam) through the unfinished states of learning; knowing that we know by trying and doing. Reggie is interested in us, as students, considering this experiential process. A rendition of self to immediate experience, including its potential vagaries. Thus, Reggie would like to hear us speak from experience—to ask him questions that arise from a processual attention to experiencing, as opposed to asking objectively or academically interesting or appropriate questions that haven’t themselves registered the sway of the doing of the movement on their framework, bite, rationale. An intellectual sensitivity to self as experiential.

But perhaps even closer to the crux, he would also like to see us move from an experiential intelligence—to note the rote and thence note the specific divergence of a new movement directive, as yet unaccomplished, from the rote we know. This actually becomes a question of technique—but especially technique of bridging technique. The challenge is to recognize differential—between what I see Reggie or one of his dancers do, and what of my habitual movement vocabulary might most closely approximate that. Approximation, a rough application of what I know to what I don’t, doesn’t make the cut. The challenge is to take the leap… to recognize, identify, and analyze (one way or another) the zones of a phrase of movement that I do not know, do not know how to perform, and without skipping a beat go into that because even though I don’t know it, I feel it. An instantaneous merging with what I don’t know based on what I already feel of it; almost pre-empting self.

Last Wednesday Reggie emphasized, in response to an observation by Emily Carson Coates, that it is the body that has, that does, that makes possible diverse dance practices. But what he seems to be enjoining us to enable, at least eventually, is more like a multiplicity of body/bodies which we might very swiftly assume and reassure. Reggie and his dancers both note the choreographer’s interest in contrast as a compositional motor: meaning for instance that movement in his phrasings may not seem to “follow” one another in a fluid, consistent manner, but rather
elaborate striking dynamic, directional, dimensional changes. From what Reggie tells us, besides looking directly at his work, this essentially rhythmic proclivity has an influence in African diasporic expressive culture, and a palette of movement or qualitative motifs drawing on quite diverse cultural and aesthetic heritages—touchstones including South African gumboot dance, downtown postmodern dance of New York City’s final 20th century decades, Spiritual Baptist traditions of Trinidad and Tobago, classical ballet, Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, Tai Chi... Reggie encourages quick, high contrast, even surprising changes of physicality: though some precision is wanting in the description, technically it requires throwing oneself into another body, and then another, and then another. And technically this requires, as Reggie has emphasized and as seems quite fruitful, a “core orientational focus” on, in, the pelvis. A unifying orientation of bodily focus for a diversifying or multiplying assumption of body.
I was really intrigued by the idea that a body holds not only organs, veins and bones, but also history, culture and experiences. Before working with Reggie, I assumed that the latter three were stored in the mind: we remember our history, contemplate our culture, and recall experiences. And yet I failed to realize that muscle memory, that which is so crucial for dancers to develop, remembers more than just choreography. It actually inhabits my history, my culture and my experience.

I made this connection between mental and corporeal recollection during the first week. Our first class consisted of footwork and hand clapping. At first I was a bit crestfallen about the fact that we weren’t going to plunge into full-body, sweat-inducing contemporary dance. But then it hit me that I had previously studied a dance genre that also concentrated on footwork and handclapping: flamenco. Coordinating my hand- and footwork tickled my brain at first, but then I realized that my mind and body were engaging in a form of movement that was vaguely familiar and becoming increasingly more so. It’s as if I had been assigned to flex a muscle that had been activated for many years. My flamenco memory was dormant but had been awakened with the gumboot choreography.

But the culture that is instilled in my body has been alive and well. I’m in love with the music that Reggie uses for class and the primary reason is because it’s so familiar to me. Puerto Rico, where my father is from, is a Caribbean island whose music and culture was very much influenced by Afro-Caribbean music so what is a popular African pop song sounds a lot like a merengue or a Brazilian samba. When I don’t even think about my, my body just enters Latin-mode and I’ll instinctively start doing some merengue.
Reggie Wilson and dancers
Dancing with Reggie brought back buried memories of my very first ballet classes. I was once again struggling with my own body as I was desperately trying to imitate a movement. Since the age of 10 I have been learning to control every possible muscle in my body, forcing it to realize unnatural shapes. This feeling of confusion had passed long ago as I attended regular ballet lessons. Learning Reggie’s choreography brought back memories of blankness. The movements I was learning were new to me and the awkwardness came back as my body parts felt uncoordinated and completely lost. It felt like a new beginning.

I found it challenging memorizing Reggie’s choreography. The parts he showed us were not defined phrases, and counts were inexistent. I only had time to get an idea of the movement and soon realized that I had to think through movements on my own. I had to stay open to ideas, listen to my body, and analyze its reaction towards Reggie’s combinations. Ballet lessons introduced me to musicality, which I have always thought of as a dancer. In Reggie’s work, I discovered how music does not seem to control a body. For many traditional dance forms, what a body can and cannot do is superfluous—it is merely about what a body should do. From perfect pirouettes to multiple jumps that seem to suspend in midair, dancers are told what they should do. Even in last year’s project with Merce Cunningham’s choreography, I felt a constant awareness of what my body should look like in motion, what the rhythms of my footsteps should sound like. Usually, the word I associate the most with dance is “should.” Not so with Reggie’s work.

Anna, one of the Fist & Heel dancers, told us that Reggie self-described (facetiously?) his work as “post-African neo-hoodoo modern dance.” Coming from a background of mostly jazz and ballet, I was flummoxed by post-African neo-hoodoo modern dance. I didn’t know what I should be paying attention to when he demonstrated the choreography, I didn’t know what my body should look like when executing the movement. I didn’t know how to approach this incredibly new movement at all. Where does one begin when one’s body is backing away, shaking its head, and saying, “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t?” It was beautiful to watch, but I had no conception of how I could make my own body replicate the action.

At this point, after several weeks of rehearsal,
As a dancer, I live for those moments—when everything falls away and it’s just my body in space, those are the moments that keep me dancing. In a recent discussion after rehearsal we talked about them as “trance moments.” Instead, I like to think of the sensation as losing myself. Inspired by Robert Frost’s poem “Directive,” I describe it as losing myself just enough to find myself, then making myself at home. The image feels so apt, for in those moments, I feel myself lost in the movement, but at the same time I find home…within me.

In rehearsal, Reggie implores us to listen to our bodies, to think about our bodies. He said once, “How you think about your body becomes how you use your body.” When he said that, it struck me. For so long, I had thought of the mind and body as separate entities. I never thought to put them in conversation with each other. Working with Reggie however, I’ve realized how important this conversation is.

Dancing with Reggie, it is always all about the pelvis. To know where your pelvis is at any given time, that is the key. For Reggie—and so many other dancers/choreographers—the pelvis is the dancer’s home base, the body’s home base. It is the starting point of our alignment and it anchors us. If you know where the pelvis is you can know not only where you are, but also where you’ve been and where you’re going.

But to use the pelvis as your anchor, you must first think about the pelvis. You must know your body deeply. Once you’ve achieved this knowing, it becomes that much easier to inhabit your body, to lose yourself in space and find your home within. I think that’s the magic of Reggie’s movement. Drawing from movements of the African diaspora, from post-modern dance, from various times and places, Reggie keeps the pelvis as the constant anchor. If his dancers think about the pelvis and use the pelvis, they can find that glorious sense of home.

Finding Home

And if you’re lost enough to find yourself
By now, pull in your ladder road behind you
And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me,
Then make yourself at home
—“Directive,” Robert Frost
Dancing Reggie Wilson’s technique has reassured me of the connection of the mind to the body. One of the classes I am enrolled in this semester is the Introduction to Modern Philosophy. The class has focused on reconstructing the arguments Descartes makes in his Meditations of First Philosophy. At the beginning of the Meditations Descartes convinces himself to doubt everything. The only thing that he can be sure of is that “I am thinking, therefore I exist”. When I first encountered this argument, I interpreted the “I” Descartes referred to, to mean the mind. To me, it seemed his argument meant that the mind could exist without the body. Therefore, the body could not exist. This conclusion seemed valid to me, but it went against what I intuitively felt to be true.

As a dancer I am very aware of my body. My body is my instrument to create art. I can distinctly perceive the differences in flexibility between my left and right ankles. I notice as muscles that were less flexible two weeks ago, gradually gain flexibility. When I am studying as a Yale student I tend to neglect the presence of my body and focus on thinking by using my brain. What I have discovered while dancing Mr.Wilson’s technique is that the body can think too. I am better able to actually letting my body think. My mind simply focuses on where each movement ends and begins in order to connect them.

Dancing is similar to riding a bike. After you spend a lot of energy familiarizing yourself with the movement, your body simply knows what to do. I simply have to focus my mind away from the idea of the movement and to the actual movement.

Elizabeth Quander
February 13, 2013

There is a fear of speaking, and an even greater fear of writing. I circumvented this block around writing by finding other means for expression, like dance and photography. In doing so, I ended out re-enforcing my obstacle. The process of writing has come to feel like a straightjacket. Writing has become an oppressive process. It left me feeling constricted, clumsy and violated. It took me a month to start writing this blog. Actually I have not written my first blog yet, this is the second assignment. I would put aside time after rehearsal to sit in front of my computer and swipe my fingers across the keyboard, helplessly. This exercise of narrating a choreography first scared me, and then I considered it as an attempt to unblock the writing process.

Writing about dance seems absurd to me, since I dive into dancing and into my body instead of writing.

In my body, sweating, ragged, bare and tiny. Awkward and uncomfortable. And strangled, silenced by the loudness of words and the weight of my flesh. At first these limbs are distant. But then there is cold ground and movement around. I must shake my limbs before the first group ends. I shake my body as a big bird on the ground shaking its feathers lazily before flight, or an attempt to jump into thin air. I feel like Baudelaire’s ugly Albatross, not quite made for this environment, I am clumsy in my body and terribly unwelcome. Reggie’s “shake” helps me release this tension, I get rid of my epistemological barriers, I get out of that body, I shake off the ugliness.

Indrani Krishnan-Lukomski
March 4, 2013
and imagine drops of water, dust and mud fly in each direction. It is a new rise.
I am cleansed and energized. There are ripples moving from inwards out and back again.
Where the frenzy that inhabits my soul embraces the convulsions of my body.

One step, a second step I am not listening to the music yet. With my third step I tune in. There is a beat there is a cry. I do not know what we called this song. The long? the short? It is the one with breath and cries and moans. It is the one we learnt with Anna and Raja. I drag my right leg out and place my weight on top of it. I just sat on those big air/sand cushions, and the air is gushing in every direction under my weight. The noise of air collapsing through a pressed bag. A cushion of bursting energy ready to spring back into motion. But first it is a slow movement and in it I collect strength. It is a statement. I am. And I feel others around what I am at this moment, not who and acknowledge what I am for collect strength. It is a statement. I it is a slow movement and in it I spring back into motion. But first of bursting energy ready to pressed bag. A cushion ing through a
laps-
col-
noise of air
under my weight. The
the air is gushing in every direction
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collaps-
ing through a
pressed bag. A cushion
of bursting energy ready to
spring back into motion. But first
it is a slow movement and in it I
collect strength. It is a statement. I
have to look at myself in the mirror, and acknowledge what I am for what I am at this moment, not who I am. And I feel others around me making that same statement of presence.

Breathe in. Sharp. It is as though I were plunging under water. A preparation. When I go under water, I disconnect. Soaking in the bath, I breathe in before plunging underneath to hear nothing but the beating of blood against my eardrums. It is like a form of meditation. Nothing else exists. You only exist within; the rest is blurred and distant. And so I breathe in. I breathe into my senses, everything else receding into soft focus. I cannot clearly perceive those around me, but I will feel the ripples as someone kicks through the water besides me. The wave hits me, and so the ripples of water become ripples of energy in the dance studio.

So I breathe into that dimension before jumping into the phrase. Before pivoting with the force of my arms swaying under and above. It is a ball that I throw to those next to me. When Reggie leads the warm up. When he brings his shoulders to his ears and I know what is coming: the tension builds, builds in the neck, the tension of the week: it hangs us from above and there we are suspended by that energy, waiting for release… and then it comes, that moment when we can cut the cord and release, and scream, and shout and drop down. There I release that tension of the breath as I throw both my arms and right leg. Arms, arms, Shoulder, shoulder, elbow, elbow: a moment of ease has arrived. Of unconfined energy and unthought movement.

This drop. A missed flight of steps. A low shutter speed photograph. A heart beat that dropped. Weightless. A split second in midair. An exhalation, like one you would do in the fresh night air to test your vapor. But before it dissipates you’re spinning. There is no story. There is only now. There is only flow. There is only forms in space and senses in time. Pascal’s division of time. An infinite present. Music notes. The vapor is still there in suspension and I swivel to see it fly to pieces: dispersed and disappearing like a balloon of dust just burst and flying in the air, the energy bursts in every direction. Slow motion and sharp at the same time.

When I contain the motion. My foot turns out, twisting through my heel. It is when I try to seem composed. But it is there tugging at my leg. Wake up. Morning call, the top of my body follows the movement effortlessly before falling back into position. The movement is an opening of the chest, and brings my sensual satisfaction: Because I predict my next second where I will give into the impulse. It is a tingle in my stomach. A little twitch: like when someone pinches your lower thigh, just above knee level. That tingle. It is acknowledged joy where I consciously accept the movement and follow the impulse. I thrust my arms in the air, and I cannot help but be dramatic, whole body following the movement and dragging my steps. And what a flow.

The energy pulls me forward. An energy that sucks me in, which is why my movement is motivated by the opening of the chest that pursues itself into my arms and whole body falling into those small forward steps. Before coming to halt on the edge of a cliff. The cliff is not emptiness. It is a great open landscape. A landscape of possibilities, and of unrestricted movement: the edge of the scene and of the stage. On the edge between performance and wholeness. The limit to which the dancer can entirely let go of everything, and I walk towards it, considering it.

There I catch my breath. The call of emptiness that had drawn me forward, sucked me into its impulse. My internal voice moans, but its the moan of a weight lifter. When I dance I place sounds to energy, in the same way Raja does. I have cries, loud breaths, moans and shrieks for movements and their according energies. So here my sound, it’s like that of the weight lifter trying to make that first motion up, like when you are lying in bed and you give yourself a little motivational cry to contract those abs and sit up straight. I have this deep frustration when dancing. It always feels slightly off, slightly wrong. I try to find myself entirely connected to the movement, and the moment that I do, I suddenly mess up. I get
it wrong, I miss a step, hit someone, fall out of rhythm; just when I thought I had accessed that point, the point of letting go.

Here I am on that edge of the cliff, sucked in by the energy of emptiness, and I have to pull out from it. The cry fades as my leg effectively forces me back to the middle of the scene, where the action is happening. It is back in a flung arabesque, but my body is still there gazing at the horizon one last time before energetically giving into the motion. It is a choice, and the choice propels me in my swirl -feet lift the ground,-loose, -air,-wind,-freeze,-cross arms, -breathe out, -place yourself, -place your shoulders, -center the weight, -be present . Feel the tension flowing through those crossed arms as though they were crossed overlapping highways and cars, energy zooming down one forearm, lane, onto the next, up the shoulder down the back through the left. Like a giant rollercoaster in a figure of eight.

My heart is still pounding and when I can’t take it anymore I let it all out, throw arms down, the release, the shaking, the throwing, the sound in my mind mimics our shrieks when warming up with Reggie, that furious rage. This is the point when I breathe in again. And for some reason, this is also when I remember how every Wednesday night, I have two essays to write. That helps me swing into the weird “go through your legs and swing your body along”. The risk, the chance, the intent, I need to move away from something. To throw the weight off my back. Probably also because blood is flowing through my neck to my eyes, and I start to feel claustrophobic and once again conscious of my physical trap.

At that moment, my eyes, they always seem lost in the distance, pleading. My arms are outstretched and then, I feel so vulnerable. As though I had just been caught in a moment of utmost deliverance, one where I let the world see how desperate I am. And there my arms are suspended, a little hopeless as though I just let something I was firmly clutching fall to the ground, and shatter. Let my composure fall and shatter. I am plié, arms relaxed and outstretch, gaze lost and asking for something. Do you know why I move? Do you know why I threw it away? Why I had to shake it all off? But that’s hardly a split second. It’s the captured moment when we awake and have no idea where we are, it hardly lasts a moment, and then everything is normal again? And I can go on with my movement. It is all unconscious again and just about the present time again. This arabesque is a stretch. To the tip of my finger to my extended foot, I could nearly shake from the energy and force I am putting into the extension. It travels from the inside out, like a blossom. Like a drop of coffee on paper-towel. When all the energy there is has been consumed, when I feel the satisfaction nestling into my muscles, as a yawn or a stretch, I release. And the sound of my head is exactly that of a yawn coming to an end. I fall backwards. I imagine gushing air, the noise of a high speed train passing right through your ear. Or standing just a little too close to the sidewalk edge when the bus swoops by. I let the potential movement drag me and I fall with the extended leg, pulled out of place by the motion. Falling into movement. Falling into release.
I lunge, sitting into my hips, staring straight ahead into nothing. My right arm picks itself up, dragging the rest of my body with it to the left so that I’m facing the back. The arm continues swinging as my leg follows. I jab my elbow once, twice to the right, not making a big deal of it, just letting my arms and legs do their thing. I stop.

I plie abruptly, letting my pelvis sink where it wants to. Pivoting to my right, I walk to the upstage left corner. I halt, showing off my left heel once, then a second time with a nice twisting gesture of my arms overhead. My left heel reaches to the left, causing the rest of my body to fall after it, then walking once, twice. I plie only to reach out with my right heel, which drags me forward, forcing me to turn and lurching my right leg out to the side and back. I step back to stop. My right arm bends and wraps around and so does my left, meeting each other in a folded “I Dream of Genie” gesture. I lean forward, shoving my hands to the grand and stepping right-left-right.

I pivot to the right, sinking into a slight plie as my head begins to tilt forward while my right heel lifts off the ground, leading the rest of my right leg into a straightened position as my left arm falls until it is perpendicular with the floor. There is a moment of falling. Until I land, and walk. Only to let my fingers be carried by a string on the ceiling so that the rest of my body can swivel around easily.

This description could go on and on, but I’m going to stop it here, simply because writing this made me want to dance, so I’m going to, and I’m realizing also that the poetry I’ve created here is actually what happens when I’m dancing. Even if it’s more difficult to see, the same listening occurs. Between choreography and body and vision and mind, the same sort of beauty and clumsiness and rawness emerges. I guess that’s how I feel dancing.

Reggie’s choreography: I feel raw. Like I’m announcing: This is it, folks. This is me. This isn’t a character. This is real, live Elena, without artifice. I feel as if, by following my body’s cues, I’m following my truest self, my most real reality. It’s scary and fun and exciting and difficult all at the same time. I didn’t expect that simply feeling my pelvis under-neath me could actually lead to a sort of exposure of myself through dance. In short, thanks Reggie, for forcing some rawness out of me.
"I've never heard of a fractal dance," said my friend, when, after seeing a book on fractals in the trunk of her car, I tried to explain Reggie’s work. In the age of technology, I relied on the pending video in lieu of words to explain.

Before I worked with Reggie, I had never seen a fractal dance either. Yet what I love most about Reggie’s work is how it interweaves curiosities—be they about fractals or Moseses. Dance may be the most lively art, and for a choreographer to draw inspiration from all of life is fitting.

Though I know very little about religion myself, I was drawn to Reggie’s explanation of his upcoming work, Moses. The Koch Curve, the fractal dance, is a part of Moses—and its repetition fits the Moses theme—the many forms of leaders and prophets, and the dancers following the leaders up and down life’s curve.

Moses is sometimes considered a lawgiver, and Moses’ mystery and leadership make the idea that your Moses reveals your self more meaningful than similar ideas about defining a person by the company she keeps.

I don’t know who my Moses is, but my Moses must be a dancer.

This isn’t that kind of jump, Moses warned me, or even that kind of dance, but how else could we move when gravity was over our heads and the sea was so red our blood ran clear—when you leap so deep underwater even the desert can be a Promised Land. Moses was another riddle, floating on the Dead Sea. Because if the sea is so dead, what do the seafloor dancers eat? And where do they breathe? And how did fifteen seafloor dancers plié on the underside of the sky?
Never Stand Still

March 27, 2013
Molly Haig

Walk forward. Stay in plié.
Roll right shoulder back.
Keep walking. Keep the plié.
Left shoulder back.
Stage light changes you.
You feel its warmth on your cheekbones and raise your chin to meet it, half-conscious of a ballet teacher’s instructions to lift your face to the last balcony, although there is no balcony here.
Reach both arms up, straight.
Feel the tension in your shoulders, caught between your floating humeri in their sockets.

An Experiment
You’ve stopped. This feels different.
Awkward, legs pressing together, knees bent. Reach both arms forward, straight, but this time, press your palms together. Your arms form a V with the point extending downstage corner.

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You’ve stopped. This feels different.
Awkward, legs pressin...
I found this free-write/thick description/poem that I wrote the night after our performance, and am posting it now as my final post for the Reggie Wilson residency.

We open to the audience, the last heel dig into the floor—Ba dum, dum dum, out out, in in… My peripheral vision on Karlanna the involuntary inhalation—Anticipation given breath and bone. I see/hear/feel it successional/then all at once, not realizing our unison in breath and body until we feel the pelvis pull back, push front—tiny increments made miles in microsync.

In an exhalation, the span of evolution.

Now there goes the world.
It shoots down the elbow and flings from the wrist.

BOOM
Your side is your front:
A universe of difference
where we once walked slow circles in silent space.

The angle of the light. Everything.
Curved over the electric potential—Bang!
Cross! Surge into right foot, electric drill spiral down WHOOSH, like turning of a dime, is sucks you under and in and down then BURST! You’re up and you see the backs of heads of those around you, then falling
(Elena
Karlanna
Indrani
Clairissa)

the reminder of gravity’s down! No! Too free, too much force to fall it’s a JUMP down, pulled back into the tide, feet begging contact, legs bend deep deep into the briefest reciprocal push

Then up. Thrown like a starfish. “I can’t be up here,” you whisper to the ground when it’s already nearing over

That force—Unimaginable! A throw AND a tug, it must be. I threw my other self into space into freedom and the rope on my pelvis tugged me and I felt an intake of breath pull up like a yank then I’m a cloud and there’s roaring at my limbs and soft peace that floats at the center

I see ground below
I am slug over cities
flung over fields
sprung over seas
There’s enough space up her for ten of me, and in the time it takes to fall
I realize I fly
Nearer to the ground and I’m less—to save myself from the force of so many of me all falling
Plié. And it’s already gone.
Shoulders back as the knee presses forward. I’m down, use my arm, my arm must pull me around and up. Torso cycles over forced arch feet
Arms spiraling side left, down. Clarissa’s yellow presence speeds up and pulls me to join her as we near the horizon, the sound barrier—then Hit it! Break up, fall and slice the air a satisfying sweep, coupé arm comes over, I’m down—“END THIS DANCE!” echoes in my ears then the words are in my blood and they’re pounding against my eardrum, in my pulse, in panting breaths
Huuuh huh huuuh huh huhh—Pelvis underneath you. Facing down. Straight leg parallel.
I imagine that my slowing heart-beat is dimming the lights
that my body is letting this all go, that it’s not being taken away from me

Aren Vastola
April 21, 2013

Final Showing From the Reggie Wilson Residency

on Reggie Wilson
Yale Dance Theater 2013
Part II: Akram Khan

Lecture/Demonstration
April 30, 2013
8 pm
Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School
177 College Street, New Haven, CT

This evening's program includes movement material from the following works:

KAASH (2002)
BAHOK (2008)
VERTICAL ROAD (2010)

Choreography by Akram Khan
Rehearsal direction by Eulalia Farro Ayguade and Young Jin Kim of the Akram Khan Company
With music selections by Nitin Sawhney from the Akram Khan Company repertoire

Yale Dance Theater

Caroline Andersson (MC ’15), Amymarie K. Bartholomew (DC ’13), Lauren Dawson (JE ’16), Derek DiMartini (ES ’13), Lila Ann Dodge (AFST MA ’14), Laura Fridman (BC ’15), Molly Haig (DC ’14), Karlanna Lewis (LW ’15), Indrani Krishnan-Lukomski (JE ’15), Elena Light (JE ’13), Clarissa Marzán (PC ’14), Elizabeth Quander (SY ’15), Zoe Reich-Aviles (DC ’15), Aren Vastola (BK ’14), Cecillia Xie (TC ’13)

Faculty Director: Emily Coates
YDT Coordinators: Elena Light, Aren Vastola
YDT Producers: Laurel Durning-Hammond, Yuvika Tolani

This Lecture/Demonstration concludes the second half of Yale Dance Theater's semester-long investigation into the choreography of contemporary artists working today. Part I focused on the work of Brooklyn-based Reggie Wilson; Part II shifts our attention to British-Bangladeshi artist Akram Khan. Over the course of the rehearsal process, YDT dancers document their research on the YDT blog. For more information on the project and to read the dancers' writing visit: http://ydtp.commons.yale.edu/.

YDT’s spring 2013 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College and the Lionel F. Conacher and Joan T. Dea Fund, in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.
We would like to extend special thanks to Susan Cahan, Penelope Laurans, Nina Glickson, Brian Lizotte, Tom Delgado, Nathan Roberts, Kathryn Krier and the UP staff, Paul McKinley, Michael Marsland, Matthew Regan, Pam Patterson, Susan Hart, Alexa Schlierer, May Brantley, the faculty of Theater Studies, Kelly Wuzzardo, Suzannah Holsenbeck, Joan T. Dea and Lionel F. Conacher, Jonathan Edwards College, Bia Oliveira, Akram Khan, and the Akram Khan Company.

About the Artist

Akram Khan is one of the most acclaimed choreographers of his generation working in Britain today. Born in London into a family of Bangladeshi origin, he began dancing at seven and studied with the renowned kathak dancer and teacher Sri Pratap Pawar. Khan began presenting solo performances of his work in the late 1990s, maintaining his commitment to classical kathak as well as developing modern work. He was Choreographer-in-Residence and later Associate Artist at the Southbank Centre London. Khan is currently an Associate Artist of MC2: Grenoble and Sadler’s Wells, London in a special international co-operation. DESH (2011), Khan's first full-length contemporary solo is a part-autobiographical work which is at once intimate yet epic. Khan's latest contemporary ensemble work Vertical Road (2010) and recent creation Gnosis (2009), where he combined his classical Indian and contemporary dance roots, received critical acclaim and continue to tour worldwide. Khan's notable company works are bahlol (2008), originally produced in collaboration with National Ballet of China; Variations (2006), a production with London Sinfonietta in celebration of Steve Reich’s 70th birthday; ma (2004), with text by Hanif Kureishi; Kaash (2002), a collaboration with artist Anish Kapoor and composer Nitin Sawhney.Besides his company work, Khan also created duets: In-I (2008) with Oscar-winning actress Juliette Binoche, Sacred Monsters (2006) with internationally acclaimed dancer Sylvie Guillem, and award-winning zero degrees (2005) with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui in collaboration with Antony Gormley and Nitin Sawhney. He recently choreographed a section of the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony. Khan has been the recipient of numerous awards throughout his career including the Laurence Olivier Award, the prestigious ISPA (International Society for the Performing Arts) Distinguished Artist Award, South Bank Sky Arts Award, UK Critics’ Circle National Dance Award and The Age Critics’ Award (Australia). Khan was awarded an MBE for services to dance in 2005. He is also an Honorary Graduate of Roehampton and De Montfort Universities, and an Honorary Fellow of Trinity Laban.

About Yale Dance Theater

Yale Dance Theater (YDT) is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and/or development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance.

As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. YDT’s mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.
This past spring, 2013, Yale Dance Theater became the first dance program at an American university to study the repertory of Akram Khan, staged by two of his former company members. This project has been international in scope, and a momentous step for dance and dance studies in the Ivy League. Two rehearsal directors, Eulalia Ayguade Farro of Spain and Young-Jin Kim of South Korea, spent several weeks living on the Yale campus and leading three-hour rehearsals three times a week. Both of these incredible dancers have received international acclaim, and through their generous teaching we were able to learn excerpts of *kaash* (2002), *bahok* (2008), and *Vertical Road* (2010).

Khan, a renowned Bangladeshi-British choreographer, has crafted a dynamic movement style by drawing upon his roots in classical Kathak dance as well as his experience with contemporary European forms. During the residency program, the dancers of YDT thus studied basic Kathak rhythm and footwork exercises, in addition to the Khan repertory.

It may be impossible to truly communicate the full-body experience of dancing Khan’s choreography, with its electric sharpness and ceaseless flow, but hopefully the reader will be able to find glimmers of the movement in these essays; we’ve tried to create writing that dances.

It was wonderful to hear audience members describe their reactions to Khan’s choreography after our lecture-demonstration. The work sparks creativity, and people saw in it “the resilience of the spirit,” “an answer to mortality,” and “something universal.” As Emily Coates, the program’s faculty director, once put it: “There are high stakes in this work.” As these essays will show, Emily’s statement carries great truth; students were spurred to tackle metaphysical questions of being and existence, or even compose poems inspired by the movement in our blog posts.
As an arts-based research initiative, the questions and methods of Yale Dance Theater change with each new project. This year’s residency was no exception, and students were pushed to experiment with new forms, new philosophies, and new approaches to investigating dance. For everyone, there was an invigoration of critical thought and an enlivenment of the whole, dancing self. This experience, like Reggie Wilson’s preceding residency, was a rediscovery of the unbridled joy to be found in raw physicality, and a reassertion of the creative, cultural, and even spiritual knowledge that comes only from dancing.

To really delve into Khan’s work, we had to reformulate our goals as we encountered the reality of learning movement that was entirely new and foreign. We had to abandon the desire to reach answers to preconceived questions and instead grapple with the process—a source of many small frustrations, but ultimately enormous fulfillment. Like the traveler in Khan’s *Vertical Road*, embracing this journey becomes a kind of faith. The physical work is unending, and the questions don’t have easy answers. Everything has a continuation.

Through committed effort, and full immersion in this choreography, our questions became fascinations, and finally celebrations of human curiosity, imagination, and, of course, movement. In conclusion, I would like to share a short poem by Rumi, as translated by Coleman Barks, whose writings have inspired some of Khan’s past work:

You push me into the dance.
You pull me by the ears
like the ends of a bow being drawn back.

You crush me in your mouth
like a piece of bread.
You have made me into this.

What exactly is “this” that Rumi writes of? It is another open-ended question, to both ponder and admire. Perhaps the reader can look for her or his own answers in the writings of the dancers on the following pages.
First Encounters

I have these blisters on my feet now
(underneath my big toes)
From twisting, pushing
trying to hit the or in four
Sometimes twisting my arms I don’t know
If I’ve done it right
Until the explosion of arms
right on the or in four
Rebounding, I grab
something
maybe a staff
or an orb
of power
whatever it is, I know
it’s important
it has weight
I give it weight
where it doesn’t exist
between my hands
gripping the now-heavy air
with fingers so alive
you can see them from the audience
Engaged in a battle (ritual?)
I’m only half-seeing
The sweep of my hands against my body
(the last e in three)
The extension of my arms, planting my foot
(TWO. Don’t forget the head. Without the head it looks like
nothing)
I feel the energy in every motion
The way it crackles
arching
sweeping, now barely (briefly) contained
before brushing across my chest
dropping to my left
my hand
my gaze
on and not before the or in four
Here at the start
Breathing, looking left
Waiting for the drop
(One)

Protect Yourself (Brush Away the Dust)

We grow, doing less, and we are bigger
doing less—we follow our noses here,
to go there, to a time when we twirled
our beliefs in our fingers and raised our
curled hands—elbow, palm, unfurl—
to the clouds. If faith yanks your fingers,
faith, the impatient child who thrashes
in the mouth of the tiger, the audience
can see him from two thousand years
away. They taught us to make flowers
and half-flowers, and double flowers,
and tak, our feet answered, and doom,
doom, doom, doom. The dancers were
heavy as sound and swift as bells,
and when their bodies snaked stars
on the marley, we wanted to be birds
or warriors of air—a little more
vertical, with accents in our triangular
hips to punctuate the hush of our ribs,
when they melted through their cage.
There is no doubt that the movement we are learning is challenging, but what makes it challenging? On the surface, I would ascribe its difficulty to the sheer speed and intricacy of the choreography, but I think I am grappling with something more. What I am investigating is not only the physical exertion that the movement necessitates, but also the physical economizing that equally facilitates its execution.

I am realizing that much of my dance experience has vacillated between two philosophical and physical extremes—difficulty and ease. My first training was in ballet, a form that thrives in some ways on insurmountable goals. There is no doubt that the movement work, such as the slight shift of the hips to the supporting leg in a very high extension to the side, or the small opening of the hip in an arabesque. While this is by no means the only way of teaching ballet, it seems that many of these anatomical realities become “necessary evils,” hence the idea of difficulty by impossibility.

By contrast, the challenge and difficulty, both take on different meanings for different movers and movements.

When we began the Akram Khan material, I felt a sense of unrequited effort. I tried to imitate the percussively harsh yet fluidly continuous movements of Lali and Young Jin, but struggled to approximate them with my own body. It was as if I were pantomiming every sentence with an exclamatory mark, but not actually saying anything, or swinging a baseball bat and continually striking out. I saw the dynamism in Lali’s and Young Jin’s movements, but even once I began to grasp the mechanics, I was still unsure about how to economize my energy. How to exert and conserve is my lingering question.

The use of the term “energy” itself in teaching dance is fascinating to me, because it is a concept that floats between the metaphorical and the physical. We sometimes hear, “You shoot the energy from your fingertips,” or, “The energy builds up in the legs and then spirals through the spine.” In this sense it sounds almost magical. At other times, energy is a very specific physical request, such as, “Not so much energy; you won’t stop turning.” This correction asks for efficiency, for less force. Energy is mysterious because it refers to both the real exertion that accompanies movement and its own imaginary metaphor—an image that helps the dancer know how to move.

As Lali said during one rehearsal, you have to conserve energy to execute the movement, or you will never reach the speed and dynamic required. You have to find out what needs to work. She said that she always thinks about the work the legs are doing moving through space. But it’s true, the arms are incredibly specific (perhaps influenced by the intricate mudras, or hand positions, of Kathak) and following the arms gives the flow of the phrase.

The movements in Vertical Roads and Kaash are incredibly dynamic, with quick shifts of weight, a constant grounding in earth, but arm gestures that crackle, flow, sizzle, twist, and warp—fluent in fire, water, and wind. Each movement burns color into the air with the precision of lightning, and yet when I finish the phrase I feel like years went by—over and under different terrains, through architecture that falls away before it is even stabilized. Perhaps I am romanticizing the fusion of Kathak, with its ancient and rich history in Bangladesh and northern India, with contemporary European trends, but I truly feel a different sense time and space while dancing this choreography, feeling hints of a secret story in the dynamic rhythms.

Time and energy, as I have written about, converge most importantly in counting the dance. The counts are more than temporal information, i.e. divisions in a blank stretch of linear time: “wuun TWO! threee four one two THREE! fouur; one TWO! three FOUR!”

The rhythm is dynamic rather than metronomic, tangible rather than abstract. You hit movement on each count with bull’s eye accuracy, like punctuation rather than a trailing pause. The counts aren’t subdivisions of time chugging along. Rather, the counts are creating rhythm and dynamic. This is perhaps why the choreography’s treatment of time feels so different: Time doesn’t pass separately from the movement that happens within it. I think of the idea of a blank canvas. We can think about painting...
I wrote a blog post yesterday about the Akram Khan material, but it keeps inspiring me to write more and more. In the past I’ve veered away from overly impressionistic descriptions, but a course I’m currently taking (called Moving Texts) is an exploration of the fruitful interplay and dialogue between dance and creative writing.

Communicating the experience of dance through writing can be difficult; rather than viewing writing as the keyhole of a locked door, an incomplete glimpse of a subjective experience from which the reader is barred, I’m envisioning a photographic aperture. This device allows a small amount of light into a camera lens to create an image. Writing may not be able to “capture” the ineffable experience of dance, but, like a photograph, it speaks to the experience and frames it in a new way, shedding light on what could easily be passed by. It becomes something new.

Furthermore, dancing and language have been in dialogue in my mind, and the practice of writing about dance helps me form new ways of articulating these perceptions. The dancing is affecting my writing; I can feel the cadence of the rhythms as I write about the choreography, and as I search for synesthetic and imagistic ways to convey what I want to say.

I wanted to write about a piece that we are learning, called Vertical Road, which presents as much kinesesthetic challenge as its title implies. This is my response to the first snippet of a phrase:

We stand poised to move, breath quickening slightly to the rattling drum beats that punctuate the air.

"wuuunn—TWO!"

Drop to the ground. I’m never ready enough to embrace the jolt—a warrior suddenly reminded of the thousand years of accumulated dust that I am shedding.

The weight shift on three is like a return to the sun, trying to cup a tiny sphere of warmth, a disbelief in the light that my eyes track across the sky after eons of silence in clay vaults.

Wuuun two threeeee FOUR! Is a suspension longer than myself, my curved wrists cling to air with a rock-climber’s grip—the only break in verticality that keeps me from falling down the waterfall of my own body.

So sudden—

I become aware that I breathe without thinking

Arms snake up a sparkling trail
Fireworks burst and the movement lingers in smoke patterns
Ash that disperses with the wind
You inhale the gunpowder smell of the last movement
Right as you blaze on to the next
Everything crackles like fire and lingers like smoke
Each arm circle turns a wheel of a thousand years
But a twist of the hands
Caging energy
Disappears as quickly as embers thrown from a bonfire
Into the night
Tiny moment of vulnerability
Dreaming of flowers around my neck
What I thought would be
An inhalation of perfume
Awakens me to battle
Sharp shift of weight, supported in a crouching knee, leaning away from clawed hands that fend off danger
Then a swing of the arm that sounds like a roar at myself

as filling the canvas, or we can think about the canvas as bringing the painting into existence. The movements of these dances don’t fill time—they make it, shaping its dynamics and its rhythms. Counting becomes a palette of color instead of an incremented ruler.

I feel like time is not outside me while I’m dancing to these counts. The choreography is fast, but I am not racing to fulfill each movement at a certain speed. My task in the dance is to create time, not overcome it. Time is my achievement, not my competitor.
A dragon of energy
It loops through the hoop of my left arm
And births a baby snake that spits out
A tiny jewel a my feet
   The glint directs my gaze downward
   Now the movement is water
My arms stir spirals
   Like the current,
I am no longer a swimmer
But the sea swimming through itself
In a low crouch I feel my arms
   moving like mad to pull me back to
the surface, my arms wrap around
my head and my waist, as tight as holding breath, then
   TWO! Triumphantly dry and regal
I fling water from my hands
My head initiates the next step
Lungs—blowing a bubble larger than myself
I hold the iridescence by my skin
   Feeling the fragility of film
As it pulses with my breathing
   I inhale through my elbows

Then shatter the whisper into a crash
   The counts quicken and the movement becomes red—
Streaks of color that reinvigorate my blood
A reminder:
We all dance in the sky of a setting sun
   I too share colors. When I throw
my whole being into the count, I can feel them working,
   Space between beats echoes
the space between breaths between heartbeats
   Dance that sparks me into remembering to live
I am its rhythms and its colors
   Fire that burns no less energetically
Simply because smoke and ash promise immortality

Lila Ann Dodge
April 24, 2013

I.
More often than not, it is not enough just to invoke “momentum” as a quality of movement. Momentum manifests with qualitative difference depending on the succession of material it passes through; and further (or, the same said a little differently), how that material succeeds itself, how it is succession, how it allows specific allowance of momentum and specific resistance or deflection of momentum.

   In dance, momentum concerns mass of the body and gravity of the body, especially. As long as we are still dealing with live human bodies, it would not be fair—it would not be logical—to say that any genre or instance of dance movement (or, indeed, non-movement) is without mass or gravity (even for those experimenting limited gravity situations… link to come). But we could talk about how mass and gravity are deployed in the body—namely by their mobilizations, differentially.

   Particularly, the mass of the body is not strictly unitary. It is articulated. By bony structure, but also by other systems—organ, lymph, nervous, muscular, etcetera. There is necessary consistency to these systems that structure the body—the possibilities for moving them, moving by way of them, are concrete. But just as the possibilities are concrete, they are also many, and not necessarily all are always available at once. One could say I am a whole city within my skin, and as the supreme mayor (which, unfortunately or not, I don’t seem to be) I could set speed limits, limit automotive access, install barricades, foreclose houses, bomb subway systems, build monorails, encourage critical mass rides, prohibit panhandling, stun everyone all over with a transcendental firework display—at my “will”.

   There is something consistent about the phrase material we have been learning from Akram Khan’s dancers. Maybe we could describe it in terms of the momentous channels in which the composite movements seem to invest the bulk of their identity (their respective likeness to self). Is a set of anatomical references enough to characterize this? How can we characterize both the force and the stuff it passes through in order to refine our descriptions of quality of movement?

May 3, 2013

II.
When the term “energy” comes up it tends to point to a limit of explicability, but also to foreclose further specificity.

   The term is not un-useful: it comes up so often, particularly in certain circles (certain lineages of dance training in conversation with a certain lineage of somatic work and certain cultural milieus…) that this frequency alone indicates an importance to what it maybe fails to elucidate.

   To use the term “energy” typically seems to indicate really ‘getting something,’ ‘powerfully,’ but being at a loss as to how to unpack it, at a loss even literally as to how to ‘locate’ it—how to link up an experiential with a classificatory
Eulalia Farro Ayuguade of the Akram Khan Company rehearsing with dancers
what exactly, or at least what is the context of, what we are registering as such. Maybe it is not necessary to aim straight for “energy” itself to get more specific—maybe the most room for specificity, for ‘gaining ground’, is along its edges. Where does it happen; what is its trajectory; when does it come; how does my body rearrange when I think I’m feeling what I think these others mean by “energy”?

What I noticed, having studied a little Tai-ji, is that similarly in how Lali and Young Jin have been training us I am nudged toward a stance that encourages a clicking-into-place of viscously elastic relationship between the planes of the hands, the planes of the head (which is conversely the gaze) and the volume of the chest-to-abdomen zones. This elastic relationship does have to do with a distinct attention to, or technique of, weight shift—what I’ve heard often qualified as “pouring” weight, like water, from one bottom-point or vessel-zone of the body to another. This is only the roughest of sketches of where I might inquire further, but maybe it begins to focus in on this paradox of circuit/circulation: that perhaps the problem of what is circulating can be significantly alleviated by bringing more specificity to the relational composition of the elements of the circuit itself: how are the relational dispositions of (anatomically identifiable) elements of the circuit already ‘charge’?

In a split second the floor falls out from under me and a breath escapes my body. Impelled by communal impulse, I inhale deeply and my hands come together, immediately rising over my head. Both phrases, Vertical Road and Bahok, begin with dynamic movement; both begin with breath.

In Akram’s work, beginnings are of the essence. They are the entrance to the rest of the piece, the first impulse that will carry you through on a wave of inhales and exhales, an ebb and flow of expanding and contracting energy. But to let these waves impel you there the piece, you must achieve a certain intimacy with the steps. As Lali and Young Jin taught us excerpts from Akram’s work, they made sure to start with the basics and go SLOWLY. With each added count, they described the movement richly, showing it over and over again to clarify how it should look, how it should feel, how it should unfold from the last breath of energy, and how it should lead into the next. Most importantly however, the slowness of our introduction allowed for a specificity of weight. To do this work, you must know where your weight is at any given moment. The freedom of your energy requires that awareness; it requires that intentionality.

When this precise understanding is embodied, the movement can truly be danced. And when it is danced, dynamism and breath take over. The movement can carry you. During our rehearsals, Lali had the habit of making sounds for each movement: a sharp intake of breath, a long "shhh," "tak!" At first, the sounds were amusing, but not much more. Then, I reached a turning point. Just a week before our final performance, I felt the phrases seep into my body. I felt the awareness and intentionally that had otherwise evaded me—and when I got there, the sounds made more sense than ever. They weren’t just a personalized soundtrack to accompany the steps, but rather, a vocalization of the ever-present energy, rising and falling to make the breathing body of a movement phrase. That’s how I’ve come to think of Akram’s pieces: as breathing bodies.

In his work, the energy is almost palpable. Dancing these phrases, it’s almost as if the energy instructs you. It expands, it compresses, it hits, and it stretches, but it never stops. For this, the sense of rebound is invaluable. Throughout, breath is indispensable. Walking away, those are the two sensations I will remember most from Akram’s work: breath and dynamism.
If we were only dance—water that’s not wet, warriors with no shields, nothing but our primordial feet—their protozoan pulse, our flagella-fingers washing away our features—we could have spun into forever on one spring breath, but instead we were water that transpired into air, and our feet stretched into earth, and our hands blended with sky, but once we put words to it, the dance imprisoned itself into those words and nothing more. If my mother had seen us move, our Kathak rhythm—it’s good, she would say, and the dance would have stayed burning in our bellies, like the Olympic torch, or summer sand on your soles, or nothing but the sea keeping everyone at bay.

A lot of the posts so far have talked about the way energy works in Akram Khan’s choreography, and while I think energy is definitely important in his work, and what distinguishes it from others, I think control is a really important aspect of the energetic qualities in this work.

There is definitely a sense in some modern techniques that the energy is primary and the body is secondary and a result of that energy. Often there is a sense of starting with an energetic impulse that the body than must follow through on. In this situation there is a lag time between the energetic impulse and the completion of the movement, as if the body is always slightly behind and is catching up, a victim to these energetic impulses.

This is not how I experience Akram Khan’s work. As a dancer you are not following the energy, but actively shaping it. If you don’t, you either fail to capture the essence of the movement, or you are incredibly late. Yes, different energies are passing through you, but you are cultivating them, sculpting them, sending them out, drawing them back in. The path, even when circular, is direct, and if the energy shoots out of the arms or the hands, you are the one that brings it back in for the next movement. It doesn’t happen to you, you MAKE it happen.

So how do you become the master of the energy rather than the victim of it? The answer is not an intuitive one, at least not for me. The control lies in the smallest details. Its not just your arms that cut the air but the outside edge of your forearm turning in. you don’t throw your whole upper body back in around in order to achieve the effect of your body spiraling up, you shift your weight very clearly from...
Young Jin Kim of the Akram Khan Company
Caroline Andersson  
May 14, 2013  

1. Rhythms.  
In high school, I choreographed a dance to a metronome. The dancers’ stomps pounded out the rhythm of the dance, and at the end one dancer suddenly turned the metronome off. In college I joined the Step Team, and in YDT’s Cunningham project we stepped out meters in tandem as we danced to Jennifer’s snapping fingers. In Reggie’s work we learned a bit of African gumboot dancing and timed our movements to an ill-defined rhythm dependent on our own shifts of weight, the other dancers’ pelvises, and sporadic instructions shouted out during the course of the excerpt. And in the Akram Khan project, we stomped out kathak rhythms and meticulously pounded out seven-counts in our heads, using syllables and breath and “shh…TAK!” to stay in sync. Rhythms are fun because they remind us of a heartbeat. Rhythms are universal.

2. Dust  
The dancers in Vertical Road were covered in dust. We all wanted to be coated in dust, some of us even joked about buying a bag of flour at Stop&Shop and rolling around in it. It is so rare in serious dance study that one gets to be truly theatrical, which is odd since dance is inherently a visual, performing art meant, for the most part, to entertain. The severe beats, the huge triangle formation, and the fierce movements of Vertical Road made for an incredibly exciting experience both for the dancers and the audience. This sort of unbridled excitement is what is often missing in today’s dance that takes itself too seriously, and it is why, I believe, it is difficult to appreciate and enjoy watching modern dancing, especially without a dance background.

3. Learning  
I kept thinking about studying dance. Why is this project so groundbreaking? Dance combines music, visual arts, and theatrics. Yale students overwhelmingly flock to music, art history, and theater classes. They watch movies and TV shows regularly, constantly listen to music, and attend concerts out of genuine interest. The two large art museums on campus are some of the best in the country. Why, then, is dance such a niche? Why is the academic study of dance almost inherently linked with the practice of dance, and why do my friends come see me dance to be supportive, not because of an outside interest in dance? Anybody on the street could name dozens of musical artists and at least name a few famous painters throughout history, but would have trouble placing the name Margot Fonteyn. What is different? I think it’s because the practice of dance today lacks the theatricality, excitement, and accessibility that music and art provide. Choreographers like Akram Khan, paired with growing access to video material through the internet, can change this reality. Akram Khan uses props and stimulating music to actively engage both the audience and dancers. His collaborations (or attempts: see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SM8mk5xAOYI) with various artists (from Kylie Minogue to the National Ballet of China) show an interest in dance as a universal human practice, not as part of an elite cultural knowledge.
This is what the dust can do. Whenever I started Vertical Road I never thought about the pretentious meaning I sometimes felt like I had to stuff into my movement, or the lengthy and circular discussions we often had throughout the project. I thought of the verse “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” and thought of the terra cotta warriors, and how the music sounded like a heartbeat. I thought about being powerful, hoped I would remember the steps, and then threw myself into a lunge.

Indrani Krishnan-Lukomski
May 15, 2013

When the world is wild, here at its center I remain. We perform the Kathak Chakkars. Do you feel the Earth turn. The Universe in rotation. Head catches my breath just as I am about to loose it. A spring that releases. The heart of the cyclone they say. Oh, the wave at storm!—yet beneath its surface an unspoken silence awaits: the one within Thomas Hood’s poem. The one you can never hear and only know.

Thomas Hood
648. Silence
“There is a silence where hath been no sound,
There is a silence where no sound may be,
In the cold grave—under the deep, deep sea,
Or in wide desert where no life is found,
Which hath been mute, and still must sleep profound;

There the true Silence is, self-conscious and alone.”

At the heart of Akram Khan’s choreography, his dancers and his art; and from this deepest search initiated by Reggie Wilson, I met an inner-world, patient and dormant. At a time when I nearly dropped my arms and left loud lectures and sleepless nights… a semester off to find myself. To rekindle with my fire that was slowly dying, asphyxiated by the empty wind of society’s useless agitation. Just when I thought I was treading on surfaces, I found the entrance. The entrance to my inner-world, the sort of ocean in which I have always longed to drown. Was it dormant, or rather entrapped?

One slow inspiration fills my breast. And in a gasp, a shudder and the cry of a chalk falling to the ground, as it slices through the pounding stillness of the air./What if Vertical Road’s stone soldiers dusting away their sleep… were nothing more but the lakes of our consciousness stirred to waves, at last crashing against the rational frivolity of our schedules, freed and surging through my senses in currents?

In my mind these surging currents can only be Federico Garcia Lorca’s Duende.

I remember seeing Vertical Road in Marseille, a few years back. I shuddered when the lights died. And mourned as coats shuffled and voices rose. After that I cried for a few hours and wrote a lot, I could have wept. When the dancers left the stage and the lights died, something at my core died too. Something that had been building up, and up, up along that Vertical Road until it was just suddenly, as a thin thread cut sharp, shtak, released. I fell into my seat, but something else remained hovering above me, undisturbed it stayed, continued its journey upwards. That night I left behind a little dust, it died with the dance and there it stayed, beyond time. And sometimes I can picture it to myself: in the empty theater, above the square platform, floating with the other particles that...
had been brushed into thin air. Suspended. And so there is this force that charges through Akram Khan’s movement; a force so inebriating that it was stirred within me, just by watching it develop. The Duende.

“The Duende is a force not a labour, a struggle not a thought. The Duende is not in the throat, it surges up inside, from the soles of the feet. The mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained, the spirit of the earth. Arrival of the Duende presupposes a radical change to all the old kind of form… generating an almost religious enthusiasm, the Duende that shakes the body of the dancer, a real poetic escape from this world. The duende works on a dancer’s body like wind on sand.” (Garcia Lorca 1933)

For some time now I have tried to understand, what it is that gives this work so much Duende. Here I have dispersed some thoughts…

-At the end of our representation the audience wanted to know about the presence of Martial arts within these dances. Often I too was tempted to see certain movements as directly inspired from T’ai Chi Ch’uan. And yet our two professors shook their heads: influenced maybe, but not incorporated.

There must be a link between the two, but then it is not so specific and straightforward:

Indeed, I quickly came to find that Akram Khan’s work requires a serenity of the soul, an intense connection of the body and mind: Peace; one drop that lies at the crest of a floating petal.

Our work revolved around the control of breath, of our center, and an intimate understanding of time and space. The choreography is so complex and intricate, so fast that if your mind moves at the same pace, it is hardly possible to comprehend and execute. The dancer must grasp the quality: melting into water to understand the ways in which it flows, or vice versa, understanding flow to embody water.

As Zeno’s paradox: thinking of time as a sandglass, sand grain after sand grain (to pursue the sand/dust and dance analogy). And conceiving of space as quicksand, compact particles, into which you carve your fingers and press against the structure, moving through space and time as if you could touch them: “…that the flying arrow is at rest, which result follows from the assumption that time is composed of moments … he says that if everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in locomotion is always in a now, the flying arrow is therefore motionless.” (Aristotle Physics, 239b.30)

I believe the answer lies at the heart of the Chakkar spins.

Akram Khan’s work encapsulates an entire universe, this parallel paradigm that hides within, the vertical at the heart of the cyclone, the vertical at the heart of the Chakkars. The vertical on which all things rotate? Our vertical. Akram Khan’s vertical, as he swirls.

In Buddhism, Yoga, T’ai Chi Ch’uan, meditation… all perform—the point to which returns the eye, turn after turn, as the head effortlessly engages the spin—within this state of the mind that requires a single-pointed concentration. Timeless and spaceless.

The Infinite balancing over the fine line of human cognition: an ontological argument?

This Duende. This force. As I swirl: I keep what Lali once said about rhythms. We were practicing our footwork to the rhythms (which I transcribed in the opening). Somehow we could not maintain the set pace and our speed would systematically accelerate. Lali told us how that was the nature of rhythms, they will always pick up, men have a tendency to let themselves be carried away by the rhythm, is what she said. The way she phrased it was particular since it implied that the rhythm was the main actor in this process. The man sets the pace, but ultimately the rhythm will take over, carrying away the dancer in its wake. And so, in agency and form I always wonder which comes first.

Names for one part, and language for another: music.

For instance, I was once told that my name suited me, we often say this “I couldn’t imagine you with another name!” My next question is if the name suits me or if I suit the name? In which order do these things work. Do I fit the name? Has endlessly affirming “My name is Indrani, I am Indrani” shaped my character, perception and feel. Have the soft vowels, harsh consonants repeated my whole life seeped into my character? I believe in the phenomenology of things. I believe in how every smallest detail of an object feeds into its “being”. Each chosen material, and from the humidity of the air to the poem muttered under our breath: every process has a final word in the craft.

Last Summer in Singapore Akram Khan told a masterclass, of which I was lucky to be a part, about thinking in terms of music and rhythms as a quality. We worked on Kathak basics and he taught us about the dance’s rigor and its rhythmic counts. We learned a story, which became a melody, and then a rhythm… a footwork, a dance.

And so in this same order of things: recalling a dance through numbers is quite different from being reminded with a rhythm, with a melody, with a story. The intention is absolutely everything and...
I loved Akram Khan's choreography. Although I will not pretend that the motions were not physically demanding and mentally tiring, the lessons I learned were more than one hundred times worthwhile. It was spectacular. Every rehearsal was difficult and eye opening at the same time. The motions were grounded, but in no way hindered or stiff. The body would drop very low to the ground and continue in its journey, in its shift of weight, until the body found itself at a new height. His pieces were lead not only by the types of movements but an overall tone that was both unique to each piece and a marker connecting every phrase. The energy in each rehearsal never ceased to flow. It was constantly in motion, constantly shifting in position and intensity, but it never stopped moving. I learned how to control the energy, releasing it, grasping it, and throwing it. Even the pauses, the points in the piece where the body ceased to move, the energy still buzzed beneath the surface. The analogy used to describe this liquid flow of energy was that of a bouncy ball. A bouncing ball can be thrown with a large amount of force> Once it hits a surface it momentarily pauses as it comes into contact with the wall before it changes direction, but the energy of the original throw never disappears. That is the mentality that I constantly kept while learning this movement. It was flexible, dynamic, and beautiful simultaneously.

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Lauren Dawson
May 16, 2013

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Dynamic Action

Kathak comes from the Sanskrit Katha:story. Kaththaka is the storyteller. This Force again, this force that runs through the story, is the same force that will run through the rhythm and into the movement. And it is a force that burns from within, a narrative, the same tale that has sent the blood rushing through our veins.

The Duende is the destruction of preestablished order. Akram Khan’s Art, and I am here reminded too of Reggie Wilson’s work, is a reestablishment of the self. It is rejection of time and space and all the knowledge with which we have been infused for so long. (It is a remastered version of the Matrix (mind my humorous propaganda))!

Discovering this space of pure creation was for me such a revolution, because for the first time I exited the “thinking paradigm” /the paradigm of structure and knowledge and all that information as layers of clothes in water, pulling me down/ and instead entered the “feeling paradigm,” as a matter of fact, Kathak’s related form Abhinaya, which is bhaav bataanaa (lit. ‘to show bhaav or ‘feeling’). The Paradigm of a-structurality and imminence. One journey inwards.

During the 16th century, Moghul domination in India tainted traditional Kathak with Persian imports. A slim parallel can be drawn between Kathak’s Chakkars and The Sema swirls. The Sema may be an anthropomorphic god for some, a spiritual concept for other. But, for example understanding the Sema (Swirling Dervishes) is another manifestation of the Duende within this art:

The Sema, a “physically active meditation” is the “remembrance of God. When the dervishes turn, they are focusing their attention on their inner centre and they turn around and around their own centre in this way. In turning, making a pilgrimage to that centre of our their being.” And for me, God in Akram Khan’s work is a monistic force more than anything else, it is Spinoza’s abstract and impersonal, immanent god? For me it is the Duende, it is the life of things.

When the fury of our everyday life keeps our inner ocean at bay, Akram Khan’s work is a raw struggle with ourselves. It is a struggle against the external force, against the authority of structures and rationality. This work is a struggle with the internal force, and the acceptance/welcoming of an ungraspable irrationality in our existence, in Existence.

“Deus sive Natura” (Spinoza)
Having learned work by both Reggie Wilson and Akram Khan, I feel I can confidently say that they not only have different movement styles, but different approaches to thinking about movement. A different mindset, a different way of interacting with movement, a different way of treating the body. At the end of Reggie’s residency at Yale, he asked me if I felt like there was a link between his choreography and his work and the post-modern choreographers we had learned the repertoire of previously (Cunningham, Twyla Tharp). At the time I said no, that his work felt completely different.

However, once we started working with Akram Khan’s repertoire, I realized what completely different actually feels like. Akram’s work definitely is riddled with difficulties, intricacies and complexities in the execution of his work, but there was a simplicity in the approach. You were working towards something complex, but the thinking and processing of that movement is very direct and straightforward. It was a mode of rehearsal that felt very different from anything we’ve worked on previously in YDT.

Despite Reggie’s insistence in the rehearsal room that we stop thinking about the movement and just do it, the amount of thought in the doing of his work is still immense and complex. The way in which he uses different textures of movement or the way he patterns or sequences simple phrases of movement is complex, and provides a rigor in the body and the mind.

There is no doubt in my mind that Akram’s work is rigorous, but it operates within one mode of doing. There takes time to understand stylistically how his movement works, whether that be the way he uses dynamics and energy, the intricacy of the hands, or the consistent sense of circular movement. And while I can’t say it’s a rigor I mastered, it’s a rigor that is contained. The shape and the form of it is clear. It stays within one mode of thinking about movement and one mode of doing movement and it remains there.

Reggie’s work is dealing with several modes of thinking and analysis at once; but as a dancer it also deals with several modes of doing. The distinction between the movement in a single phrase of Reggie’s work isn’t just a distinction between quality or dynamics, it’s a distinction between the way you approach doing the movement. It has to be done, yes, but the way you think about doing one movement will not necessarily help you understand how to navigate the next. In Akram’s work, there is a sense that the correction for one movement can be a correction for most of the piece as well, there is an attention to detail that is unique and specific and consistent. Reggie’s attention to detail shifts from place to place depending on where he is coming from. In that sense Reggie has a different implementation of dynamic range, one that is born out of the independence of the multiple movement styles he incorporates, whereas Akram’s dynamics seem to be born out of the fusion of his movement styles into a singular style.
Learning repertory from Akram Khan and Reggie Wilson, but particularly from the former, has felt like an intensive language-learning immersion program. I dove into Reggie’s unembellished, minimalist (but above all unnaturally natural) world in which the pelvis is at its core before navigating a dynamic space with lightning flashes of power, whirling energy, and glittering details in the fingers and hands. These long, arduous sessions of learning and practice would leave me thinking about the work and the philosophy behind it long after walking out of Broadway Rehearsal Lofts. Hearing the music or reviewing (both theoretical as well as choreographic) material in my suite reminded me of when I would listen to French television programs online or read newspaper articles online to get more practice outside of class.

But after the immersion session is over, in the contexts of both language-learning and YDT-dancing, I’m at a huge loss for what to do. How can I communicate in French to maintain that level of knowledge? How can I continue practicing Akram’s style beyond that which I’ve learned with Lali and Young Jin? I already have holes in my memory about Reggie’s choreography and feel anxious about losing Akram’s choreography from my memory too.

Language fluency comes and goes in waves. When in France for a week, my Spanish died. But it came back when in Spain. And then in French class, my French came back, too. The environment, and above all the mindset, can help flesh out what may have been feared as forgotten. And I think the same is possible for my inimitable, unbeatable dance experience with YDT. The tide of memory may recede but it will come back because it never really went away to begin with.

But beyond choreographic memory, I think I’ve developed a more deep-seated knowledge about the choreography, in learning about the creative motivations about it, that I think will last longer than my muscle memory about the choreography, for this deep-seated knowledge doesn’t apply to only certain repertory, but also any and all work that I do from now on: with YDT, A Different Drum, or at an open Contemporary class at Steps. My awareness about dynamics, the pelvis, appendage-related details is so much higher, and I’m slowly improving in the ability to stop being so cerebral in my dancing.

They say if you learn one foreign language well, picking up other languages becomes significantly easier because you’ve worked that mental muscle. Perhaps one can compare a talented dancer to a polyglot who is well-versed in a couple of corporeal languages and can easily learn others to achieve fluency. I’m still very much in the process of really digging into Contemporary dance, which is my foreign language (or language family since it’s such an umbrella term), while Ballet remains my mother tongue. But I’m glad that I’ve picked up phrases and structures from different corporeal languages to help me adapt more easily to other tongues. I mourn the brief but wonderful time I learning everything I could from Lali and Young Jin, but even if my memory of the work fades, I’ve gained much more than I will eventually lose to time.
As the Akram Khan showing has come and gone, I’ve been thinking a lot about some of the ideas I mentioned in my last post. I talked about risk, about tension, about Khan’s choreography affirming my own existence. I realized that virtually everything I said stands in the face of mortality. I think perhaps that is why I so identify with the Khan movement: each time I complete one of his movements, lunging deep to the ground or thrusting my arms as far away from my chest as I can go, I emerge victorious out of battle with the unknown, with gravity, with all the forces that surround me in this absurd situation we call life.

I emerged from the lecture-demonstration with a strong adrenaline high, as if I had just overcome some great obstacle. After the performance, it was particularly strong, but I had that feeling every time I did these movements in rehearsal too. It reminds me of the myth of Sisyphus, whose punishment for his deceitfulness was an eternity of pushing a stone up a hill. Each time he reached the precipice, the stone would fall back down, never continuing over. It seems tragic, but I prefer the interpretation of French writer Albert Camus, who wrote: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” This is dance—an eternity of improvement, of never-ending happy failures. When I did the Akram Khan movement, I felt as if it was a string of pushes; each one of my movements paralleled Sisyphus’s steps up the hill. I often felt as if I might fail, forced to stop from sheer tiredness or shaky muscles. I never did. Each rehearsal, I pushed the stone up the hill; the next day, I would have to start from the bottom again.

Still, at least I get to push the stone up the hill. At least I have a body that can move, that can do (or attempt to do) the virtuosic Khan movements. This session of Yale Dance Theater was not only my third year in the program, but it was my second year performing after tearing the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in my right knee and having surgery to repair it. Each time I squatted to the ground, mimicking Lali’s low-placed pelvis or Young Jin’s turned-in ankle, I felt a twinge of pain in my knee. Each time I practiced the beginning part of Kaash, literally lunging every two seconds onto my right knee, it hurt.

According to my orthopedist, it’s the kind of pain I’ll probably have forever, left over from scar tissue and bone misalignment. Doing the Akram Khan movement made me realize that dance might possibly be my ideal pain killer. I can’t explain it, but even though I felt pain when practicing the movements in rehearsal (focusing on a single kick or lunge), when we actually did them all together in sequence, I forgot the twinges. My physical pain was erased; it didn’t register. Instead, all I could feel was the simultaneity of my head and hand moving together; all I could focus on was moving from point A to point B in the given rhythm. Nothing else mattered. Pain was an afterthought that my mind and body chose to ignore.

I don’t know if dance can truly cure pain, but I do think it literalizes the human life force. It deeply engages our bodies and minds, it creates communities, it questions the limits of reality. I can honestly say that I have never felt more alive than after doing Akram Khan’s choreography. Thank you to Akram Khan, Lali, Young Jin, Emily, and the members of Yale Dance Theater for providing me with this incredible opportunity to experience such a crazy metaphysical phenomenon. Now I know: dance really is life.
My experiences learning Reggie Wilson’s choreography and Akram Khan’s choreography were different. There was an emphasis on manipulation of time in the Khan choreography that was absent in the Wilson choreography. In the Khan choreography my movements were informed by the counts. The goal is to hit the movement at the same time as the count, not before or after. This creates tension in the movements followed by bursts of sharp or smooth energy. This also forced me to be extremely present in each moment. I could not dance the Khan steps on autopilot. Both the mind and the body are equally exerted, but the mind is the leader in this choreography.

There is more focus on finding the true movement in the Wilson choreography. When I was learning the steps, rather than manipulating my form to fit into time, I listened to my body to find the form. The body is the leader in the Wilson choreography.

A similarity in my experiences of Khan and Wilson choreography is the importance of the mind and body connection. I felt that both forms of choreography required attention to my own thoughts in relation to my body, or my body in relation to my thoughts. For example, in Wilson choreography the pelvis is the key part of any movement. When I danced the steps, I tried to listen to my pelvis to determine how long a movement should take. It takes a given amount of time to transfer my weight from my left foot to my right foot. I can calculate this amount of time by listening to my pelvis.

In my experience of Khan choreography I learned to manipulate my body using my mind. I determined what time I wanted a certain movement to happen, then performed that movement by manipulating my body in time and space. For example, first I decide that I want to shift my body from my left foot to my right foot on the third count of a phrase of four. Then, I count: one, two, shift-three, four. I do not shift at the beginning or end of three, but in the middle of the count.

Both of the ways I just described of shifting my weight from one foot to another require a strong connection between the mind and body. This is what connects all of my experiences of dance. I believe the connection of the mind and body can only be explored in the artistic art form of dance.
Akram Khan’s choreography
What a semester it’s been! For me, the opportunity to learn and compare choreographies by Reggie Wilson and Akram Khan has been an unprecedented and unparalleled experience. More than ever before, this session of Yale Dance Theater has provoked numerous questions about the interplay between physical and metaphysical inquiry, conducting dance research, and my personal relationship with dance. I’ll walk through all my major questions and discoveries as best I can.

Well before the project began, I was infatuated with its global scope. Here were two acclaimed contemporary choreographers, working in itinerant and diasporic forms that simultaneously drew upon and shaped their own histories, engaging traditions separated across time and space in entirely novel and cutting-edge ways. I was brimming with questions before rehearsals even began, anticipating concerns of cultural fusion, appropriation, synthesis, and influence.

However, when we began working with Reggie, we had to reevaluate the nature of our questions, as well as the information we were pursuing. While I do think there is a place for the kinds of macroscopic questions I was thinking about at the beginning, I had to reformulate my approach to the choreography when I realized that I was overly concerned with my preconceived notions of use and value, and trying to make information pertinent in an academic sense. This is certainly not to say that choreographic research is not an inherently academic pursuit. Rather, it is a process of discovery that often requires us to reconfigure our thoughts, destabilize biases towards static conceptions of information, and form new kinds of connections.

How does one ask questions of choreography? What is it to know a dance? I found myself asking such questions a lot, and thinking about the relationship between choreography and information. Information can be in the details of a movement, whether it is Reggie telling us to change direction with the whole pelvis in Big Brick or Lali emphasizing the sharp turn of the head that punctuates the Bahok phrase.

Additionally, there is a sense of how to inhabit a choreographic world that comes with doing and with discussing. This too can be a kind of information. Both choreographers have philosophies about the body, space, rhythm, and time that come to light through the efforts of undifferentiated physical-mental work. Sense of flow and use of weight are also important considerations. These are not two parts of a whole, the practical and the theoretical, but rather undivided information that feeds into our own choreographic understanding of an artist’s practice.

In the past, I’ve tended towards a view of looking for information below the surface of the choreography. I used to imagine some kind of implicit knowledge tucked away and inaccessible within the choreography, and it was my job as a thinking dancer to excavate it through practice. However, with these two residencies, I stopped seeing analysis as what I’m left with at the end of the day and started looking at it as an active, all-the-time pursuit. Instead of bypassing initial frustrations (of which there were many) and looking forward to the day when everything would become clear—physically and conceptually—I took moments to breathe and consider what the process of encounter could tell me.

By allowing this paradigm shift, I found it was in struggle, not ease, that I began to understand what I was doing. These residencies pushed me to extend my body with struggle that was not only a matter of capturing a certain aesthetic, but also reconceptualizing my body and myself as a dance. Reggie’s eternal question, “Can a body?” was what triggered this realization. To dance in these choreographies has been to discover new bodies, new selves, and new ways of understanding, and I’d like to elaborate on some of these for both artists.

Reggie’s work, for me, reveals the dynamic contrast of actualization. It is, as he said, the difference between the words “up” and “down,” as they are enacted in the studio versus conceptualized. It is the difference between just jumping and thinking to oneself, “I’m jumping, I’m jumping.” There is a complex relationship between doing and speaking; while they seem autonomous, I found that they were mutually informative.

This work was setting oneself into motion, and riding a unique and unstoppable flow. The choreography feels very migratory, never settling in space and time. We dance in microsync—working with the time it takes for our own weight to move a certain distance, with a certain force.
The choreography travels; contrast creates a sense of changing place. This is not a domination of space, since we never inhabit or claim it. There is directionality that isn’t geographic; we pursue one intention and then veer off towards another. The metaphor that makes sense for me is thinking of topography versus geography.

With Cunningham, we danced in space with no fixed points. This was an uninflected, geographic space, with evenly distributed potential for inhabitation. Space became that in which things take place. With Reggie’s choreography, the experience of space was vastly different. I call it topographical because we moved through the terrain of space, encountering various places in our interaction with it. Space and time were not lines of meter to fill; instead, they were forces to be encountered as we travelled through them. Geography is the space we fill, while topography is the space we interact with. Ideologically speaking, this is a departure from the domination or systematization of space that exists in many concert dance forms, from ballet to Cunningham.

Having our sense of space shaped by the movement is something I will return to when discussing Akram Khan, since I think both choreographers engage with space and time in ways that I was not accustomed to.

Time, too, was something set in motion. Rather than arching over us as a series of counts, time was the physical reality that the movement of our bodies necessitated. Time was a process, the trajectory of “travelling through” rather than an arbitrary measurement. Khan’s approach to time is similarly related to the dancer’s actions, but in a different way.

So, in ontological terms, what is the nature of the body in Reggie’s choreography? No matter what I say, I’m sure Reggie would be able to add a “both…and…” While the movements look dramatically different from those of Akram Khan, I find more similarities than differences in comparing the two choreographies. First is the emphasis on contrasts and dynamic, the excitement of doing, truly doing. There are two moments fixed parallel in my mind: The first was Reggie telling us what he didn’t want us to do, saying, “I’m jumping, I’m jumping,” while frowning in mock concentration. The second was Lali talking about the dynamic shifts in Vertical Road, saying, “It only looks good if everyone does it.” Here is an activation of the body, necessitating exertion and commitment, a step beyond intention. Taking the extra step, moving beyond my body and my questions as I had them neatly conceptualized, is the fall into new discoveries.

I found that my body, my presence in Reggie’s choreography was fuller in a sense than anything I’ve done before. The contrasts in dynamic, navigation of complex phrases, and full-bodied movements demanded nothing less. This work, as well as Khan’s, has complicated my ideas about body and presence in dance. I cannot say that my mind was “off,” since I don’t believe that dance is or can be without thought, but self-judging and preemptive evaluation were subsumed into the movement. Our second showing was, as Reggie said once, “me in my full presence.”

A recurring issue I’ve encountered in several of my classes this semester is the overly static nature of traditional metaphysics, the constant and undevelopable nature of being. My experience with both these choreographers has shown me the incontrovertibly physical aspect of the metaphysical (contradictory as it may seem), and how the body in action spurs philosophical discovery on the personal level.

Reggie sought to make this experience personal, and I felt this, sincerely so. Getting into the dance strips away preconceived questions and throws open whole new epistemologies; I must grapple with the “I” that fixes objects for my critical consideration and become immersed instead, realizing that dancing brings “me” into existence in a new way, validating and even creating a presence in time and space.

Like others have written, I felt a similar surge of validation performing the Akram Khan repertory. Rather than travelling through space and time, Khan’s choreography gave the empowering sense that I was creating space and time. This assertion lies in the rhythms, the staccato breaths and suspended counts that punctuate the phrases. Linking back to space, rhythm is not a metronomic means of dividing a blank stretch of time here. Instead of marking an imposed, inhabited time, the rhythms are how we create time as dancers. I felt my body as a powerful source of gravity, actively warping rather than drifting in the fabric of time.

Viewers commented on the raw energy of the movement, the universality of effort, and even the resistance of mortality. The counts were our key to empowerment, not tools of subservience. When we hit a “wunnnn TWO!” right in the meat of the count, the sensation is tangible, not conceptual.

In an earlier blog post, I wrote about energy, and what that means in dance. In the Khan repertory, this too blurred the line between physical and metaphysical. I described energy as a metaphor for itself, an imagined dynamic force with a very real physical manifestation. Energy is the sounds you follow through a phrase, the economy of exertion found in
efficient physical chain reactions (the Khan movement is all about hits and releases, attacks and suspended withdrawals), and the way your breathing fits into that of those around you.

Going off of breathing, there was a sense of social togetherness in both choreographies. Reggie once mentioned that breath was not an obsession of his, but we became attuned to the paths of each other’s pelvises and found unity in our rhythmic chants of “See Line.” In the Khan pieces, our unity was in energy, rhythm, and breath. While there was a definite group dynamic in the Cunningham work, I remember that more as a field of synchronized rhythms, independent in time and linked by proximity.

If I felt like a full body in Reggie’s work, in Akram’s I felt like a “flow body.” I imagine the barriers of my skin replaced with an energy that is both diffuse and direct. I assert my presence by letting go of my control. Dean Cahan asked if there were philosophical insights to be drawn from this work, and I think there most definitely are. Akram Khan and Reggie Wilson’s choreographies both have a kind of decentralization of the body. In many Western forms, there is a controlled autonomy of the body, a kind of solipsism that puts forth a singular subject who “does a dance.” Movements come from the core as a control center, and this muscular action becomes the choreography’s focus. Ballet has pull-up, Graham has the contraction, etc.

While Reggie works with the pelvis, it is not a means of controlling the body’s movements from a single point. Khan, too, does not conceive of such a control center. Both choreographies are decentralized in their initiations and reactions, which gives them a unique flow. Reggie makes use of weight in the heel, the forearm, the “foreleg” and other extremities. Khan’s movements also use the extremities extensively; Lali and Young Jin told us that we could find the flow of a phrase by following the hands, and responding with the rest of the body. The head, too, is not always perched on top of a stacked spine, but sharp and responsive to other movements. It punctuates, rather than navigates. As Lali once said, upon finishing a spitfire phrase that ended with a quick turn of the head, “This is all you see.” This was all a part of discovering a new kind of body logic.

In Khan’s choreography, I also had to abrogate some of my fixed identity as a single dancer. Instead, I attuned myself to the group, emulating a collective and flowing energy rather than existing as one body dancing with other bodies. Giving up this autonomy ushered in a new way of being, and a new philosophical look at my “self” as a dancer. While I long resisted understanding dance as energy, instead preferring to treat moving as an anatomical activity, the choreographic idea of energy gave me a key to a new and different understanding of my body and myself—I am not a static entity, and this is paradoxically how I can fully experience dancing.

In conclusion, this two-part residency has left me with much to think about. I will continue to investigate these questions of self, energy, space, time, rhythm, group, flow, and many others as well. It is somewhat ironic that I am ending this year with so many questions when I sought after so many answers at the beginning.
Yale Dance Theater (YDT) is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and/or development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance.

As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience. In the final phase of the project, we draw on these writings to develop a print journal. YDT’s mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.

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YDT’s spring 2013 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College and the Lionel F. Conacher and Joan T. Dea Fund, in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.