FALL 2024

# indance

DISCOURSE + DIALOGUE TO UNIFY, STRENGTHEN + AMPLIFY

P.12 First We Laughed, Now We Act

P.16 The Approximation of Resilience

P.42 To Squat or Not To Squat

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**Dancers' Group – publisher of *In Dance* – provides resources to artists, the dance community, and audiences through programs and services that are as collaborative and innovative as the creative process.**

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# WELCOME

**by MAURYA KERR, Guest Editor**

**curation n.**
a curing of disease, restoration to health, a taking care, attention.

PHOTO BY ROBBIE SWEENY OF MAURYA IN LARRY ARRINGTON'S *www.mom*

I am grateful to Dancers' Group for the opportunity to guest edit this fall 2024 edition of *In Dance*; it feels like a beautiful convergence of many facets of my life that I love: curating, writing, and editing. As guest editor, I of course worked with and edited the articles of the writers you are about to read, but more importantly, I curated the voices I wanted to hear more from, voices I feel we, as a community, need to listen to. Just as I consider my work as ODC Theater's Resident Curator to be political, I consider it a political act (and a privilege) to gather these twelve writers, together, at this time. I am, and always will be, committed to centering and normalizing racially minoritized voices, to offer them care and attention in an effort to restore ALL of us.

The alternative high school I attended in Seattle allowed me a lot of agency in my education; when I proposed that I not read or study any literature from the white male canon, my teachers agreed. While I'm sure those writings have value, as a fifteen-year-old black girl, I felt I needed to take that stance to protect my imagination, my hope for what could be. I knew, even then, that I'd experienced more than enough white supremacist patriarchy. And here we are today.

Will this curated assemblage 'cure' anyone or anything?

Probably not, but it is one of the ways I know to protest, one of my praxes of resistance.

To all the writers who contributed, thank you—for your vulnerability, your trust, the work you are doing in the world.

Sarah Chou and Stella Jacobs share about the ongoing racism they experienced during their dance training; Alex Ketley on his important work with Bill Clark (currently incarcerated on San Quentin's Death Row); Emile Suotonye DeWeaver, a brilliant activist (who was formerly incarcerated), on the horrors of another Trump presidency and the concomitant necessity of, in our two-party reality, voting for Harris; Sima Belmar and Leila Mire on the cruciality of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and backlash to Mire's activism; Randee Paufve on her latest work, *Sisters*, driven in part by a great aunt without access to safe abortion—women dying just because they're women; Shruti Abhishek on her upcoming premiere and dance-diverse experience in Pauvfe's process; Gregory King on the detriment wrought by racist, culturally ignorant dance critics; Eric Garcia & Kat Gorospe Cole, co-directors of Detour Productions, on their shift to immersive theater; and Lisa Giannone (who has helped me rehab all of my injuries/surgeries for the last 18+ years) on how to keep our bodies strong.

Oppressive entities count on our overwhelm and apathy. Please don't relent—VOTE. Believe in 'the what could be.' Boycott companies profiting from the genocides in Palestine, and Congo, Sudan, Haiti…

Let's get ready.

Offering all of us a taking care, of ourselves and our communities, near and far.
**—Maurya**

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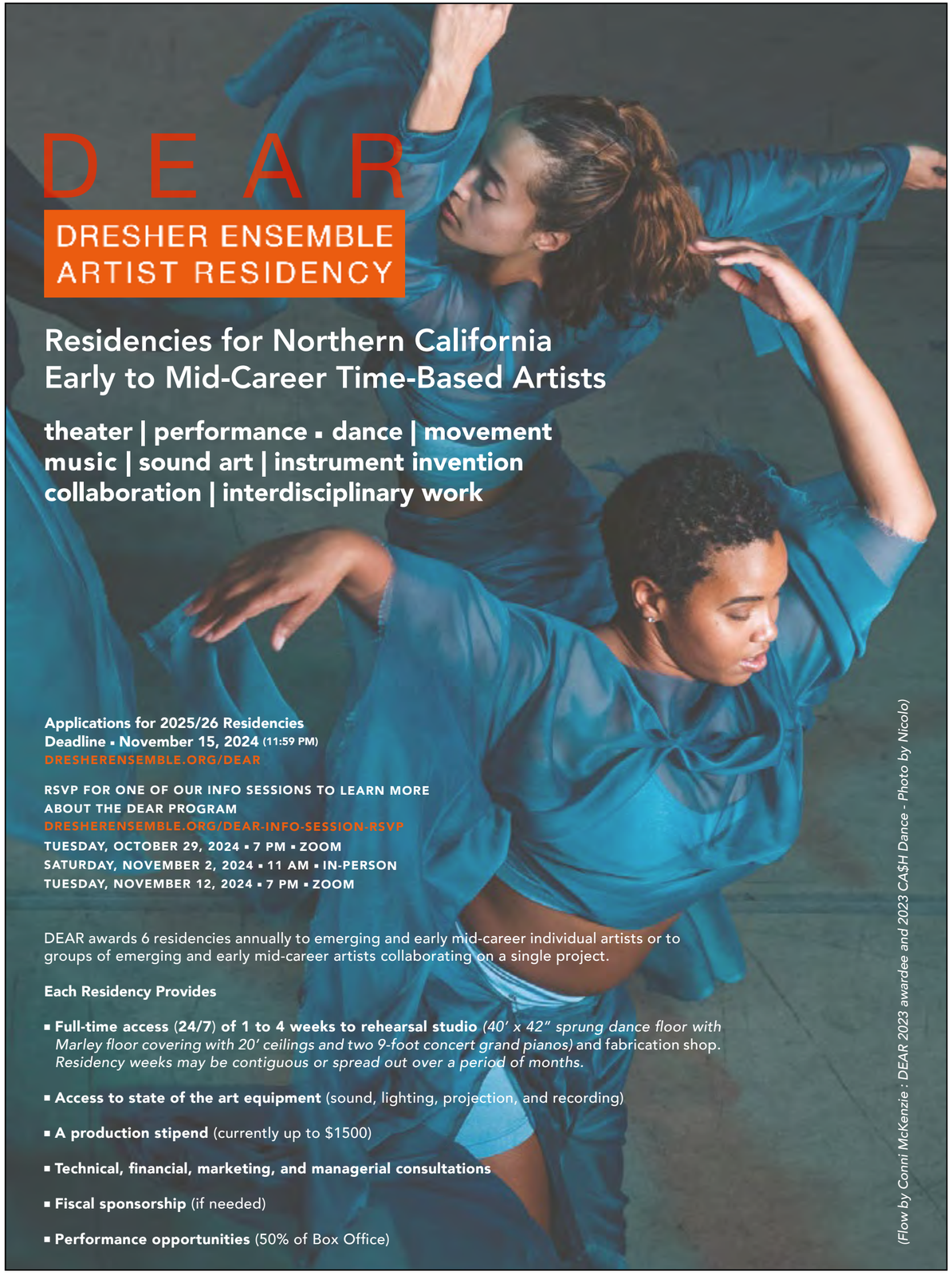

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# FIRST WE LAUGHED, NOW WE ACT

**BY STELLA JACOBS AND SARAH CHOU**

## “Wow, you two look so similar!”

While we get this comment a lot, and it’s an inside joke that we get to use, we couldn’t be more different. We are both Chinese-American, but the similarities stop there. Sarah stands at 5’5” with jet-black, straight, sleek hair and an aversion to floorwork. Stella is inches shorter, has wavy hair, a darker complexion, and moves completely opposite of Sarah, but somehow we are interchangeable and seen as carbon copies of each other. While we laugh at the fact that we feel obligated to provide descriptions of ourselves and shouldn’t need to explain who we are or what we look like, it proves the point that this common phrase isn’t a surface-level comment that should be brushed aside.

STELLA JACOBS; PHOTO BY QUINN WHARTON. (OPPOSITE PAGE) SARAH CHOU. PHOTO BY CARLY TOPAZIO

"It's just so hard for me" is commonly said by a person who mixes up people of color's names with indifference. The automatic defensiveness and shifting of blame away from themselves, and in turn towards the individual(s) incorrectly addressed, is of course reminiscent of reactions towards pointing out a racially charged (even if done unconsciously) comment: "I'm not racist; how could *you* say that I am?" Centering their own feelings in the aftermath of name-swapping reveals an inability to take personal responsibility. And what happens when the individual is at the front of the room, exploiting their position of power, affecting your ability to learn or even book a job? How does one approach conversations with ignorant people without sounding combative? How do we stand up for ourselves in spaces where we don't feel safe to question anyone?

It's common to make a mistake, especially when first meeting someone. The issue is how long we have known the various people who can't seem to view us as individuals. When the two of us trained together, teachers who had us for an entire year on Zoom (with access to our names on their screens!) swapped or used one name for both of us. This bled into the second year of our training in person, still being mistaken as one despite knowing us for a year, particularly with one teacher who consistently failed to call us by our correct names. In one instance, after mixing our names up yet again, he kicked us, the only two Asian people in the studio, out. Our presence in the rehearsal was mentally "too much" for him. To quickly cover his tracks, he proceeded to randomly make others leave the room. While we were both still in shock, our peers brought this up to our school director, who forced him to apologize.

Sarah Chou & Stella Jacobs

PHOTO BY DIEGO GARCIA

Instead of taking responsibility, he asked us why it was important to call us by our correct names and said that he did not see it as a plausible concern. He lacked any type of understanding of the larger racial and historical issues involved, heavily played his white male victim card, and blamed what happened on his difficulty in remembering names. What we asked of him was simple: to correct his mistake and move on. Instead, in the studio, he overcompensated with more kindness and attention than necessary, trying so hard to convince us that he changed. We didn't ask for special treatment; we wanted the respect that every white person inherently is given.

The offending party's resistance is often met with feelings of guilt in those on the receiving end of the harm. We each respectively wondered, "Is this my fault in any way? Is it because our names really are so similar?" In the minutes that followed the incident, there was a constant questioning of if we cared too much, if our expectations that he call us by our names were misplaced, and what we could do to rectify the situation. In the days that followed, and even perhaps now, residual feelings of whether or not we overreacted piled on. We didn't immediately bring this issue of name-swapping up to our director until this specific incident and only did after, in large part, because of internalized and sensitive feelings regarding our own racial identities. Decades of feeling like you have changed yourself to fit the mold that is expected of you doesn't evaporate as soon as you learn what a microaggression is.

The fear of being perceived as "the same as" underscores nearly all of our experiences, even if the perception isn't expressed verbally. We know that in any dance space we will be compared to any other Asian present; the box of racial inclusion is already laid out for us to share, and the box is tiny. It manifests itself at auditions, where the thought of quotas is always a constant, wondering if, by luck and chance, there will be a spot for both of us. This fear is justified when one of us opens Instagram and sees that we are tagged in a photo, such as a solo shot from a recent event, only to discover that it's a photo of our Asian colleague. At what point do we get to stop checking to ensure the correct person is tagged, and why does the mistake keep happening? Or when, after a performance, someone tells either of us how great we were in a certain piece, one we just so happened to not be in at all, all we can do is laugh because it happens all too often. But behind the laughter are of course deeper feelings of anger and frustration.

**WE KNOW THAT IN ANY DANCE SPACE WE WILL BE COMPARED TO ANY OTHER ASIAN PRESENT; THE BOX OF RACIAL INCLUSION IS ALREADY LAID OUT FOR US TO SHARE, AND THE BOX IS TINY.**

Dancers of color should not have to think about how to differentiate themselves from others in order to be seen as individuals.

These experiences allow one, too often not by choice, to be introspective on previous experiences in dance spaces: at a young age, Stella was told she wasn't able to wear false eyelashes during performances because her eyes were "too small." She was also described as seductive and exotic— when she was fourteen. There was a time when Sarah was told that she and three other Asian dancers of smaller stature were clones of each other; nicknames such as "China" or "geisha" are *very* real (and lacking in creativity one might add). And it's hard to forget that someone assumed Sarah was stretched at a young age to be more flexible because "that's what the Asians do." All of these childhood examples that were skimmed over at the time are deeply ingrained in us, and the thought of them still leaves an unpleasant taste in our mouths.

In an industry that actively benefits from white supremacy and intentionally upholds racist structural barriers, there are few, if any, spaces that offer dancers of color a true sense of belonging. The reality, in 2024, of being one of the few and sometimes the only dancer of Asian descent in the room only validates the fact that there is little to no investment in DEI "efforts" to make these traditionally white spaces available and welcoming to everyone. There are a lot of promises, but promises at this point mean nothing; if anything they're just lazy words masquerading as actual efforts toward change. The work around antiracism needs to be action-oriented and not static, and the experiences of people of color need to be heard and believed; we must be open to honest conversations.

**SARAH CHOU** is originally from San Diego, CA, and received her early training at Southern California Ballet and Danceology. She is a graduate of the Alonzo King LINES Ballet Training Program, under the direction of Karah Abiog. She has performed works by Edward Clug, Laura O'Malley, Yue Yin, Helen Pickett, Gregory Dawson, David Harvey, and Chuck Wilt, among others. She has danced with ODC/Dance Company and is currently in her third season with SFDanceworks. Sarah graduated Cum Laude from Wellesley College in 2020 with a Bachelor of Arts in History and a minor in Economics. Her most recent choreographic work, *there's a chance we may change*, was commissioned by Harvard Ballet Company in 2023. In addition to her performance career, Sarah brings her passion for creativity, change, and equity as part of the Finance team at Intersection for the Arts.

**STELLA JACOBS** (she/her), originally from Boston, has danced with a variety of companies as a freelance artist in NYC, including The Moving Forward Collective by Madi Hicks, Obremski/Works under Jesse Obremski, Liony Garcia, Rachael Lieblein-Jurbala, and kNoname Artist–Roderick George. While in NYC, Stella trained with GibneyPRO, where she worked with Peter Chu, Ana Maria Lucaciu, Laja Field, Adam Barruch, Lea Ved, and Sidra Bell. She performed for two seasons with SFDanceworks in San Francisco, under Dana Genshaft, and with Gregory Dawson's DawsonDanceSF. While training at The Alonzo King LINES Ballet Training Program, she worked with David Harvey, Alex Ketley, Chuck Wilt, and others, then apprenticed for BODYTRAFFIC in Los Angeles. Stella is thrilled to be a company member with Whim W'Him Seattle Contemporary Dance for their 2024/25 season.

Maurya encourages you to also read *Leslie Cuyjet and Angie Pittman are not the same dancer.*

# AN APPROXIMATION OF RESILIENCE

BY ALEX KETLEY

Ja'Moon Jones in *An Approximation of Resilience*

**DURING THE YEARS** I spent caring for my dying father, I was struck that if he had not had my family he would have been alone in this final transition. From that awareness I became a hospice volunteer and was about to embark on a performance project called *Still Witness*, which had the intention of exploring our country's complicated relationship with dying. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, our planet was struck by a global pandemic and I found myself quarantined at home. I still felt the need to work, and this concern around people's loneliness was still deeply in me. I have also long been concerned about our carceral system, so taking those two together, in the middle of the night I went on the website Write-A-Prisoner and began looking through the profiles. I came across the profile of Bill Clark, an artist and death row inmate who conveyed that his writing practice was the salvation from what he described as a soul-crushing loneliness. For the individuals on death row at San Quentin, they are only allowed out of their 4-foot by 9-foot cells for 12 hours a week. I awkwardly wrote a one-page letter to Bill saying hello, and two weeks later received a beautiful eight-page handwritten letter in response. That began a friendship that has been one of the most impacting of my life, and a collaborative relationship that has changed me immeasurably.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALEX KETLEY

For dance to feel necessary, I need to place my body in direct relationship with the communities I am concerned about. My friendship with Bill has given me a window into incarceration no amount of reading could compare with. At San Quentin, Bill and I met weekly in what can only be described as a glorified dog kennel. We were both locked in a tiny cage for three hours while being circled by guards. San Quentin is also like a medieval castle set against the most beautiful views of the San Francisco Bay, views that the inmates can't see because the windows have never been cleaned so nearly no light shines through them. Bill has not seen moonlight in the span of his 33 years of incarceration. He also shared that if you care about an article of personal clothing you wash it in your toilet, otherwise it will be stolen by the general population's laundry service. And despite how horrific



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Bill Clark and Alex Ketley at San Quentin

death row is, Bill is one of the most beautifully optimistic people I have ever met. He tells me often that this is intentional: to survive in one of the darkest situations anyone could ever be placed in, you have to become a vibrant generator of your own light. He is deeply aware how awful his circumstance is but is radiant as an act of defiance to a country that has deemed his body not even worthy of being lived. It is an example that beauty exists everywhere, even in the forgotten depths of prison.

I feel like societal change is possible when unlikely communities collide. On the surface, Bill and I are certainly unlikely friends, but we have met in a space that feels pretty pure: our shared love of artistic practice. I wanted to expose others to this vibrant space, so I invited Bill to be my guest in a Stanford University class called DanceAction: Performance Practice, Death Row, and the Evolution of Cultural Reform. In a room filled with student dancers, filmmakers, musicians, writers, animators, directors, and actors, we had a weekly two-hour conversation with Bill. All the students, except for one, had never been directly affected by our carceral system, so the class profoundly influenced their thinking around incarceration and their own individual art-making process. To metaphorically stand with one foot at Stanford and one foot at San Quentin is the kind of collision I find so ripe with the possibility of real change in terms of how communities view each other. The students and Bill bonded deeply with one another, and the final projects felt important because the content underlying the class was so clearly consequential.

**AT SAN QUENTIN, BILL AND I MET WEEKLY IN WHAT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS A GLORIFIED DOG KENNEL.**

Bill and I are now embarking on a new evening-length project called *An Approximation of Resilience*, which is set to premiere in the spring of 2025 and then tour throughout the country. What interests me in this piece is the interstitial space where what we think we know about something becomes more complicated. We think of prisons as terrible places, and they absolutely are, but I have also seen staggering expressions of love within those walls: children visiting with their fathers, inmates having brief moments to say hello to each other through the bars, or Bill's 25+ year friendship with fellow inmate and artist Steve Champion. Inequity is statistically rife within our judicial system, and, by extension, as members of society, we each play a part in how the machinations of society function. Many people blind themselves to our inmate population, but this project uses performance as the vehicle to stir an audience's conscience and make it clear and visible that inmates are truly part of our community family. Things can change when a society cares about all its people, incarcerated or not. Apathy only perpetuates injustice. As Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, said, "I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned. We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated." Our stages are an ideal way to challenge misconceptions, and with *Resilience* I hope to play a part in bringing a broader awareness to an individual I have come to care very deeply about, and who I believe has transformative knowledge to share.

---

**ALEX KETLEY** is a choreographer, filmmaker, and the director of The Foundry. He has received acknowledgment from the Hubbard Street National Choreographic Competition, the Choo-San Goh Award, the Princess Grace Award for Choreography, four MANCC Residencies, the Eben Demarest Award, the National Choreographic Initiative Residency, a Kenneth Rainin Foundation New and Experimental Works Grant, and the Artistry Award from the Superfest Disability Film Festival. His pieces have also been awarded Isadora Duncan Awards for outstanding achievement in the categories of Choreography, Company, & Ensemble. In 2020 he became a Fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and in 2025 he received a National Dance Project Award from the New England Foundation for the Arts.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALEX KETLEY

# THE 2024 ELECTION & ARTISTIC FREEDOM

**BY EMILE SUOTONYE DEWEAVER**

PHOTO BY GORDON ALLEN

I've been listening to the discourse around the 2024 Presidential Election. Three camps emerge on the left: people voting for Kamala Harris to avoid a Trump Dictatorship, people voting independent because they've lost faith in the Democratic party's willingness to support meaningful social change, and people who don't believe voting matters because it's impossible to get justice in the current two-party system. The common thread in the first camp is that although the Democratic party may fail to bring meaningful change, it's possible to organize communities around progressive policies with the Democrats. It'll be almost impossible to organize for anything but more white nationalist power if Trump becomes the first overt dictator of the United States. The second camp understands the urgent need to break the two-party monopoly on U.S. politics, and the common thread in the third camp has become a popular meme on social media: "Burn it all down."

I'm a formerly incarcerated, Black progressive leftist. I'm also an artist, and I believe the progressive left can stave off a conservative dictatorship if we incorporate a lesson from the creative arts. When I write a book or a short story, I have a vision that will ultimately become a product for an audience, but I don't focus directly on producing the end goal. I focus on perfecting a process that will produce the end goal. Process for writers is outline, characterization, sentence transitions; it's dialogue, scene development, and revision. Perfect these moving parts, and together they'll churn out your masterpiece.

People voting independent this year don't seem to acknowledge that they've yet to refine a process that can produce a third party – that takes time that we don't have between now and November. Everyone is tired of hearing that change takes time, including me, but we have to take accountability for what we haven't been doing with our time over the past ten years. We haven't prioritized instituting the rank-choice voting we'd likely need to establish a third party over our respective pet projects (prison and immigration reform, climate change, poverty, education). We haven't prioritized mobilizing millennials and gen-z to vote in midterm elections so we can replace centrist senators with progressive ones. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 87 percent of youth eligible to vote in the 2022 mid-term elections didn't.

People who won't vote because it's time to "burn it down" are so focused on the possibilities they hope will arise once our current white supremacist system collapses – they  don't realize that we have been successfully burning this system down for decades. Burning down is a process, and though our current processes have deep inefficiencies, they have produced voting rights for women and people of color, LGBTQ+ rights, prison reform, housing rights, and workers' rights. Yes, conservatives are rolling back these rights at a terrifying speed, but their current ferocity is a reaction to our successes.

In Project 2025—a 900-page plan for the next conservative president to transform the U.S. into a de facto one-party, white nationalist state—conservatives argue that they must rescue their children (from trans people), reclaim American culture (read "reclaim white male dominance"), and defeat the anti-American left. Their reference point for the crisis they're experiencing today is the 1970s. What was happening around the 70s? Political power was shifting in the country because of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting. The Equal Pay Act of 1970 gave women the right to sue employers for pay discrimination. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 gave people of color the right to sue employers for discrimination. The Black Panthers and other anti-racist groups rose in prominence. Although these events didn't transform our white supremacist country into a beacon of equality, they did represent structural and cultural change.

**Project 2025 closes the door for artists to make a living if they create any content that doesn't perpetuate white cultural hegemony.**

Conservatives in the 70s responded with a Mandate for Leadership, a 3,000-page plan for the next conservative president, Ronald Reagan, to unify the right and "rescue" white America from equal rights. According to one author of Project 2025, 60 percent of the Mandate for Leadership's recommendations became policies in a year. The Heritage Foundation wrote Mandate for Leadership; they also produced Project 2025.

The progressive left talk on the news and in podcasts about the rights they fear we'll lose or the violence the U.S. will commit against immigrants or the climate crisis Trump will exacerbate. I wish more people talked about the processes Project 2025 will create to achieve these outcomes. Trump will issue executive orders that enable him



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**According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement,**

**87 PERCENT**

**of youth eligible to vote in the 2022 mid-term elections**

**DIDN'T.**

to fire all federal employees and fill their empty positions with MAGA supporters trained by the Heritage Foundation's Presidential Administration Academy. He will do an end-run around Senate confirmations for his political appointees by appointing acting heads of federal agencies like the Department of Justice, who will remain in office long enough for him to execute Project 2025.

In my upcoming book, *Ghost in the Criminal Justice Machine*, I talk about white cultural hegemony, the process by which rulers take control of culture, producing institutions like schools, media, and churches in order to control the ideologies of populations. As a result of this hegemony, I grew up believing lies like "healthy families must be nuclear, heteronormative families." Today, after decades dismantling white supremacist ideologies, we know that healthy families exist in multiple configurations; that budding wisdom in our country represents a rupture of white cultural hegemony, as do DEI efforts. The goal of Project 2025 is to "repair" those growing ruptures, and the one-party white nationalist state it will create will suffocate artistic practice.

Project 2025 takes control of school's accreditation processes to control what artists can learn and debate. It puts federal grant-making directly in Trump's hands and weaponizes the government's power to give or revoke non-profit status to CONTROL ARTISTS' FUNDING STREAMS. IT regulates media to control what artists can publish and frames social justice issues as a national security threat that the Department of Justice can criminalize. Project 2025 closes the door for artists to make a living if they create any content that doesn't perpetuate white cultural hegemony.

And it can get much worse. Trump will also immunize law enforcement from prosecution and expand the Secret Service's law enforcement powers from the White House to all of Washington, D.C. Imagine the Republican House introduces legislation that criminalizes activism, organizations, and any community that doesn't align with Trump's vision for white America. On the morning of voting day, Trump sends the Secret Service to arrest half of the dissenting House representatives. When a person, even a congressperson, is arrested, there's nothing they can do about it in the moment. They can be held without being charged with a crime for days, long enough for a Republican House to establish a quorum and vote through the legislation. The Supreme Court granted presidents immunity from prosecution, so Trump could rinse and repeat the same process when it comes time for the Senate to vote.

This machine, these processes, will transform the U.S. into a supercharged white nationalist state with exponentially more power to destroy opposition to white hegemony. These are the stakes of the 2024 Presidential Election. I don't support the Democratic Party, and I despise Kamala Harris' centrist politics. But I am voting for Harris, not because the Democratic Party is going to hand us justice but because I'm an artist. I understand that we need more time to perfect the processes that will produce our end goal of justice for people of color, for LGBTQ+ people, for Palestinian people, for us all.

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**EMILE SUOTONYE DEWEAVER** is a formerly incarcerated activist, widely published essayist, owner of Re: Frame LLC, and a 2022 Soros Justice Fellow. California's Governor Brown commuted his life sentence after twenty-one years for his community work. He has written for publications including the *San Francisco Chronicle, San Jose Mercury News, Colorlines, The Appeal, The Rumpus,* and *Seventh Wave*. He lives in Oakland, California. DeWeaver's debut book, *Ghost in the Criminal Justice Machine: Reform, White Supremacy, and an Abolitionist Future*, is forthcoming with New Press in May 2025 and is available for pre-order at bookshop.org. You can find his monthly essays on Substack's *re:frame* reads and his upcoming content on the elections on TikTok at @emiledeweaver

# DANCE AND SOFT POWER

## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN LEILA MIRE AND SIMA BELMAR

(TOP) LEILA MIRE. PHOTO BY ERICA MACLEAN. (BOTTOM) SIMA BELMAR. PHOTO BY SOPHIE LEININGER

**JUST DAYS AFTER OCTOBER 7TH, 2023,** Leila Mire, a PhD student in the Department of Theater, Dance, & Performance Studies at UC Berkeley, delivered a talk on Zionism in modern dance for Sima Belmar's "Dance in American Cultures" class. After a brief clip was posted online, it went viral, sparking both enthusiastic support and harsh criticism.

Now, nearly ten months into the genocide, Sima and Leila have come together to reflect on that conversation. In doing so, they explore the dance community's aversion to the boycott of dance artists, analyzing what this reluctance says about how dance is depoliticized and exceptionalized in the context of Palestine.

**Sima Belmar: Looking back, I'm astonished you gave your talk mere days after October 7.**

**Leila Mire:** I was nervous about that. I thought you were going to ask me to censor it, but instead, you were like, "What kind of slides are we working with?" And I was like, oh… this is a tech question.

**Sima: It didn't occur to me that giving that talk could be risky. Perhaps you can explain what your argument was about?**

**Leila:** I walked through how Israel and the United States use dance as a soft power. I looked at the history of modern dance in relation to Israel's conception and normalization. I also examined case studies of Israeli dances and choreographers, addressing the appropriation of Palestinian dance. I concluded by explaining BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) and how it might be applied in a dance context.

**Sima: After your talk was posted it was accused of misinformation, usually by folks who only heard a 30-second snippet on Instagram.**

**Leila:** Yeah, I've gotten used to that. Strangers presume I don't know what I'm talking about, as if this isn't the culmination of my work and experiences. They also don't know how thorough I am. I screenshot everything before facts are erased. I'm a junior scholar, and I make $34,000 a year, yet famous choreographers and senior scholars can't wait to drag my name through the mud, claiming that I do this out of personal vendettas or for career mobility. I don't care to engage with that narcissism. I have already lost multiple jobs because of my support for Palestine. That's not why I do this. I do this because it's what's right and because if I love dance, it's my responsibility to criticize it.

**Sima: Well, certainly there is tremendous resistance to critiquing Israeli dance or choreographers like Ohad Naharin (and Batsheva), not only from Zionists (Jewish or otherwise) who equate anti-Israel rhetoric with antisemitism, but also from dance folks across the US who feel like dance, especially modern dance, should never be criticized at all because of its perceived second class citizenship among the arts and its very real lack of funding here. So, many are loath to call out bad Israeli actors for fear of being perceived as antisemitic, or "bad choreographies" for fear of kicking an art form when it's down.**

**Leila:** I attribute that to a couple of things. One is that the broader community wants to see modern dance as something that's "free." Acknowledging how racism is foundational to modern dance—that it has been orientalist and complicit in US exceptionalism and state-building projects, as well as appropriative of Black and Indigenous dances—gets in the way of that logic.

**SIMA: I'd love people to understand the difference between facing appropriating practices inside modern dance and appreciating how those practices can feel individually liberating. Dance writer Wendy Perron mentioned this in her Instagram comment on the clip of your speech. She wrote, "[W]hat I objected to in Leila's lecture is that she seems to ignore the experience of Graham technique and Gaga as art practice and look at them ONLY as pawns in colonialism/imperialism. It's possibly [sic] to be aware of both functions."**

**Leila:** Does it help that I took Graham from age 6-18?

**Sima: Right. In my mind, there's no reason we can't face problematic histories within dance forms while also acknowledging and embracing the liberatory potential within an individual's particular dance experience.**

**Leila:** Plus, it's a distraction from what's important. This is a genocide. Dance was used to normalize Israel. And now it's used to erase what Israel is doing.

**Sima: Say more about soft power.**

**Leila:** Soft power is around us all the time. The Cold War is just where the term became popularized. In the Cold War, modern dance's supposed democracy and freedom were meant to juxtapose the USSR's ballet, which the US painted as being stiff, menacing, and oppressive. Dance became the arena for a geopolitical pissing contest.



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Beyond combatting the threat of communism, dance was used for national state-building projects and normalization.

**Sima: How does BDS subvert that imperial soft power?**

**Leila:** In 2020, I wrote two pieces in *Thinking Dance*, where I touched on what we could do to progress BDS forward in dance. BDS has already named certain organizations and companies like Batsheva, and Ohad Naharin opposes BDS, saying it won't accomplish anything. But BDS has proven quite successful. It's a nonviolent method to cease international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and to pressure Israel to comply with international law.

The arts may not have the same profit margins as corporations, but its influence serves the state. But when I say that, people are offended. They think it's suppressing the arts. They fear the work of great artists won't be seen. But if they want to use that argument, they should think about all the Palestinians whose lives were prematurely stolen from them. They could have been artists, scholars, etc.

An artist like Naharin is called a "genius." But what conditions allowed him to get where he is? I'm at Berkeley, a school with some of the "best and brightest." But as I sit through classes I have to wonder if we're the best and brightest or if we're just the ones given the chance, the ones willing to sit squarely in the confines of respectability politics.

BDS simply says that we won't support artists who accept money from Israel. In response, people often say, 'well, then, why don't you boycott the US?' But this argument doesn't hold because the US doesn't fund its arts like Israel does. The vast majority of us are not getting state money, and if we are, it's usually symbolic.

**SIMA: It's also interesting the way nationality does and doesn't attach to modern/contemporary dance companies. Like if Wim Vandekeybus' Ultima Vez comes to the US, I don't receive them as Belgian. Or Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker's Rosas, I don't receive them as Dutch because of the way modern dance operates transnationally with a rhetoric of universality, eluding national attachments when it tours. I think Batsheva is received that way. Its attachments to the state of Israel are invisibilized. Those outraged by the idea of boycotting Batsheva in the US want the company both to be Israeli and universal, both associated with the state and apolitical.**

**Leila:** And that's tied to privilege and relation to Empire. Universality still falls under "First World" or "Third World" baggage as affiliated political projects. If a company is from Cuba, it's Cuban. If it's from Russia (or another country we're afraid of), it's tied to national origin. Other times it's tokenized to advance state interests (e.g. Shen Yun criticizing China or Ukrainian allyship with the US). Modern dance is ideal because you can argue both subjectivity and abstraction. It can mean nothing and everything so the state can use it.

**Sima: Yeah, a lot of the anti-BDS rhetoric centers on the individual artist and how unjust it is that they should suffer just because their state is committing war crimes. Even hearing myself say that, it's bonkers. However, this response suggests a complete misunderstanding of what BDS is. This is about opposing state-sponsored violence, an illegal occupation—ask the International Court of Justice. So even though Batsheva and Naharin become collateral damage, it's not personal. Plus, it's minor in comparison to what's happening in Palestine. I can't help but feel that the anti-BDS folks are spitting in the face of actual material suffering of Jews, Arabs, Israelis, Palestinians, historically and today.**

**And, I'm certain this will be an unpopular opinion, but I'm not moved by arguments like, "Oh no, this artwork will never be seen!" As you said earlier, who knows how many of the children murdered by state violence would have become artists with amazing work to share?**

**Leila:** Exactly. Dance is resistance. It can be liberatory. But that doesn't mean it always is. It can be co-opted, and it's on us to maintain its integrity and to criticize it to ensure that it goes where we need it to. It isn't devoid of politics. It *is* politics. We're watching a genocide. As artists, we cannot fall under some naive assumption that the arts are above the realities of that or that seeing a dance piece is more important than the lives of Gazans. We have a responsibility to this movement. Disappointment over missing a hypothetical new work shouldn't be something we're willing to think much less voice. These are lives we're talking about. We need to get some perspective here. We must do everything in our power to reckon with our past and be critical of our work. Dance is potent and it's about time we act like it.

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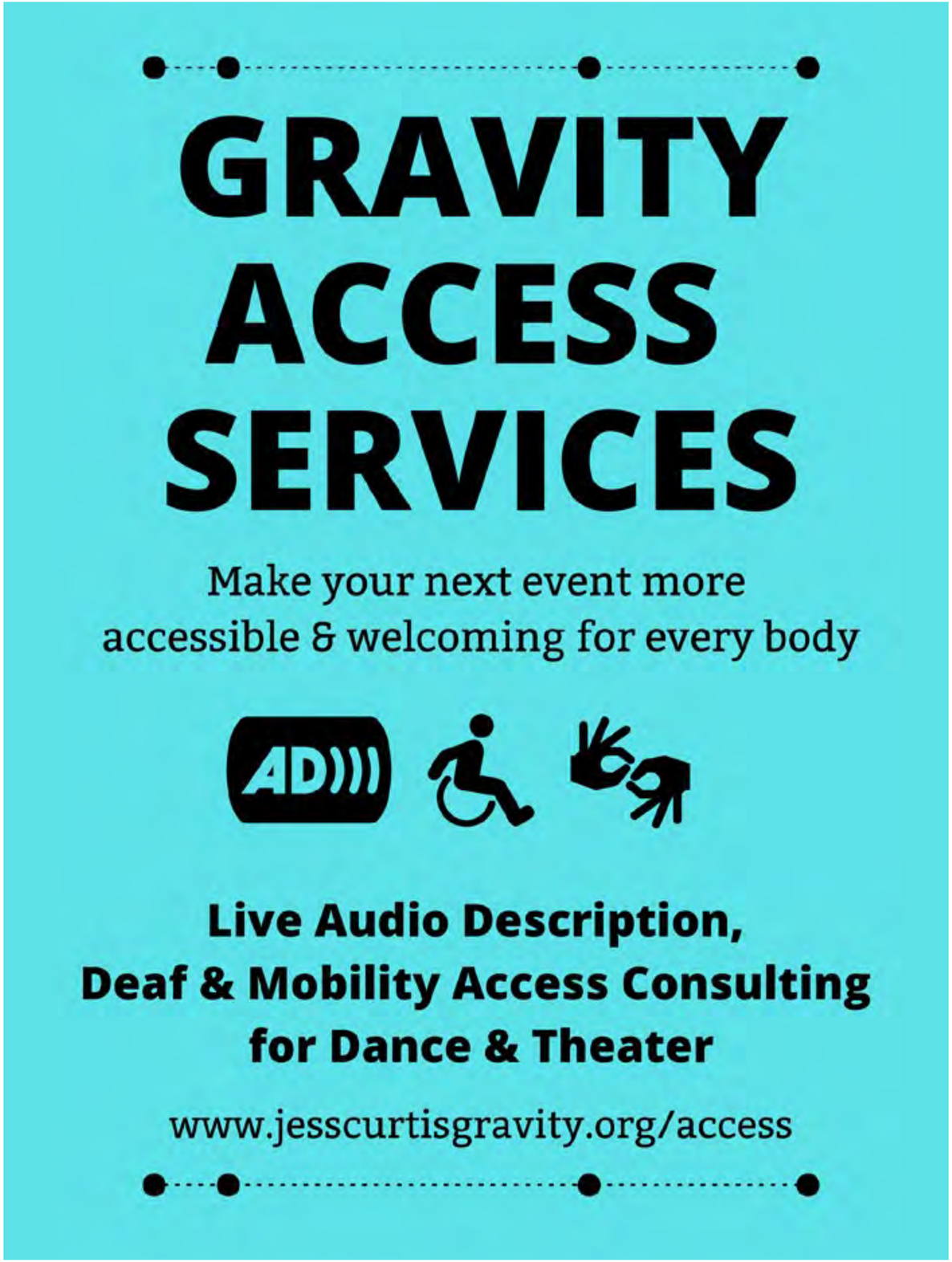
**SIMA BELMAR, PHD,** is a Lecturer in the Department of Theater, Dance, & Performance Studies at UC Berkeley. She has been a member of the Bay Area dance community since the early 1990s as a dance critic, columnist, podcaster, educator, choreographer, and dancer. From 2019-2022, Sima was writer-in-residence at ODC where she created and hosted the ODC podcast Dance Cast. Her writing has been featured in a variety of local, national, and international newspapers, magazines, and academic journals. She currently dances for Andrew Merrell's Slack Dance and works as an editor and writing coach for students and artists.

**LEILA MIRE** (she/her) is a researcher, performer, choreographer, community organizer, and educator. She is a current PhD candidate at UC Berkeley in the Theatre, Dance, Performance Studies Program and is an alumni of New York University and George Mason University. Her research looks at how dance is co-opted, appropriated, and performed for state and anti-imperial interests, particularly as it pertains to Palestine and its occupation.



# SISTERCRAFT

BY RANDEE PAUFVE | PHOTOS BY STEPHEN TEXEIRA

**Craft is the breath of my work.** I collaborate with dancers to generate and rigorously fine-tune movement vocabularies specific to each dance, drafting and redrafting, crafting and recrafting until there is nothing extra or unnecessary.

I invite dancers from a variety of backgrounds to explore a different or fresh relationship to our respective formative genres, and to more deeply inhabit the forms we have in common. In this way, I think of craft as empowerment, as our work together is fundamentally co-creative, supporting dancer agency, placing the burden of communication on movement, and imagining an audience that craves the sort of expression only dance can provide.

My latest project, *Sisters*, is an anthology of dances regarding sisterhood, motherhood, pregnancy, birth, abortion, and death. Created in collaboration with eleven women who span borders of dance forms and life experiences, *Sisters* reclaims feminism as a celebration of the resilience and power of women, of femininity, of any gender expression; and as a progression toward freedom of choice, identity, and bodily autonomy.

**Maurya Kerr and Molly Levy in *Sisters***

Irene Hsi in *Sisters*

Shruti Abhishek and Elizabeth Zepeda in *Sisters*

## I COME SEEKING THE DANCE THAT NEEDS TO BE MADE, ASKING WHO WE ARE IN THIS PLACE TOGETHER.

In the summer of 2022, as *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, my family learned that our ancestor Justine, who emigrated from Sweden to Brooklyn in the mid-1800s, died at seventeen not, as we believed, of influenza, but of sepsis from a self-induced abortion. A series of newspaper articles investigating her death revealed two things: one, that Justine, upon her deathbed, told her sister Johanna (our great-grandmother) the name of the father, and two, that Johanna vowed to carry this secret to her grave.

Using Justine's story as a base, the dancers and I began by writing and talking about our sororal relationships and the whisper networks of women.

*Sisters* is composed of solos, duets, a trio and group sections all woven together into a cohesive performance. For this article I'll focus on a duet created with Bharatanatyam dancer Shruti Abhishek and *baile folklórico*/modern dancer Elizabeth (Eli) Zepeda. I've worked with Eli since she was a teenager, and I know Shruti from when we danced together in a 2019 duet choreographed by Nadhi Thekkek. Though we began by writing about sisterly relationships, the conversation quickly turned to what was really on Shruti and Eli's minds—their birth stories and early motherhood.

I am not a mother, and while sometimes I feel sad about that, I've never felt evolved enough or secure enough to have a child. I've seen beautiful mothering, but also motherhood that looked grim. And the pain of childbirth; I've had endometriosis since I was a teen and know the excruciating pain of endometrial cysts bursting in my ovaries. Pregnancy was recommended to thwart the endometriosis, but I couldn't accept the idea of pregnancy as a cure for anything.

I didn't feel I could make a dance reflecting something I've not experienced, but birth and motherhood kept surfacing as the main thematic presences in the room, so I let go of my concerns and bowed to the dance, conscious of the challenge of honoring intimate stories that do not belong to me and translating them into choreography and performance without falling into a pit of literalism.

Shruti and Eli's duet begins with all eleven women rushing toward the audience, a wild, space-eating phrase created in response to the question, "what is the movement of a pregnant woman's water breaking?" In unison, the dancers hurtle forward while maintaining a tight cluster; they careen back and forth across the floor, as if on a ship in a storm. The sequence culminates abruptly with the dancers landing on one leg in a skydiving/flock of birds formation. They struggle, wobble and hop, reaching out to touch a nearby arm, foot, back, stilling themselves, finding balance, and breathing together in community; Shruti and Eli emerge as a duo while the others melt away.

Early on, Eli and Shruti expressed a desire to learn more about each other's forms, so we devoted several rehearsals to their teaching each other Bharatanatyam and *baile folklórico* skills and steps. These sessions helped us expand on a repetitive sidestep devised in an earlier rehearsal, a foot pattern that speaks to dance traditions and human movement across the globe. We layered gestures—complicated, meticulous upper body phrases drawn from our stories of sisterhood/birth/motherhood—on top of the stepping pattern, working with a simple 4/4-time structure, no other sound but their light feet tapping time.

Working with these phrases as a base, we designed a spatial pattern taking Eli and Shruti downstage center, forging a runway path toward the audience. Once they reach the audience, they split apart, circling back to where they started. Shruti and Eli dance this sequence in unison, meeting again and again upstage center to start a new pass. Dance critic Heather Desaulniers wrote that for her, this reflected an act of treading water; indeed, our intention was to reflect ideas about mothers holding it down, cool moms at the park making it look easy and lovely while barely containing the inner churn, the fears, frustrations, and craziness of early motherhood.

I rarely use text in my work, but early in the process I began feeling strongly that we needed to hear from Shruti, who has an amazing voice but had never worked with spoken text in dance. Shruti went for it, and her first improvised monologue became the words we used in the dance— the ten-year struggle to obtain a visa for her mother, during which time Shruti gave birth, followed by a more than two-year delay before Shruti's daughter met her grandmother for the first time. We later added text for Eli, who describes her son's birth like a shopping list: five days in labor, three visits to the hospital, two shots of morphine, seven days in NICU.

The choreography in this duet explores how bodies hold the fraught, often extreme spaces of early motherhood—a difficult birth and caring for an infant, the greatest love of your life and the greatest challenge—and for many, in a new country and home, without family support, and how birth changes women's bodies and relationships with the world.

As a choreographer and dancer in my sixties I have learned that I can only move in this body, in this moment, offering intimate presence as connection and valuing dance as critical to our survival. I come seeking the dance that needs to be made, asking who we are in this place together. To me dance is rooted in hope, the work of small transformations. This is not about me as a dance artist; this is about dance, about the work of *our* work, knowing ourselves better, evolving, so we can better relate to each other and to the world.

*Sisters* premiered at ODC Theater as part of their State of Play series, August 2024.

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**RANDEE PAUFVE,** artistic director of Paufve Dance, is a 2019 Fulbright-Nehru Senior Scholar. She has been a featured artist on NPR's "All Things Considered" and was named one of San Francisco Magazine's 2017 "100 Artists Putting the East Bay On The Map." Randee received the 2015 Isadora Duncan Dance Award for Outstanding Individual Performance and the inaugural Della Davidson Prize for Innovations in Dance-Theater. She was nominated for the Theatre Bay Area Choreography award for her work with San Francisco's Cutting Ball Theater and is a two-time recipient of the E.E. Ford Award for dance research. Randee has taught on the faculties of UC Davis, Reed College, Lewis & Clark College, University of San Francisco, Cal State East Bay, St. Mary's College of California, Cal State Sacramento, Marin Academy, and, since 1993, at Shawl-Anderson Dance Center. paufvedance.org



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# *EMBRACING THE JOURNEY*

## Trust, Tradition, and Transformation in Dance

*by* **SHRUTI ABHISHEK**

When Randee Paufve first spoke to me about the possibility of a duet in her new work *Sisters*, pairing me with Eli Zepeda, I didn't think, plan, or even pause to wonder. I just said yes!

From the beginning, *Sisters* was all about trust for me—trust in Randee's years of experience as a choreographer, trust that I could find synergy with Eli, whom I'd never worked with before, trust that our stories held meaning for both of us, and trust in my body to move through a space it wasn't yet familiar with. I trusted the process to reveal its truest intentions in its own time. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else got in the way.

Rehearsals with Randee and Eli were special. Every session, I stepped into a world I couldn't yet define, creating it moment by moment, step by step, conversation by conversation. I felt like an infant, piecing together a story, a new reality. I learned how to let go. Randee has this incredible gift—she nudges and pushes just enough to let you discover the direction that was inside you all along. She saw something in me I hadn't seen in myself.

Art-making is such an incredible process, especially through movement. You're creating something intangible in space, making decisions as you see and feel it. Doing this with two differently trained bodies, finding the rhythm and dialogue between them, was both interesting and challenging. In every duet and trio in *Sisters*, the movement was alive at each moment, carrying emotion with it. When I watched the pieces, I could hear the bodies talking. Randee's choreography is a beautiful poem, a dialogue in motion. That's rare.

Being part of this process with such powerful women and experiencing such potent movement was profound. As an Indian immigrant dancer trained in Bharatanatyam, stepping into a space filled with modern, contemporary, and ballet-trained dancers felt daunting. Trusting my own training was key to navigating that space.

Like ballet, Bharatanatyam has a structured, traditional approach with specific guidelines. My training emphasized a geometric quality, where I learned to create distinct shapes and patterns using my hands, legs, and eyes, all contributing to the beauty and structure of the dance. Through intricate footwork, sculptural poses, and hand gestures, Bharatanatyam brings a sense of rhythm, balance, and visual appeal to the dance.

My mentor, Vaibhav Arekar, pushed me to stretch the boundaries within this codified form. He helped me find fluidity, patterns, and abstract images in the technique and encouraged me to explore the use of theater in dance. For example, he would ask: if a character from a story is placed in the spotlight, what would their words or monologue be? And if that monologue could only be expressed through movement, how would you convey it?

This approach challenges the nature of the practice, where the body, unaccompanied by any lyrical aids, becomes the sole vessel to communicate the story. It has allowed me to go beyond the codified form, moving beyond the traditional use of hand gestures and footwork. By expanding how I use my body to communicate, I often find new ways to invite even audiences unfamiliar with Bharatanatyam into my world.

*Kismet with Kali* is a solo dance theatre work I'm currently building, an exploration of the fluidity between relationships and memory, tracing the quiet shift from expectation to acceptance. It draws on personal stories of holding on and letting go by inviting the audience into a daughter's perspective of her evolving relationship with her mother. Along the journey, goddess Kali arrives. She transcends to become a guiding, surreal presence. With myth, movement, poetry, lighting, and live music, *Kismet with Kali* creates space to reflect, connect with, and unflatten notions of what exists.

Bharatanatyam has evolved over the years. From poems that were written that reflected the Indian society—which talked about topics of oppression of caste & class, polygamy, and affairs—to a much-refined version of the Indian "culture" post-colonial British rule in India—where the focus was more on religious and mythological stories—to a lot of choreographers now who talk about recent history or current social themes.

Using Bharatanatyam to explore human emotions in *Kismet With Kali* feels abstract, but working with Randee on collecting movement from intention has been helpful. By building a "movement bank" and shaping sentences from it, I've learned to let movement carry the intent. This approach echoes my mentor's philosophy, though expressed through different dance styles and cultural backgrounds, which I have found fascinating.

Incorporating text into my duet with Eli in *Sisters* has also shaped my choreographic process. Moving beyond the traditional framework of Bharatanatyam and letting my body respond to a personal story through monologues has been liberating and empowering. *Kismet With Kali* is my first evening-length solo venture, and the timing of these two works coming together feels destined.

Both *Sisters* and *Kali* explore the raw, personal stories of women—unfiltered and honest. They delve into how women find solidarity with one another or in a figure they admire, highlighting the need for a sister or mother figure to offer guidance and support along the way. *Kismet with Kali* premieres on October 18th at Joe Goode Annex. The production also features a stellar ensemble of South Asian musicians.

Finding the balance between tradition and evolution has been quite intriguing for me. As a friend recently told me, to doubt is good; embrace it and you'll find your clarity. As nervous as I am, the thought of diving into the process—whether with *Kali* or *Sisters* —fills me with excitement!

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**SHRUTI ABHISHEK** is an Indian dancer, teacher, and choreographer practicing Bharatanatyam. She started her training with Rohini M. Singhi from Mumbai, and since 2012, has been training with Vaibhav Arekar. In addition to her own company and solo performances, Shruti is a Principal Dancer and Rehearsal Director at Nava Dance Theatre. In 2018, Shruti founded Kshetram, an intergenerational dance institution that helps keep Indian traditions alive in California while offering space to reflect on how Indian traditions continue to transform, evolve, and grow with each new generation. Shruti co-curates two festivals: Varnam Salon, a series of performances by California-based senior art practitioners, mid-career artists, and upcoming dancers, and When Eyes Speak.

*Kismet with Kali* premieres October 18th at Joe Goode Annex

PHOTO BY ABHISHEK ASHOK

by **GREGORY KING** | photo by SKYE SCHMIDT

**BalletX dancers in Jennifer Archibald's *Exalt* (2022)**

# THE DOUBLE BIND

## BLACKNESS IN DANCE AND THE BIASES OF CRITICISM

**THE DOMINANCE OF WHITE NARRATIVES IN DANCE WRITING MEANS THAT BLACK ARTISTS ARE NOT ONLY UNDERREPRESENTED BUT ALSO MISREPRESENTED WHEN THEIR WORKS ARE FILTERED THROUGH A LENS THAT DOES NOT UNDERSTAND, VALUE THEIR CULTURAL ORIGINS, OR SEE THE IMPORTANCE OF CAREFULLY CURATING CONTEXT AROUND BLACK CULTURAL SOPHISTICATIONS.**

### A Complex Examination of "A Strange Loop": Conformity and Commercialism in Black Art

I recently saw a production of Michael R. Jackson's *A Strange Loop* at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles, California. Winner of the 2022 Tony Award for Best Musical, *A Strange Loop* attempts to subvert stereotypes, but in my experience of viewing, reinforces the 'struggling artist' and the overbearing, unsupportive Black family tropes, hyper-sexualizes the Black gay male, suggests Black folks are inherently burdened with trauma, and displays the portrayal of Black pain for the consumption of predominantly white audiences.

I left the theatre thinking about bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representations*, in which she addresses the commodification of Black culture. In the text, hooks explores how Black culture is consumed and how Black creators often feel pressured to present themselves in ways that are palatable to white audiences. She offers that Black creators sometimes adopt derogatory language or perform stereotypes to fit into white-dominated cultural spaces or markets. This act of "self-othering," she asserts, can be seen as a survival strategy in a society where mainstream acceptance often requires conformity to stereotypes. It dawned on me that the lingering feeling I experienced upon leaving *A Strange Loop* was a questioning of how conformity impacts commercialism. Do Black creatives think they can only achieve success based on the expectations of white theatregoers? Do they believe their validation is dependent on the stereotypical lens through which art critics define and analyze their works? If the answer to any or both is in the affirmative, then undoubtedly, Black creatives may feel compelled to cooperate with a system that rewards such portrayals.

This reflection also led me to consider how choreographers' works are discussed within the realm of dance criticism. Writers, whether Black or white, may feel pressured to pen pieces that reinforce stereotypic, confining, and reductive portrayals without fully considering the harmful impact of such depictions.

### The Language of Exclusion: How Terminology Marginalizes Black Dance

Black choreographers and dancers face a double bind: they are often tokenized within the industry and asked to "perform their Blackness" in ways that conform to white expectations, yet their artistic contributions are rarely given the same critical consideration or respect as their white counterparts. The works of Black choreographers and the abilities of Black dancers are often written about devoid of cultural context and reduced to lazy and insulting terminologies like "primitive," "exotic," or "unrefined."

In addition to marginalizing Black dance forms, these jargons suggest that Black dance forms are not worthy of serious artistic consideration but are instead suited for lower, less cultured audiences. Knowingly or not, these nomenclatures reinforce a racist hierarchy that places Black artistic expressions at the bottom, denying their artistic merit. This language, in an effort to uphold Eurocentric standards, denigrates the cultural articulation and sophistication of Black communities while ignoring the rich histories and social significances behind Black dance movements. Yet, some dance writers and critics continue to use offensive verbiage in their descriptions, evaluations, and analyses of dance works created by Black choreographers and performed by Black dancers.

Writers' unwillingness to be non-binary and nuanced in their approach to dance criticism is indeed lazy and exclusive. This exclusion is not just a matter of oversight or self-proclaimed ignorance; it is a continuation of systemic oppression. The dominance of white narratives in dance writing means that Black artists are not only underrepresented but also misrepresented when their works are filtered through a lens that does not understand, value their cultural origins, or see the importance of carefully curating context around Black cultural sophistications. These misrepresentations not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce biased standards in dance, but they are flat-out racist and harmful.

We must impede!

We must recognize and challenge how dance works are experienced, talked about, and written about by acknowledging the cultural significance of Black dance forms and citing Black choreographers, Black dancers, and Black culture appropriately.

### The High Cost of Biased and Harmful Critiques

In a 2023 review of Jennifer Archibald's *Exalt* for BalletX, Jeff Slayton wrote, "It is a dance that brought the Irvine Barclay Theatre audience to their feet with shouts of bravo, but again, it is the dancers who earned the applause and olés. Archibald's choreography has a similar business to Alonzo King's work for LINES Ballet Company and Dwight Rhoden's for Complexions; two prominent and acclaimed choreographers of this era in contemporary dance. What I see too much of in these works is the complexity of the choreography. It is showmanship vs. art. This company is, however, more than worthwhile going to see, and I look forward to doing so soon. I do wish for more meat on those creative bones."

This is an example of comparative diminishment, the undermining of Archibald's contribution, a lack of constructive feedback, and overemphasis on "complexity." While comparisons are common in reviews, Slayton compared Archibald's choreography to that of prominent choreographers Alonzo King and Dwight Rhoden, grouping her exclusively with other Black choreographers. This is limiting and racially biased, implying that Black choreographers are only relevant in comparison to one another rather than within the broader context of contemporary dance, thereby reinforcing racial demarcations.

When Slayton credits the dancers and not Archibald's choreography for the positive audience reaction —"it is the dancers who earned the applause and olés"—he dilutes her creative vision and skill, inferring that her choreography is secondary to the performers' execution. This is particularly harmful as it devalues the recognition of Archibald's artistic contribution, a common issue faced by Black artists in predominantly white spaces.

Mentioning that her work leans towards "showmanship vs. art" is unconstructive and biased as this criticism perpetuates a stereotype that Black creativity is less serious or less artistically valuable. Such a distinction undermines the legitimacy and depth of her work, reducing culturally rich expressions to mere entertainment akin to how 'street dances' such as breaking, krump, etc., are framed as lacking skill, training, and validity.

The phrase "I do wish for more meat on those creative bones" is not only vague but unhelpful and patronizing. It does not provide any feedback on how Archibald could improve her work or clearly articulate what Slayton found lacking. Instead, it dismisses her choreography without offering constructive insights, making the comment disparaging rather than productive.

Criticizing the complexity of Archibald's choreography—"What I see too much of in these works is the complexity of the choreography"—implies that her work is overly complicated in a way that detracts from its artistic value. This proposes an unfairness against the intellectual and technical rigor in her work, which might not be similarly critiqued if the choreographer were white. It reinforces a narrative that Black artists' work should be more accessible or simplified for white consumption, reducing their creative depth. I mean…. how dare Archibald defy her 'primitive,' 'exotic,' 'unrefined' destiny?!

### Towards Inclusion and Respect

Harmful reviews do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a larger system of exclusion in the arts. When critics fail to recognize or appreciate the sweat and value of Black artistry, they reinforce the systemic inequities that have historically marginalized Black artists' voices. This propagates a cycle where only certain narratives and dance genres are deemed "worthy," further entrenching racial and cultural biases within the industry and our larger culture. Injurious reviews also potentiate fewer opportunities, reduced audience interest, and a tarnished professional image that can be difficult to rebuild.

**HARMFUL REVIEWS DO NOT EXIST IN A VACUUM; THEY ARE PART OF A LARGER SYSTEM OF EXCLUSION IN THE ARTS.**

To all dance writers and critics, I implore you… cultivate cultural humility and deepen your understanding of the diverse cultural contexts from which dance works emerge.

**GREGORY KING** received his MFA in choreographic practice and theory from Southern Methodist University. He has performed with The Washington Ballet, Erick Hawkins Dance Company, The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, and Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway. His writings have appeared in *Stage of Reckoning* (Routledge, 2022), *Africa, Caribbean, and Black People's RESILIENCE During Covid-19* (Demeter Press, 2023), *Dance Magazine*, and *ThINKingDANCE*. In 2021, he launched the Decolonizing Dance Writing: International Exchange Project, bringing together artists from Peru, Columbia, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, and Ghana to explore non-Western dance practices. Currently, King is the inaugural Assistant Provost for Faculty Development at California Institute of the Arts and is completing his doctoral studies in Interprofessional Leadership at Kent State University.

# PRISM
# WITH ENDLESS ENDINGS

by ERIC GARCIA AND KAT GOROSPE COLE

For fifteen years we've directed Detour, a performance company that embodies queer maximalism and an ensemble approach to devising work.

We weren't always like that.

Fifteen years ago we were a contemporary dance company (or "troupe" as one news article called us). We were dance babies self-producing work out of The Garage, CounterPulse, Studio 210.

Babies.

Since then, we've shifted into crafting work for unconventional spaces, most recently OASIS (a cornerstone queer night club along with the revival of the STUD!) and The General's Residence in the Presidio (think: haunted ballrooms, decadent decor, a view of the piers).

We've gone from being Detour Dance to Detour Productions. It was a way to honor that dance, while still a part of our practice, isn't the only toy in the sandbox anymore.

More is more.

### Why does Detour drag?

- Affirmation (tip$$$, vocal cheers, eye contact)
- Connection
- Risk is Celebrated
- High Reward
- Entertainment
- Brief but Mighty
- Dynamic, Bold Expression (deeply personal to camp to emotional ballad to choreographed spectacle)
- Referential
- The Form Itself: costume design, lipsync, makeup, skill-sharing
- Familial

### Why does Detour dance/theater?

- Rehearsing/crafting for long periods of time
- Ensemble Creation
- Building and stacking scenes/sequences
- Building the plane as we fly it not quite knowing where we'll be in the end but trusting in the p r o c e s s

PHOTO BY WADE WILSON

It's the liberatory, immediate energy of queer nightlife
paired with
the nuanced, multidimensional world-building of dance and theater

& it all comes together in a seemingly chaotic
but rigorously conceived format of (inhale)
**immersive theater**

Doesn't that sound yummy?

### Within the container of immersive theater, we're asking:

- What is the dynamic between the devisers/performers and the audience? How do we continue to keep the audience's experiences in mind as we build?
- What work is needed to be responsive to the audience, and allow their engagement, spontaneity and autonomy inform the work?

### How are we building this plane?

This is a (non-exhaustive) list of some of our approaches:

- As an ensemble, each person creates scenes based on a concept or theme. We see each other as artists and creators in our own right, and there's a lot of liberty and responsibility for each person to refine their own character and scenes.
- We share our developing scenes with one another and invite feedback and ideas—everyone is welcome to share their opinions.
- The keeper of the vision is Eric. He'll take stock of what's being built and organize the show's main arc, oftentimes "swapping" creative material between people. In that sense, the work we're creating is non-proprietary and can be gifted to anyone in the group to use.
- Scenes are stacked together through a very intense process of trial-and-error. For our 2023 show, *We Build Houses Here*, we tried dozens of different orders for our scenes until we found the right balance of energy and timing.
- We must shed our performer ego/individualism, knowing there's a chance that no one is seeing our scene, trusting that the larger vision of the work is being held by all. The narrative, so to speak, isn't held by one person or one experience but instead by the collective, who all hold a piece of the totality.
- We also trust our abilities to take care of ourselves and one another. An access check-in at the start of every rehearsal allows people to share where they are at and how we can support them. This trust extends to the performances, where we are tuning into and listening to one another.
- In practical terms, this means that performers are not only aware of their roles within a scene but also continuously revising and adapting in response to the audience. This dynamic interplay requires both a keen sense of improvisation and a solid grasp of the narrative and spatial context, and pulls from the spontaneity and presence that drag invites us into.
- It's about navigating a three-dimensional performance space, engaging with audience members on a personal level, and guiding them through a complex web of interactions and sensory experiences.

**An excel spreadsheet/visual document of scene order/show structure for *We Build Houses Here*. There are 12 columns—one for each performer—and dozens of rows that signal minute-by-minute timestamps, broken up into the four acts.**

### And what happens with the audience?

A list of hopes, and invitations:

- Step out of the traditional confines of passive observation into a realm where you and your choices significantly impact the experience;
- Navigate the space, make choices, place yourselves in environments that react to your presence;
- And by doing so, alchemize interaction and spontaneity from everyone present.

A prism of sorts.

Immersive theater allows us to explore the boundaries of creativity and human interaction, for performers and audiences alike, and offer experiences as diverse and dynamic as the people who participate in them.

As we do, we turned to our ensemble of collaborators to share thoughts on what this process is for them. We want to emphasize here that, while Detour provides the container and structure for the work to happen, the real culture and impact that the ensemble feels is something that each of them has co-created. It comes from the openness, care and trust that each of them bring to the process. It is a daily choice to show up like this, in the same ways we want to be held and listened to:

*"I felt trusted, valued, and challenged. Working quickly, not questioning first impulses, and assigning a seemingly-random site for a performance module puts me in a sexy place to be creative… Then using prompts and randomization, let each performer build and inhabit their own dossier of character, born out of their performance strengths. It was all very mathematically orchestrated in its construction. And it worked. It challenged me to let go of my usual rehearse/refine/perfect performance style and live in a react/respond/breathe mindset."*
—KEVIN CLARKE

*"For me, the most important part of theater and performance is the communal experience…In a Detour show, it feels like... I happen to be in the role of glittery performer, and you happen to be in the role of audience member, but we can also feel that we are human animals in a small space together. Ensemble created work is so hard and gratifying. Sometimes you're just dancing with a mop around in a room by yourself wondering what the fuck you're doing. Sometimes you're all fumbling around together trying to figure something out. What is this thing? You live together in the unknown. And you miraculously do SOMETHING even when you don't know what you're doing. You keep reminding yourself to trust. You find ways to pour some essential part of yourself into this crazy vessel and share it."*
—ERIN MEI-LING STUART

*"The ensemble nature of these devised pieces means I have a wealth of artistic knowledge to draw upon from a diversity of talent who are mutually invested in each other's success, growth, and caliber of the collective performance. What's more is Detour's radical commitment to collective access principles, inviting in access checks at each rehearsal and providing accessibility support for performers and audience alike. This praxis subverts the antiquated notion that only disabled people's body/minds have needs, which is refreshing and healing to feel the pressure taken off me as a disabled person to proactively self-advocate to ensure my (and people in my communities) experiences will be considered in the production."*
—ALEX LOCUST

*"My experience with Detour is one of care and having the performers' backs… which is something I have never experienced before. Putting the performers well-being to the front of the conversation really helped me take care of myself and gave me the ability to put my best performance forward."*
—LISA FRANKENSTEIN

*"My experiences with Detour's ensemble-devised/immersive theatrical productions have been nothing short of healing. The combination of the process of collective consciousness, personal expression, and integral skill sets is what has set my experience with this production team apart from anything I've ever done before."*
—MUDD THE TWO SPIRIT

*"Working with Detour makes me think of... permissions, being summoned to create with my whole self. A place where I am treated with love and respect in my messiest states. Alchemize the fraught and chaotic experience of discovery into something I can learn from and look upon with compassion."*
—QUINN DIXON

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**ERIC GARCIA** is a San Francisco-based devised dance-theater artist, drag queen, community organizer, and the Co-Director of Detour. He creates immersive and site-responsive performances that straddle nostalgia, radical futurism, collaborative ensembles, and queer maximalism. He has worked with men in detention, senior adults, trans and queer youth, drag performers, and self-identified non-dancers on various dance films and live performance projects. Eric is rooted in the queer nightlife and drag performance scene as Churro Nomi, and produces/hosts Clutch The Pearls, a drag cabaret on the first Sunday of every month at Make-Out Room in the Mission District. Since 2010, Eric proudly serves as Managing Director for both Fresh Meat Productions and the SF Transgender Film Festival.

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**KAT GOROSPE COLE** is a Bay-Area based director and producer working in film and live performance. She formerly served as Development Manager and later Program Manager for CounterPulse, and has worked in production and arts management for several other Bay Area arts organizations. They have worked as an Associate Producer for Academy and Emmy-winning directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, and was the Associate Producer for Boots Riley's I'M A VIRGO. Her short films have screened in over 25 festivals including Hot Docs, NewFest, CAAMfest, Los Angeles Asian Pacific American Film Festival, New Orleans Film Festival and Outfest. She was awarded Best Bay Area Director from the Coven Film Festival. He moonlights as the drag king Sir Acha.


Flyaway Productions & the Tenderloin Museum present

# ODE TO JANE

**What does resistance look like in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's Dobbs decision?**

**DIRECTION: Jo Kreiter**
Choreography: **Jo Kreiter** in collaboration with the dancers
Performers: **Ai Yin Adelski, Laura Elaine Ellis, Sonsherée Giles, MaryStarr Hope, Jhia Jackson, Megan Lowe and Saharla Vetsch**
Composer: **Xoa Asa**

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photo Brechin Flournoy

dancersgroup

# TO SQUAT OR NOT TO SQUAT

*by* **LISA GIANNONE, PT, KINESIOLOGIST.** *photos by* CARLYN STRANG

**There was a time**, not long ago, that dancers didn't train muscles outside the studio or stage. A dividing line between the type of training deemed necessary or 'appropriate' for sports versus dance existed. Dancers didn't avail themselves of the science, training, and physiology embraced by other physical sports.

Times have changed. Athletes in every sport are using strength and power training to improve performance. The rules and science of physiology and training can apply across physical disciplines. Moving with strength, coordination, balance, and explosiveness is the same in pointe shoes, bare feet, or cleats. Muscles don't know if they are contracting for a jump in dance or basketball. Training your body, if it's a moving machine, changes the way you work and feel.

But reluctance remains in the dance world, justified and not, when it comes to training other than with very specific dance movement. Worry over interfering with turnout actions, disrupting lines, and developing too much tone or bulk is still very much a concern in dance. But all training is not created equal and some of those concerns may be the unintended result of misdirected, non-nuanced, or generic training approaches.

Independent of the central question of "to train or not to train" lie many other questions about structuring a program best suited for dancers. What does "training" mean? How does it look, why, and how do we do it? Train in parallel, or avoid it? Use added resistance, like weights or machines, or only body weight?

Most importantly, how do I do it all safely and specifically: build strength and endurance, protect against injury, prolong my career, and enhance my performance? If you can reach outside of traditional dance training to better achieve these goals, it's all possible.

There comes a moment in a dancer's career path, maybe related to injury or sense of physical vulnerability, an internal inkling or an urging from a dance teacher or director, when the thought comes to mind that perhaps, just maybe, I should consider training.

For years we've seen reports of NFL and NBA players doing ballet, Pilates, and yoga; world champion boxers dancing to enhance footwork and balance. These competitors learned that moving slightly differently than their norm was paying huge physical dividends. Take that successful concept of training outside the dance norm and the traditional boundaries of class with repetitive *relevés, pliés*, center and jumping, and apply it to professional dance and ballet. Training with different stresses can relieve the repetitive

## SQUAT FORM

Victoria Wright and Diego Cruz with Lisa Giannone

The key to executing a squat with precise form is the start position: "tall," held spine with good posture; stance just slightly wider than shoulder-width; gaze forward/upward.

Flex at ankle, knee and hip, which drops your torso straight down. Posture maintained, back in soft extension, hands light on knees, creating upward "standing" tension at knees with quads.

Sideways view of precise form: clear angles at ankle, knee, and hip; "vertical" upper body and upward head/gaze maintained; continued "stand up" tension at knees and quad tension. Goal for holding the squat should be 60-90 secs, with 3-4 sets as you gain strength.

## COMMON COMPENSATIONS >>

Legs have moved out of pure parallel and thus less able to isolate quads at goal level; she is also avoiding bowing at the limbs/knees.

strain brought on by the exclusive participation in one activity.

Cross-training for Eurocentric dance forms is traditionally Pilates and Gyrotonic. Dancers find comfort in their dance roots, relationships, and specificity. However, when we analyze the forces involved in making the movements in dance, including ballet, we know that the limbs and the body not only create repetitive acceleration or jumping forces but also repetitive landing forces. Dancers move and push across the floor. They stabilize and balance in motion. The dancer's body has to hold, balance, and move. That level of physical presence—having muscles on, available, and ready to react—doesn't come with ballet classwork alone. It's "athletic stuff" and must be specifically trained into the system with complexity beyond simply setting out to "strengthen." Optimized function is the goal. There are powerful means to get strength and enhanced muscular function that don't involve contraptions, excessive load, and "bulking up."

"Training," then, comes down to two main issues – SET-UP and FIRING.

Set-up: establish moves, actions, and positions at angles and in planes so that the target muscle group has the maximum opportunity to work. This is often in parallel and not just in turnout.

Firing: bring optimal coordination and awareness of muscle activity, what we call neuromuscular activation, recruitment, or turning the things on that need to be turned on. Learn to fire with intention and focus and keep the muscle on.

It's far more technical than it appears. This is the key, whether applied to rehab, injury prevention, or enhanced ability: look for muscle burn – it's the body's built-in biofeedback to let you know you are working properly and thoroughly.

Obtaining conscious access to muscles, or neuromuscular recruitment, is the step BEFORE working on strength, etc. Bodies "try" to do less; we need to make them do more. Activation of muscle, for any athlete, is the primary means through which training gives results. If you cannot "summon muscles" at any given moment, they cannot offer support or direct action at a joint or through a limb. Access and use of the target muscle are the goals – muscles that function better. A 'Muscles 2.0' version without the unwanted "side effects" of building bulk.

## QUADS

As discussed above, dancers lift, lower, and move their torsos with their limbs. They jump and land, and create elegant lines with a straight leg. Your quadriceps muscle is responsible for these actions and more. Your quads are central in providing shock absorption to the joints, tendons, and ligaments up and down the limb and spine. The better they work the better you can perform.

This training is effectively done with your body weight, as that (and at times the weight of another if partnering) is the primary resistance that a dancer needs to be able to move. Quads need to have a solid "presence" in the lower limb of a dancer and be able to produce force, stabilize, and sustain over time. Fatigue and weakness are the enemy of both protection and performance as they reduce shock absorption and spring of the lower limb.

A dose of parallel squat work in a dancer's weekly regime prepares the body for optimum functioning. The body weight squat, set up with precision and intention, is the exercise that isolates and works this main player of the leg. It's a beginner, mid-, and advanced-level exercise depending on how it's issued and performed, and should be the primary tool in the dancer's training toolbox.

## POSTERIOR CHAIN MUSCLES

Additionally, in parallel, one can train the hamstring and superficial and deep (think turn out muscles) glute groups. Despite vigorous daily activity—class, rehearsal, performance—dancers frequently miss out on specifically targeting and isolating these key "directors" of the hip and limb. In fact, weakness in these groups, and the quads, is a number one finding in the bodies of dancers despite their exquisite skill in making aesthetic and athletic-looking movement.

## THE CORE

The core is both under- and over-hyped. The core, including muscles on all sides of the torso, links the lower and upper body, and is key even when it's not moving. For instance, during a bodyweight squat, it controls the torso while the legs work and move, sustaining "perfect" posture, without losing proper spine position. The legs are pistons to a fixed torso. This provides extremely effective core activation and stabilization. Without a solid base and stable link between upper and lower body, it may be impossible to generate force and efficient limb movement. Additionally, the core, especially the spine, becomes vulnerable to injury when not stabilized.

While dancers are masters of nuanced and refined movement, it is interesting to isolate the contributing motor units, i.e., movers and stabilizers, of a dancer's body into component pieces. Breaking movement apart can expose a lack of sufficient activation and use. When not at one's personal full activation and potential, there will be a deficit working not only across a specific joint but for the body as a performing whole.

The goal of training must be specific and intentional activation of all target muscles so they can contribute to the entire spectrum of movement and protection. Enhanced durability, stability, and ability are the result. Quite simply, your body feels better, works better, and performs better.

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**LISA GIANNONE** is a PT/Kinesiologist and Founder/Owner of ACTIVECARE/THE GARAGE.She was a UCLA Kinesiology/Biochemistry major and class Valedictorian and completed her graduate work at UCSF Medical School in Physical Therapy. Dissatisfied with the traditional approach to sports and dance medicine, Lisa founded her own thriving practice where she approaches rehab as an engineer with an understanding of physiology. She creates specific protocols for biotech companies, sports organizations, and her individual patients, who include Olympic, professional, and collegiate athletes, world champion boxers, and professional dancers. They refer to her treatment as the "most specific, precise and effective" they have experienced. She is rehabilitation consultant for San Francisco Ballet, ODC/Dance Company, and Smuin Contemporary Ballet, and conditioning consultant for the SF Ballet school.

## >> COMMON COMPENSATIONS

**Also a leg position mistake stressful to hips, knees, and ankles; avoid turn out of feet at ankles and the resultant knock-kneed position.**

**Loss of upright posture: head has fallen, gaze is down, which moves body weight out of quads, overloads hip, and can stress spine.**

**Throwing the weight forward by throwing arms out in front loses upright core-focused posture and significantly lightens load to quad muscles.**

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