

Reggie Wilson in Conversation



Susan Manning

As dramaturg, I spent hours talking with Reggie Wilson as he created his most recent work, *Moses(es)*, for Fist and Heel Performance Group. This interview summarizes our conversations on the trajectory of his career and his distinctive working methods. The first half was recorded during a visit to his family's home in Milwaukee in July 2013, and the second half was recorded during a company residency at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) at Florida State University in October 2012, as Reggie looked ahead to a sound residency at Vermont Performance Lab in March 2013 and a production residency at Philadelphia Fringe Arts in May 2013. Editing the transcriptions for both interviews, I realized that some

Figure 1. Reggie Wilson and Susan Manning present a talk about dramaturgy at TanzKongress 2013 in Düsseldorf. (© AnjaBeutler.de)

questions were missing, so those were added via phone and Skype conversations in summer 2014. In other words, this interview in one sense is a fabrication, and that seems entirely appropriate for Reggie’s work and career, for he often plays with spectators’ preconceptions and expectations of authenticity. See the three other essays in this issue of *TDR*: “Reggie Wilson and the Traditions of American Dance,” “On the Making of *Moses(es)*: Notes from a Dramaturg’s Journal,” and “Zora, Zar, Ohad, and Nubia: Research Memos for Reggie Wilson’s *Moses(es)*.”¹

SUSAN MANNING: Reggie, you grew up in Milwaukee, and your family on both sides migrated from the Mississippi Delta in the 1950s and 1960s. These biographical facts we know from your solo *Introduction*. Can you talk more about your experiences in your hometown?

REGGIE WILSON: I went to Rufus King for middle school and high school, a public school for the “gifted and talented,” and I performed in lots of school productions—swing choir in middle school and musicals in high school.

MANNING: Were you also in your church choir at Metropolitan Baptist Church?

WILSON: Not formally, no. But in Sunday school for programs we would put things together. My cousin Janel was very much a pianist and a vocalist; we would collaborate and get choirs together for the Christmas show and for Easter and we would sing a duet or two over the years.

MANNING: You actually started choreographing as a young teenager.

WILSON: The first time I was actually called a choreographer was in eighth grade, when Debra Jupka, who was choral director at Rufus King, asked me to be her assistant choreographer for the high school musical *Godspell*. And I had never taken a dance class, just performed in swing choir, basically step, touch, turn, different angle, step, touch, like that. A lot of swing choir songs are actually show tunes. I remember that we performed “We Beseech Thee” from *Godspell*. I don’t remember what else.

MANNING: So that’s where Miss Jupka saw that you had a talent for moving.

WILSON: What was odd and wonderful was the fact that I was in the eighth grade where the middle school and high school were in the same building, so there was already this ongoing tension about the little kids. And here I was being asked to be assistant choreographer for the high school musical, which meant that I was going to get to tell juniors and seniors in high school what to do. For me, that was beyond believable!

MANNING: Were you familiar with the term “choreographer”?

WILSON: The term wasn’t foreign or estranged, not like “dramaturg”!

MANNING: What kind of dance did you see growing up in Milwaukee?

1. In addition to the three other articles by Susan Manning that complete this special section of *TDR* (59:1) on Reggie Wilson, *TDR* online includes supplementary content: a 15-minute video on the making of Wilson’s most recent work, *On Fixing My Mouth to Say...Moses(es)*, by Nel Shelby Productions. —Ed.

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WILSON: I grew up watching *Soul Train*, watching *American Bandstand* every Saturday. *Dance Fever* with Deney Terrio and *Solid Gold*. Then musicals. *A Chorus Line* was the first musical that I went to see down at the Performing Arts Center. *All That Jazz*. *Cats*. I thought, oh my God, let's just imitate that! Freshman year I started taking basic ballet and basic jazz.

MANNING: Then you continued to serve as assistant or co-choreographer with Miss Jupka through high school—for *Pippin*, *Guys and Dolls*, *West Side Story*, and *Cabaret*.

WILSON: I forget at which point I actually became *the* choreographer. By senior year I was the lead and the choreographer for *Cabaret*, and the production won a citywide theatre competition and was presented at a local festival.

MANNING: When were you introduced to modern dance?

WILSON: Summer between my junior and senior year of high school I went to Northwestern for an intensive summer program affectionately called Cherubs. That year the program was focused on Graham's Greek works: we saw *Clytemnestra*, *Night Journey*, *Errand into the Maze*, and I studied Graham technique. I thought, okay, this is something really serious. And the fact of how much energy and resources it took for me, my mom, my aunt, my aunt's husband to get me there. It was a big investment, really different from what anybody in our family did. That summer was a turning point.

MANNING: So that's when you decided to pursue dance rather than musical theatre.

WILSON: I asked my Northwestern professor Lynne Blom, "do you think I can do this dance thing? Seriously, should I go to school and study dance or just go to New York and try to dance?" She said, "well, a university program is not a bad idea," and she recommended the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. NYU seemed edgier than other schools; folks there were making work, and it seemed they had access to resources in the city.

MANNING: So in fall 1985, just a month shy of your 18th birthday, you started the three-year intensive year-round program at Tisch. Who were your teachers there?

WILSON: Phyllis Lamhut was my composition teacher, and she became a mentor. The tools that she got from Nikolais and taught us were really concrete, and I still use them in my own teaching. Time, space, movement. There are different types of time: how are you showing time, and how is time perceived? In terms of space, there is a profound difference, choreographically, between elements being near or being far—whether body part to body part, body to body, body to object, or body to audience. And then movement, just to start, there's rotary movement, angular movement, fast and slow, all these qualifiers. As a choreographer I can choose to do whatever I want, but how do I even know how to do that if I don't know what a noun is, what a subject is, what a verb is. That's when you start to break out, when you realize you have some grip on how to make choices. You can write something, but how can you actually go back in and craft something? That craft aspect was something that came really strongly from Phyllis. It doesn't matter if it's tap, hip hop, postmodern, modern, ballet—time is there, space is still there, movement is still there.

MANNING: Another NYU professor that you kept in touch with after graduation was dance historian Camille Hardy.

WILSON: When she gave visiting lectures on different topics, she would ask me to demonstrate Graham and Humphrey-Limón and Cunningham technique, and I would also do a short solo of my own. She also asked me to house sit. She had an incredible library, and I spent hours browsing her library. Since she lived right around the corner from Lincoln Center, I would also spend hours there watching videos. For some time I had ongoing conversations with Camille about the history of dance and my relationship to it.

Reggie Wilson

Selected Works, Concerts, and Curated Events

Unless otherwise indicated, all group works are with Fist and Heel Performance Group.

- 1988 *Either Side of the Mountain*. Israel Museum in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, Israel. Commissioned by The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Collaboration with choreographer Yin Mei. Music: traditional Chinese by Chan Yuan Wang.
- 1989 *N/um*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. Fresh Tracks showcase for new work, a shared evening.
- 1990 *Kaffir*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. An evening of dance works.
- 1991 *Seeline 'oman*. DIA Foundation for the Arts, New York, NY. Commissioned by Neta Pulvermacher and Dancers.
- 1992 *The Clearing*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. An evening of works.
- 1994 *Holy*. Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA. An evening of works. New York premiere at Dance Theater Workshop, February 1994.
- 1994 *Making Thanks at Nashowakemuch*. The Yard, Chillmark, MA. An environmental piece celebrating the 300th anniversary of Chillmark.
- 1994 *The Bearded Crone Makes Thanks*. Dances for Wave Hill, Riverdale, NY. A site-specific work.
- 1994 *Shouting Rings*. Movement Research at the Judson Church, New York, NY.
- 1995 *A Black Burlesque*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. An evening-length work.
- 1995 *Fête Fuh So!* The BAM Majestic Theater, Brooklyn, NY. Curated dance program for 651 Arts, celebrating the cultures of Trinidad and Tobago.
- 1996 *Juba*. Queen's Hall, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies. Commissioned work by Noble Douglas Dance Company Inc.
- 1996 *love*. Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, New York, NY. Evening-length work. Also performed at Festival e'Nkundleni in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, November 1996.
- 1997 *Africa in America*. Tisch Auditorium at the 92nd Street Y, New York, NY. Curated program of dance and music groups from the African diaspora.
- 1997 *The Dew Wet*. Lincoln Center Out of Doors, New York, NY.
- 1998 *A Concert of Works*. Program included *The Overwhelming Scenario*. Jacob's Pillow, Lee, MA. Evening of dance works premiered at Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY, May 1998.
- 1998 *Rum and Salvation*. Queen's Hall, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies. Commissioned collaborative work with Noble Douglas performed by Fist and Heel and Noble Douglas Dance Company Inc.
- 1999 *Qoqoda*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. Evening of dance and performance works. Also performed at Dance Place in Washington, DC, February 2000 and at LINKFEST in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, August 2000.
- 2000 *Congo Connection*. Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI. Commissioned dance work and lecture collaboration with Dept. of African and Oceanic Ethnology.
- 2000 *Wangena—the birthday concerts*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. An evening of dance works.
- 2001 *Rise, Sally Rise and Tales From the Creek*. Triangle Theater, Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY. Part of the Thelma Hill Urban Dandelions Showcase curated by Marlies Yearby.
- 2002 *The Tie-tongued Goat and the Lightning Bug Who Tried To Put Her Foot Down*. Danspace Project, New York, NY. An evening of dance works.
- 2003 *Black Burlesque (revisited)*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. Trilateral, multiyear collaboration with Black Umfolosi (Zimbabwe) and Noble Douglas Dance Company (Trinidad and Tobago). Toured multiple venues.
- 2004 *Big BRICK: a man's piece*. City Center, New York, NY. Fall for Dance Festival. Quartet from 2002 presented as part of inaugural season of Fall for Dance.

- 2006 *The Tale: Npinpee Nckutchie and the Tail of the Golden Dek*. Dance Theater Workshop, New York, NY. Evening-length work. Toured multiple venues.
- 2006 *Left Moat-East*. Dancing in the Streets, the fort on Governor's Island, New York, NY. A site-specific performance.
- 2006 *Jumping the Broom and The Dew Wet*. Black Dance Tradition and Transformation, 651 Arts, Brooklyn, NY. Two revisited duets for a shared concert with Eternal Works Inc. dance company.
- 2007 *We Ain't Goin' Home But We Finna Get The Hell Up Outta Here*. Victoria Theatre, Dayton, OH. Commissioned by Dayton Contemporary Dance Company as part of the Jacob Lawrence Project.
- 2007 *Accounting for Customs*. Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the steps of the US Customs House, New York, NY. Site-specific collaboration with Andréya Ouamba.
- 2008 *Kwenda Vutuka*. French Institute/Alliance Française, New York, NY. An evening of repertoire of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel and Andréya Ouamba/Cie 1er Temps, and a work-in-progress excerpt of *The Good Dance*.
- 2009 *The Good Dance-dakar/brooklyn*. BAM Next Wave Festival, New York, NY. Full-evening work. Collaboration of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group and Andréya Ouamba/Cie 1er Temps, resulting from a five-year exchange and collaboration. Toured multiple venues.
- 2011 *A Pouring Vessel To Hold*. Southern Dance Works, Birmingham, AL. Commissioned work for five dancers.
- 2011 *SHOUTing Rings - a work*. Muntu Dance Theatre, Chicago, IL. Commissioned work for 20 performers.
- 2012 *theRevisitation*. New York Live Arts, New York, NY. An evening of dance works.
- 2013 *Moses(es)*. BAM Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn, NY. Full-evening work. Multiyear research began in 2010 at Foundation for Jewish Culture's American Academy in Jerusalem. Toured multiple venues.
- 2014 *...Moses(es)*. River to River Festival, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, St. Cornelius Chapel on Governor's Island, New York, NY. Site-specific work created from material and ideas from *Moses(es)*.
- 2014 *On Moses(es) a local investigation* copresented by the Institute of Contemporary Art and Summer Stages Dance at Concord Academy, Boston, MA. Work created on 21 local Boston dancers with three Fist and Heel dancers during a one-week workshop residency sharing the ideas and processes of *Moses(es)*.

MANNING: How else did NYU impact you?

WILSON: The engagement with other students who were choreographing. There were a lot of opportunities to make pieces and show them in different spaces at NYU. And NYU brought in lots of choreographers to work with students, both during the regular year and during summer intensives. Ohad Naharin, Susan Marshall, Richard Colton, Sara Rudner, Elisa Monte, David Gordon, Bill T. Jones, Lar Lubovitch all taught at NYU when I was there.

MANNING: At NYU were you focused on becoming a dancer or a choreographer?

WILSON: Even while I was choreographing at NYU, it didn't seem realistic to just jump ahead and become a choreographer. Only in the last decade or two do people assume you can become a choreographer without dancing in someone's company. At that time it was still very much assumed that you would dance with someone for 5 to 20 years before you became a choreographer yourself.

MANNING: You joined Ohad Naharin's New York-based company your senior year at NYU and performed with him from 1988 to 1990. You even considered relocating to Israel when Ohad returned to Batsheva. Your relationship to Ohad was one of the research clusters for

Moses(es), and an excerpt from that research memo is included in this issue of *TDR*. What's important to note here is that you started showing your own work in New York while still dancing with Ohad.

WILSON: In hindsight, the period of working with Ohad feels deeply connected to that learning period when I was at school. When I danced with Ohad, it wasn't a full-time company. So I was also performing with other folks: Yin Mei was a traditional Chinese dancer who had started to do contemporary work, and we even toured a program together to Israel. I danced with Neta Pulvermacher, another Israeli choreographer in New York in the 1980s. I was in a work at DTW [Dance Theater Workshop] by Kristin Eliasberg called *The Fred Piece*, based on Astaire, and Ralph Lemon and Donald Byrd were also in it.

MANNING: The late 1980s was a time when black postmodernists were making a stir in New York. How did their work impact you?

WILSON: There was a practical impact as well as an artistic impact. What were their choices, what were their interests, and how were they performing and getting others to perform that? Were they using white dancers, were they using only black dancers, were they using male dancers or only female dancers? Were they using text or not? Were they using music or not? Were they being political or not? I feel that, directly or indirectly, Garth Fagan, Marlies Yearby, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, David Rousseve, Jawole Zollar, and Donald Byrd impacted my choices. At the time folks felt that their work was marginal, but now it seems like so much was going on.

MANNING: And out of all those myriad influences came Fist and Heel Performance Group?

WILSON: I was also influenced by white postmodernists like David Gordon and Twyla Tharp and by visiting companies like Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal. As influences I would single out Laura Dean, Lucinda Childs, and Meredith Monk for their formalism, use of repetition, and vocal work.

MANNING: You found the name for your company, Fist and Heel, in a study of the black church in the South. In the years after the Civil War, Daniel Payne, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, criticized the "fist and heel worship" of the Shout. As you note in your programs, both black and white authorities dismissed the "soulful art form" that enslaved Africans had created when they were "denied their drums."

WILSON: The name "Fist and Heel" didn't appear until the mid-1990s. I was terrified of locking onto a name before I felt that it was right, even though for several years I had been making work with the same group of folks. Early on I committed to Fist and Heel as a company of primarily or predominantly brown-skinned and black dancers. And to problematize what that is supposed to mean. If I have a didactic soapbox, it's that to be black or African American is much more complicated or complex than one thing, much more complicated and complex than the conversation or dialogue often allows. Black is also human, even more so. I don't want to make a piece about that. It's a core value and so whatever I'm dealing with, that should still be visible.

MANNING: How did you embark on what I call your "research-to-performance method"?

WILSON: I started traveling after not moving to Israel. It didn't even start off as traveling, but as going back to my early ideas on anthropology and ethnography and actually doing the research. To collect the stories, to understand the material in a deeper way, what it's doing and how it functions. And that led to me coming back to Milwaukee and then going down South to research the Shout, then going to Trinidad and Tobago to research the Spiritual Baptists and the Shangoists. Having grants like The Suitcase Fund at DTW and The Fund for US Artists at International Festivals and Exhibitions made a difference. At Symphony Space in New York, I met folks from Black Umfolosi, and they said, "you really should come to Zimbabwe." And then I found out they had a festival, so I could get the money to go.

MANNING: During the 1990s you produced a concert every year at Dance Theater Workshop or Danspace.

WILSON: It wasn't that formalized. After we finished a show, I started thinking about another idea, or David White [Executive Director] at DTW would ask if I wanted to be on the next season.

MANNING: When did you first perform your signature solo, *Introduction*?

WILSON: The first version was an untitled solo on a program titled *love* [1996]. And if I find the tape, I will make sure it's burned and buried, because it is really embarrassing to see the first idea. It was the first time I ever started to incorporate material from the Spiritual Baptists. And I'm barely talking and mumbling and walking and talking very shyly. It failed in my view, horribly. But usually before a show I would say, "Hi, I'm Reggie Wilson and this is Fist and Heel Performance Group, and I've just been doing some research in Trinidad and Tobago, and some material that you'll see tonight is connected to that research." I don't know at what point the connection happened, but I feel like *Introduction* has been a work in progress over many, many, many iterations.

MANNING: Was *Black Burlesque (revisited)* from 2003 a turning point, when you made the transition from an evening of shorter works to a full-evening work?

WILSON: Even when I was making small pieces, there was always an arc; the evening was packaged as a whole. My full-evening works might not be so different. Even in *Moses(es)* there are all those sections, like episodes. That's not something that I'm running away from. That probably was what really attracted me to Pina Bausch, it occurs to me now, because she would add these bizarre little things, like spaghetti whipping, that had nothing to do with anything else in the piece.

MANNING: You love wordplay in your titles. Can you tell me more about how you see the relation of the words in the titles to the work?

WILSON: My titles are a way of signifying that audiences are not going to get the work without seeing it, without tasting it. Words are not sufficient for dancing. In effect, the titles say, "either get past these words and come see the work or just leave it alone." I could have titled my new work simply *Moses*, but I choose *Moses(es)* to alert audiences that there's a twist going on. I manipulate words to tell you that what you're seeing is not simple.

MANNING: You have characterized your work as "post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern Dance." Does that phrase work similarly to your titles, manipulating words to alert potential viewers that what you do is not simple? Were you influenced by Ishmael Reed's 1972 "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto"?

WILSON: Not directly, no. I heard the term when I was in New Orleans in the early- and mid-1990s and then used it. Each word in "post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern Dance" functions literally, maybe even hyperliterally, but when they are strung together, they seem confusing to some people, maybe the same people who find my choreography confusing. People more and more are gravitating toward the phrase and asking me publicly for an explanation.

MANNING: I love your analogy for making work as a two-step process akin to creating cloth and then taking the cloth to a tailor to create an outfit.

WILSON: By the way, that's not the only metaphor that I use for composition. But since you ask: the idea started when I was traveling to the Caribbean, where so many folks still have clothes made for themselves and the selection of fabric is an endeavor in and of itself even before you have to choose the pattern and go to a tailor. Generating movement material in the studio is like creating the cloth. Choreography is what happens once you have the cloth and

you go to the tailor to create an outfit. Once you have the material, it could suggest the form and style of the outfit, but you could also do something really different that nobody's ever done with that type of material. The first draft of *Moses(es)* we'll show in Philadelphia in May [2013] is like the first fitting of an outfit. The tailor has cut the cloth and patterned the outfit, but it's not done. You have the customer come in, try it on, and they look at it and decide if they want it longer or shorter or a slightly different cut. Tailors always leave extra material, just in case you want to make an extra trim or an extra piece or an extra head-tie.

MANNING: So what happens next?

WILSON: Then from the production residency in May until the September premiere in Philadelphia, the analogy is of finishing the outfit, ironing and pressing and seeing how it wears, making sure it's just what you ordered. And then after the Philadelphia premiere and before BAM Next Wave Festival, you've got this outfit, but you wore it to somebody's wedding and you want to wear it to another wedding or maybe to an award ceremony. Different head wrap or different earrings that might set it off differently so people don't really know that it's exactly the same, or they think that it's the same but this is a more formal version. For me, the analogy helps me stay grounded and stay focused on the different tasks that I need to do at different times and/or that there are different options of going back in and working with a piece of choreography.

MANNING: Continuing your analogy, do you always leave some extra material in the tailor shop that you will reuse in creating the next outfit?

WILSON: For me, that's closer to a quilt analogy. If you have leftover material, it's the same material, but now you can cut new swatches out of the same material and make it into a completely different quilt.

MANNING: Let's talk about your use of music. You have around 10,000 musical selections on your laptop, right?

WILSON: I don't know how different it is from other peoples' processes, especially in a day and age where everybody now has an iPod. I've been working this way for a long time, bringing in stacks and stacks of CDs and, before that, stacks of cassettes. For a long time I've liked and used prerecorded music. I've also taken the opposite approach and used live vocals; in that case, the aim is to recreate or use sounds in the way a sound happens in its actual context as opposed to engineered for recording. I also like layering both approaches, juxtaposing recorded finished sound with what we've been trying to do when we're actually singing. I rarely hear, have, or know a song and then want to recreate it or choreograph to it.

MANNING: In rehearsals, you'll ask dancers to run through the same section to very different kinds of music, perhaps house one day, an old blues singer the next day, another day the song "Frankie" [by Sister Sledge]—a song that was totally unfamiliar to me, until you told me that tune always closes the bars in Trinidad and Tobago. Can you talk about how playing with different musical selections impacts the development of the movement material?

WILSON: The music may fit for a particular reason, not necessarily because that's what I want to do in the performance, but at a particular movement that track might have the right rhythm or the right tempo. It might have an idea or there might be a lyric, which the dancers have to ignore in order to focus on what they're doing rather than what the music is doing. So I think it's a provocative tool for rehearsal. When the rehearsal generates material that I really don't have a particular viewpoint on yet, I play different kinds of music, first, to see how it affects the dancers, and second, how it affects my looking at the thing. So my use of different music in rehearsal functions on at least two or three different levels.

MANNING: How do you figure out which music goes with which section?

WILSON: The development of the sound is usually on a separate track for me than the development of the movement, especially if we're working with live vocals. At the Vermont Performance Lab, we'll have just a vocal residency [in March 2013], where we'll have the luxury of adding and pushing and pulling some ideas that I've wanted to try for a while. So by the time we get to the production residency in Philadelphia, it'll be really, really good to know the music we're using and which music we're singing on top of so that technically we can actually figure out how that will happen in the space—how if the sound is moving from one speaker to the next and around, how that actually needs to time with whatever lighting or whatever steps as well as what type of mics need to be in place in order that the live vocals can be heard and balanced against the prerecorded music.

MANNING: One last question: Is the cast for *Moses(es)* a more international ensemble than you have had before? The opening is so impressive when the dancers announce their provenance—Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago, Sierra Leone, and Jamaica in addition to the US.

WILSON: I feel like the ensemble has always been international. Consider the core of myself, Rhetta [Aleong], and Lawrence [Harding], who both have been with the company for more than 20 years. Already we have members from Trinidad and Tobago and from Sierra Leone. That was an issue of mine, because I felt that people would see *Fist and Heel* and see it as a “black dance company,” meaning African American, whereas *Fist and Heel* has always been an international company.

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