CHOREOGRAPHERS

Most labels are snakes eating their own tales and "post-modern" dance is a particularly hungry python of a pseudo-category. I talked with four choreographer/performers whose work has strong performance features—they say yes to persona, props, narrative, costumes, music, (in a word, theater)—which let the taxonomical chips fall where they may. I deliberately chose pairs from opposite backgrounds: Jim Self and Meg Eginton share histories of their own choreography followed by tours as dancers in the Merce Cunningham company; Pooh Kaye and Yoshiko Chuma come to dance with no formal dance training, just unusual personal experience and concerns, and a need to express them kinesthetically.

POOH KAYE

What's on your mind about your choreography now?

First I would say that I don't choreograph. I don't have the level of sophistication of putting material together to come under the heading of choreography. Since my process always tends to be reductive instead of elaborative, I don't want to be responsible for saying I choreograph. What's on my mind lately about movement and performance is... I think I'm in transition, leading away from narrative and expressive themes and formats into simpler, clearer motives that are more isolated, focused on the content of each fragment that I work with, on a movement as opposed to a series of movements. I think I'm going against the times because everybody seems to be getting into expressiveness and content.

You think it's a backwards transition? Against the flow?

I guess it's what I'm missing: some kind of purity or purism that's just about totally disappeared. I mean work that had been done in the art about the nature of materials and trying to bring out the innate expressiveness that's in those materials, so that expression or narrative is not something that's overlaid, but is available in the material itself.

Are you trying to stir up a neo post-modern Judson?

I haven't achieved that yet in performance.

So in contrast to Thick As Thebes at the Kitchen which had a story running through it...

Yeah, it was a narrative.

you're saying now that you're not connecting up the units, that you're letting them be what they are?

Or letting the content develop out of what the units are. In other words, because the material is just there, it sets up possibilities—it's not theatrical.

What's "theatrical" to you?

To me, it has to do with image, with metaphor, with interpretation, and how you perform something, the particular manipulation of performance dynamics. I have nothing against theatricality. I really like it.

What are your discontents with it?

I've just gone too far. I storied myself out. I started off with grandiose themes like life and death—TAT was my expressionistic display about death—and now I've reduced myself down to making tea at home, household stuff, love poems. I don't have strong feelings about any new direction so I'm just trying to open things up for myself so something can start to happen. I'm going to do a piece in the spring and I'm thinking of doing it with a simultaneous dual cast, one of children and one of adult males and females to point out differences and ambiguous cross-overs between men as men and men as children, and women as women and women as children.

There's always been something child-like, or innocent, running through your work. I think I generate almost all my material from my childhood. Right now, my own personal concern is being an adult in touch with one's own gender as well as the androgynous child and where the two meet or don't meet.

You think of children as androgynous?

They have their innate differences but I think that the way they experience information is very direct, therefore androgynous. That's also the time when the kind of information that's appropriate for each gender gets set up, but until then, there's a real ambiguity about the motivation to get it. That pure motivation doesn't belong to gender. I've always been interested in that kind of consciousness. Now what interests me is what is real about sexual differences, the biological differentiation, not what's socially conditioned.

Why not the social aspect?

That's very confusing. It doesn't hold water very much anymore. I'd like to know what the real motivations are for having a sex at all.

The short films you showed at Warren Street two years ago had that quality. In the first you were nude and burrowing in dirt, in the second you wore a grass skirt and tried to climb a pillar, and in a third sequence you were nude and laid across a chair and table while moving your arms and legs. You were child-like, sometimes animal-like.

Everybody attributes this animal thing to me because I worked with Simone Forti but outside of TAT which had all these organic images, I have never worked with any animal imagery in a conscious way. I am very interested in the possibilities of the human body outside of any Western formal dance tradition.

Although you were nude in the films, they weren't at all sexual.

That's right. I never in my life really dealt with having a sex at all, at least for a large part of it. Since my work is very personal, how I perceive myself comes out very strongly. I was nude in those films because there was no role I was playing. Since I didn't have a role I didn't know what clothes to put on. The idea of clothing is always very difficult for me.

So you thought of the movement as certain activities, not as an expression of character, not as a story?

One of them was a character which I later developed in a couple of performances, the one in a grass skirt which is an obvious costume. That was a character called the "wild girl," which was an attempt to put a formalist energy into a social role. I picked a social role that doesn't really exist.

An unsocialized social role.

A character who had never really dealt with society in any way. She did all sorts of things that people weren't supposed to do. She got to do whatever she wanted to do.
Why do you choose to use such sensitive personal concerns as performance material?

Because I always have to start off with something that comes out of me. That’s why I think of myself as a very small person, I’m not a creator with a large world view. I make performances for a certain community since it comes from problem-solving I’m doing for myself. I try to make it large enough so that it incorporates other people’s universes.

Sexual identity is not a little problem.

No, it’s a large one and I don’t think my problems are unique. But I’m absolutely crippled when I try to be larger than my own life, to tackle a world problem that I haven’t experienced. I’m making my material from my own experience and my own possibilities, I’m deliberately not going outside of that.

That means in terms of discipline as well as themes, doesn’t it? I know you’ve never really studied dance.

No, I never studied it and I never really studied with Simone, I just performed with her. At the time Simone had this very democratic, egalitarian philosophy about never telling anyone what to do, so it was always up to me to do what I thought was appropriate. I began making my own material. I believe in that and am very supportive toward people who generate that kind of effort.

Do you still plan to work that way yourself?

I think I was more democratic in the past than I am now. I used to have this method of group observation in which we all would observe and pick out material, then I would organize it. Now it seems to be thinking about people I work with as autonomous tools, that they have their own selves but that I can still work my material on their personality.

There’s a sort of group I think of in your work, people who work with you and whom you work with.

Yeah, Yoshiko Chuma, Susan Rethorst, Simone Forti, Cesc Gelabert, Peter Rose. Those are all autonomous people, powerful people in their own right, and we’ve all affected each other very deeply. I put a lot of faith in acts of empathy on everyone’s part.

That way of working is unusual now isn’t it? Choreographers are using younger dancers rather than sharing their performing experiences in the way that the Judson bunch did.

I’ve noticed that. People don’t want to share careers.

What happened in the Performing Garage series two years ago?

That was our split-up.

You presented two pieces: Ragged Valley was billed as Yoshiko’s work and Camptown as a collaboration between you, Susan Rethorst, Clair Bernard, and Peter Rose.

And Carol Mullins the lighting designer.

How’d that double bill happen?

It was a disaster. There were too many egos. Camptown was an actual unsuccessful collaboration. Initially, Yoshiko and I were going to do something, then she didn’t want to share directorial responsibility with anyone else except me. We had a fight about it because I was convinced it was still possible to have a real collaboration. So I took half the run and she took the other half. . . .

The whole situation was too idealistic, too removed from actually making the work. Everybody either wanted their way or not at all, and some didn’t want to get involved at all. What we finally came up with was this farce-like thing that was mostly about months of argument. I did enjoy performing that particular piece because the situation was so difficult.

I’ve never gone to one of your performances thinking that I knew what I was going to see, but there’s often a quality of titillation, of feeling like I was supposed to look at it sideways because of the difficulties or problems that the performance displayed.

I think I do that strongly and deliberately, and that it comes from
childhood radicalism on my part. I know I have an attraction to taboos, like psychological realities that don’t have a place in public society, like sado-masochistic tendencies. I know I have a strong taste for extremes, for extreme soft sensuality and also for hardness, for violent, psychical sensations. A lot of the material that people find titillating I never considered titillating. I was totally innocent about it.

*That attitude can be pretty titillating in itself.*

I suppose so, but I was always shocked when people found my performances shocking. In *TAT*, people were very disturbed by all the dirt stuff—throwing it, burying our heads in it.

*I hate dirt myself, but I’m willing to be upset by it in a performance. Did you like dirt?*

I was terrified of dirt all the time as a child. I had a terror of dirty bathrooms and I used to clean bathrooms before I would use them. Now I’ve forced myself to overcome all those particular psychological aversions. I think that facing and overcoming fear has a lot to do with the kind of tests I’ve shown in performances.

*Do you think of performance as therapeutic?*

By the time I get around to using them in performance, they’re no longer fearful but enjoyable. Once you get past the fear part of a taboo, you can make a choice about the sensation whether you enjoy it or not.

*Are there taboos that you wouldn’t deal with in performance?*

Oh yeah. I would never deal with sexual taboos on stage. It’s not that I don’t like to see it, I love to watch it in other things. It would be very hard for me to do that, to perform naked.

*You did at The Kitchen when you were “Wild Girl.”*

No. I took my shirt off because I have no sexual feelings about the upper part of the body, but we wore these grass skirts. In my work, things are only vaguely sexual.

*I think of it as polymorphous, sort of pre-sexual differentiation.*

Exactly, you got it. But another thing that concerns me, more powerfully than taboos, is oppression of self, of genuine organic needs, which leads to the oppression of people by each other. That has something to do with my preference for working with autonomous individuals. So much of our lives is about interpersonal, social, political, and economic oppression.

*And earlier you said you dealt with little subjects?*

They’re little subjects in my format I guess.

*Since you never studied dance, can you explain why your work comes out as kinetic movement performances rather than as, say, poems?*

I think my work exists between disciplines, between dance, theater, and sculpture not unlike a lot of other people, but I think I have a very strong kinetic relationship to people and things, and I trust that material as a direct vessel to define psyche, energy, intelligence. I just don’t have as strong a relation to other mediums. I don’t write and I don’t trust words. I spent a lot of time playing as a child in a way not very different from these performances, making very ritualized, object-oriented kinetic games.

*How does this feeling of transition in your work affect the subject of your next piece, the one contrasting adults and children?*

Thematic I don’t think it’s any transition except that I’m trying to integrate the transition into the material itself and not have it applied from the outside.

*How do you start working on a piece?*

I usually start with some kind of boundary that is basically thematic, and with a certain direction, a sense of how I’m going to formally organize it. In the past I’ve gotten people together and worked into the material and into the psyches of the people so that everybody is sharing the same process.

*Do your pieces ever use music?*

No, that’s a problem. I know it’s time to have music, not only because it’s part of the times, but it feels like something’s missing. It’s a real problem because I’m scared of that kind of collaboration—my work tends to be so integrated that it would be impossible to pastiche some music on the outside like some people do. On the other hand I don’t know if I’m flexible enough to reform myself around a composer’s vision.
JIM SELF

How do you feel about being called a postmodern dancer?

I don’t think it’s appropriate. I think if you have to distinguish between modern and postmodern, then I’m modern. In Minneapolis, Sally Banes was talking about the expressiveness of modern dance, and how postmodern—after Balanchine and Cunningham—was more formalistic, and I thought, I’m modern.

When you began performing in Chicago several years ago, did you think of it as dance or as performance?

As dance. Towards the end of that period, I was doing a lot of improvisational work. Every Monday night for twelve weeks I gave an informal performance. Usually it was solo, twenty minutes long, and the material had to do with working out things, more with possibilities in performance than with structured choreographic work.

How were those performances set up?

In various ways. I started out with some props and ideas and put them together. Then I was working toward not having any ideas so I would go in with nothing—no props, no music—there was just movement and a movement idea. Once I finally got to the point where I had no idea of what I was going to do and just did something although it was based on what had gone on before in earlier performances. The last performance was a recapitulation of all the others.

When you came to New York, was it for the purpose of joining the Cunningham Company?

No. I had seen their work, but I only intended to study at the studio. It just sort of happened. I decided I had to give up outside work and concentrate on Merce’s work. I kept working but I didn’t show it.

Do you feel like your dances now are full of elements that Cunningham dance leaves out? For example, specific costumes and props, music, character, an overall dramatic point and shape? Those aspects are often included in the term “modern,” and those who call such dance “postmodern” either have to ignore such features or consider them a regression.
That’s one of the big problems with that term. Obviously anyone who worked with Merce and who now does their own work went to him to learn something, not to any of the Judson choreographers. From what I understand of their work at that time, it was getting rid of things, and rejecting Merce’s work too because somehow he was the clearest about what he was doing, and taking dance somewhere else. They found their solutions and it didn’t allow for other possibilities beyond that. So you can grasp their work very quickly because it exists in a limited area which they do very well, but it doesn’t have broad possibilities. You have to go to the source: Merce.

Each of your dances is specifically and spectacularly costumed. Do you think about “character” when you choreograph?

That has more to do with working with Frank Moore because there was never a costume element in the earlier work I did. I used street clothes or sweatpants. My work always had a theatricality to it, and costume brings that out even more. It always had characters.

Dances as character studies?

Yes. A certain kind of movement would suggest a kind of character, but not like the development of a story.

Would you begin with the idea of the character and start to move, or start to move and discover the character?

Both. The structure of a piece was based around moving as the character and not moving as the character, and those sections alternated so there were various stimulations for movement.

Were there sections in your recent dances that were not “in character?”

I wasn’t thinking so strongly about character in those pieces. Uproots was not so much about a character but about a situation of going from one place to another place. In one place I was really planted, the movement was based on the torso and the legs, then parts of the body on the floor. Then I went to a totally different place, where the whole body was released.

And you approached the piece with a list of movement possibilities based on those contrasting places?

Yes, but it was done right after I moved from Chicago to New York so it was also a way of making sense of a lot of new information.

So when you performed it at DTW you were presenting a past version of yourself since it was about an event that happened around 1976?

It’s autobiographical, but all those things are just suggested. People tend to read more things into what I do than I think about when I’m doing them.

Why do you think that happens?

I don’t know. People have always talked about these characters and these situations. In Chicago I used to deny it although in the beginning it was very much about character. I guess I wanted to get rid of that idea in some way but it didn’t go away: I was denying it but people saw it. Since most of my work was solo I didn’t really know what was going on.

Do you think that audiences now are looking for all those qualities—character, themes, stories—which were excluded from dance and which generally came under the negative heading of “theatrical?”

Whenever I would look at Merce’s work, I would always see stories, and I couldn’t believe that he didn’t tell people about them. I thought it was amazing that he could make this movement which contained such strong, rich imagery and it always suggested something—a father and kids, or whatever—although it was never developed in that way.

Do you think that’s true of Cunningham’s later dances?

The more I got to know his work the less I felt that way about it. Sounddance to me is like a village where people go to do their work—it’s a real workers’ dance—and go back inside at the end of the day. As a dancer you can do anything you want to within its choreography; there’s a whole area of performance possibility in it.

In your duet Domestic Interlude, with its pajama-like costumes, its lusty movement for a man and a woman, and its clock-radio, suggestion-of-a-bedroom decor, there’s no way a viewer won’t think of a story although you described it completely mechanically as built in sections of doubled time-lengths.

That’s the way it was thought of. It’s true even if nobody believes it.
Did the title, costumes, and decor come later?

That's where I overlaid one thing on top of something else. The piece hadn't been resolved when Frank Moore took a look at it and suggested some ideas, and then I said okay, I can do that within what I'm already doing, it doesn't matter if the content comes about that way if it turns out later to be like a sex duet.

So you thought of character and story as something outside of the dance movement itself?

Yes. For example, for the ending of Domestic Interlude I had wanted them to separate but it didn’t seem right even though it fell within the structure I had set up in terms of density.

What made that seem wrong?

There I was making some sort of statement. If I was making a statement where two people didn’t get together, that was one thing. I chose a more tender kind of ending.

You can't be surprised when viewers see a story in that dance.

Oh no, I would be disappointed if they didn’t. That’s true of Marking Time also, the dance as definitely based on characters: one was hysterical, another was slower, and the third marked time in a regular way. That provided a time structure and motivation for the movement itself.

What’s new or different about your most recent dance, Architectural Stories?

It’s the most formalized dance of any I’ve done. The title comes from the idea of building a structure, in this case based on the space, and on the way the body is structured, and on top of that you have a story or stories, very simple ones like somebody walking across a room.

As Jack Smith put it, anything that happens in time is a narrative. What we’re talking about is the quality of that narrative, what kind it is, what story it’s telling.

When some people saw it in progress, they said the architecture was good but the stories were not so great—the writers I know wanted more narrative.

You don’t use music except for a distorted tape of a disco song in Scraping Bottoms.

That’s Frank Moore’s idea. Originally I whistled.

Is music a problem coming from the Cunningham company where music is used as a sound environment, not as accompaniment?

I would love to use more music, but I haven’t found some one to work with. I like the people who have worked with Merce but they’re so strongly associated with him that I don’t want to do that.

What about collaboration? You’ve worked a lot with Frank Moore for one.

At MoMing in Chicago, people wanted to work collaboratively and I didn’t—I wanted to do everything myself. Gradually I’ve gotten more and more people involved. I’m not competent to do lights, sets, and costumes as well as choreograph and dance. More people make it more interesting. It’s more complicated to work that way but its a complication I find stimulating.

You showed several older dances at the DTW concert. What did you think about the response to them?

In dance you can have repertory and keep showing older work—you can always have earlier dances. But I was surprised that the response to them was so strong, I had done them for so long before people took notice.

You told me you were suddenly interested in Martha Graham.

Particularly in Diversion of Angels which I saw last spring. But then I always thought that work like Yvonne Rainer’s films was also very Graham-like: full of angst although it’s personal rather than mythical.

What interested you about Angels?

The structure, the characters, and the way the whole thing flowed—it all worked so well together. Also, it was constructed like a painting in its colors which were also choreographed. The woman in white was in the middle raising her arms to the heavens, someone came in and fell at her feet, then someone zipped across the front of the stage—it was always surprising but always made sense.
Graham's supposed to be "modern"—does "postmodern" mean that dance has supposedly passed beyond certain attitudes and gestures like raising one's arms to the skies?

Dance has progressed along a certain line, but that doesn't remove the fact that people still look to the sky and open their arms. It may have been removed from the dance vocabulary people choose to work with, but people still do it.

What attracts you about that kind of movement?

It's an immediately recognizable gesture, something you know. You know what it means.

Do you think of your dances as comedies?

After leaving Merce's company two years ago, initially everything came out funny. That's not necessarily the way I see the world.

Your dances are as much about performance as choreography. Do you make a distinction between them?

No, because I'm interested in a new illusion of the self. When I'm performing I try to present a mediated version of myself and even if I'm doing personal material, it's a more rehearsed, edited version of everyday process. The dances are performance pieces in that respect. This illusionism helps me choose, edit, and condense material. I don't separate the making of the piece from how it will be performed—it's symbiotic.

That sounds like theater.

That's something we see in theater all the time but not so often in dancing. Too often in dancing the dancers are overly concerned with the physical execution of movement. It's a result of an over-emphasis on the purely physical, virtuosic element of dancing. The dancing which gives me the most pleasure is both physically rich and informed by a mediated intelligence about the act of performing.

Are you talking about technical dancing in general or about the choreographic uses to which it's put?

There's a lot of work which can hold almost any performance attitude. Curiously, this doesn't produce individuality but anonymity—a body in space rather than this person's body. When someone does pop out as really special it's a chance encounter usually rooted in extreme gifts or in mistakes which catch the dancer off-guard and throw him or her back onto themself. This is a result of a choreographic formalism which sees the dancer as just a color or a quality, a part in an overall jigsaw puzzle—it leads to purely physical, emotionally unfocused dancing. The wizard of Oz is still around; despite all the rhetoric he pulls the strings, and he's the real show. I'm not thrilled by the other performance extreme either, that of impersonating God on earth. That's pretty boring too.

Isn't that the attitude of a lot of technical virtuosos?

Yes, pizazz and athleticism, there's lots of that around. I really reject the idea of quotidian excellence in technical dancing because in real life that doesn't exist, people are always conflicted. I was a competitive swimmer and that kind of dancing is like swimming lap after lap just to get a better time. I'm looking for a really deeply-rooted sense of self which finds expression in movement.

Yet you danced with Merce and now study ballet.

I always wanted the skill but so that I could use it in expressive ways. As a dancer, I think it's important that you develop your own story, track, whatever you want to call it, for whatever dance you're doing because then you can inform, fill out your performance. And even if you can't totally get there, there's more to watch. Its more rewarding for you too. It's like Nietzsche saying "Dance over yourself." Now that's freedom.

You performed with Mary Overlie and Andy DeGroat, neither of whom use difficult movement, and you also performed with Douglas Dunn and Cunningham, who do use complex technique. How do you think of using both technical and non-technical movement in your dancing?

I'm interested in technique because it gives you a wider range. Of course it can rob you of some things—although I can still crawl or fall, I work on those things too. To say that Mary's work is simple isn't true. Physically it's not very demanding but it's demanding in mind-body ways. The pieces I did with her were structured improvisations, and at the time I found her work difficult because you were making it up and performing it at the same time.

How do you use your technical training if not as a movement source?
I use it for range, stamina, and for the awareness it’s given me about controlling the moment. As long as technique doesn’t become a limitation, as long as you don’t end up feeling that you can only move in one way and it’s not okay to just walk or crawl or shake someone’s hand, it can only help you.

And choreographically?

Compositionally, it gives you lots of options, but you can end up taking too many side trips.

Let me put that question from the other point of view. Do you think there are ways to put “yourself” on stage?

The closest I ever got to that was in Bad News and I would never do it again. I lost all interest in that dance as soon as I’d performed it. The only thing I still like is the film.

So it was more important as a performance event than choreography?
Yes, but in fact I still wasn’t able to perform myself because I built a persona in it.

A version of yourself?

Yes. So I still wasn’t just “being myself” on stage. I’ve never been able to do that, I don’t know how.

Could you think of a way?

Maybe I could make a task that was so physically hard that I couldn’t do anything but that—it’s been done. Performing for me is so scary, the only way I can do it at all is to go through into this other place where the I and the Not-I is erased. Then the otherness of the audience doesn’t have so much bearing on me in personal, everyday terms.

What kind of problems do you have by both choreographing and dancing in the same work?

One of the problems is fairly specific. If you are trying to intuitively sense dramatic time and you’re not watching from the outside, you can’t be objective enough about time. You can solve that by counting but I don’t think that’s the best way since then you too often lose the sense of immediacy which makes dance exciting. In general, things which seem actual onstage are often not, which is why videotape or a trusted friend’s eye is so important.

Do you enjoy going back and forth between the roles of dancer and choreographer?

I’m torn between wanting to dance because I find it so important to me, and wanting to stop so that I can see what I’m making.

Do you try to have a consistent movement vocabulary that bridges different dances?

No, not now. I think that develops anyway. I’m not interested in willfully building a style. The voice is there anyway.

Does the same thing go for costume? Is there one costume that’s right for each dance?

Yes. I would never sew a uniform which spanned all my dances. As soon as I realized that I was making expressive work, costume became important. Leotards and tights and unitards imply self-reflexive pure movement pieces to me; dancers playing dancers. Street clothes imply simple narratives to me: because you can’t see what the body is doing, you lose the underside and are left with pure plot. I’m not very successful yet with costume, but I like to think of it as extending my own awareness of the piece and its world into clothing. And I try to design costumes to add to the movement, to amplify it rather than laying another interpretation on top.

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Why did you use film in Bad News and video in Veii?

I’m interested in different versions and voices of identical material; in how the presentation of material is influenced by medium. The film and video contain condensed versions of the particular piece they’re a part of. In Veii, the videotape which Florence Lambert edited, has an actual landscape behind it which evokes the original Mediterranean sensation that the piece grew out of. Bad News grew out of the film Ericka Beckman shot. We worked with very tight shots on a lot of movement, we divided my naked body into sections for study, then we used a lot of pixillation so the rhythm between the film’s movement and the dance material is very closely related. It’s theme and variation made with the camera as a context shifter.

Bad News began with an audiotape by Christopher Knowles in the first part, and used pop music in the last section. Do you think about music and sound as accompaniment?

I didn’t dance to either tape. The dancing doesn’t work against the accompaniment but it takes off from Chris’s insistent voice or the music’s insistent 4/4 beat so the rhythmic phrasing of what I’m doing goes away from it or comes back to it. I don’t use music ironically, I play with it. Chris’s de-accumulation poem lent an urgency to the start, it was like a needling voice stuck in a groove. The pop music is used as ambient sound—I wanted to dance to music which was part of my life.

In Veii there are two solos within the duet choreographed to Paganini Caprices.

My solo wasn’t. I choreographed it without the music, then made the dance fit the music by changing the meter of a particular phrase or movement sequence. The second solo is choreographed exactly to the music, which is interesting, but I don’t always want to do that.
Each phrase has to be like a brick in a wall. Each phrase has to work on a kinesthetic, pure movement level, and to be a cumulative link to the phrase before and the phrase after. I don't fragment.

There are only five minutes of music at those two points in the entire dance. Why was the rest in silence?

I used the music very theatrically.

Paganini is very theatrical, but what does “theatrically used” music mean?

Music sets an emotional tone no matter what the music is. Music just opens the floodgates, which is why it should be used very carefully.

And you don’t want the gates to open?

No, that’s why I used Paganini. It’s very crazy, but also very structured, very controlled.

There’s lots of material which seems to be about childhood memories in your dances.

Yes, some things come from childhood. They’re physical memories, not autobiographical stories—not causal or situational. It’s not very far away from the way I used to write poems: poems are written inside or underneath events, you don’t write on the surface.

So when you go into the studio you have an image or an idea as a starting point?

Yes. I put an image or idea in my head. In Bad News I was working from material I’d been reading about the basic split in everyone’s psyche. I was really working from those ideas, taking them down to size. If I’m working with something which is emotionally very resonant for me, I daydream and something will generally suggest itself. In Veii, the emotionally important, personal material took the form of a mini-narrative in the middle section of the dance. When I’m working with people, I work with fantasizing about them, how I think they would react and move in a given mind-place.

How do you decide which phrase goes where in the overall structure?

Each phrase has to be like a brick in a wall. Each phrase has to work on a kinesthetic, pure movement level, and to be a cumulative link to the phrase before and the phrase after, and a time control which makes for density of image squishing the linear development. I think the result of that density is that the narrative gets pushed, impacted, so that it will hit you—if it works—kinesthetically in an experiential way and bypass certain intellectual expectations which are game-oriented. Live, I think you experience the world of the dance, and afterwards you might have trouble figuring out if it worked or not in purely formal ways.

In Bad News I saw a lot of repetition but Veii didn’t seem to use that device.

In Veii, there’s theme and development but not repetition. The development is contextual rather than purely physical. The pieces are narratives of context and the phrases are made to be cumulatively important rather than to further linear plot.

So all the elements are related to each other to make a whole thing?

Yes, I don’t fragment. The dances are self-contained and because of that, they have their own surface, their own texture—which is why I’m not interested in making a movement style at this point. I think that each dance will have its own style, of movement structure as well as of formal structure. Of course I’m just one person. But everything doesn’t have to be so codified into systems. We can’t fit everything into a system anyway. We lose something by always trying.

Integral, self-contained—those sound like modernist criteria. What do you think about so-called postmodern dance?

It depends on who’s doing the dancing. As a term I think it may already have outlived its usefulness. It’s a convenience for the critics to cover work of a particular generation, the Judson and post-Judson group who grew up with the Cage-Cunningham aesthetic. If you really look at the work, it runs the gamut from pure formalism to out-and-out storytelling and entertainment. It’s a media label—this year’s passion, last year’s fashion. Like other choreographers, I make movement, not Movements.
Did you study dance in Japan?

Yes. No. Well, actually in Japan dance history is different from Western dance history. I have never studied any traditional Japanese dance or martial art, but I graduated from university where I studied education for dance which was influenced by Western culture. But I don’t have any Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham or classical ballet training. I do have a teaching license for educational dance.

Is it like phys-ed?

Yes. Its like you can express something by moving around in space. Creative dance, not theater. There was a teacher who studied with Martha Graham in the early years and who then came to Japan to make this program in educational dance.

Why did you come to New York?

When I was a kid I was an actor in childrens’ theater and I had a very good teacher who made a childrens’ experimental theater. He was interested in working with different ways of talking, different voices. When I was a kid I was already writing scripts, I was really a child actress. In high school I was a broadcast announcer and I made up my own programs; they were radio theater programs. Then I went to the university and I chose a very easy course because I didn’t want to study very hard. I really didn’t know what I should do, so I was a student. In 1969 the student movements broke out all over Japan. The university closed down, like here, and I got involved in a student movement. Also many underground theaters broke out in Japan, something like the Living Theatre here. They were involved with some kind of a new theater movement. I didn’t have a conscious wish that said I wanted to make theater, or I wanted to be in a theater or I wanted to be a performer in the theater. But after I graduated from the university I went to Kyoto and in Kyoto I joined up with some underground collective theater people and worked with them. But then in Japan the whole situation, economic and cultural, changed and I lost the focus on what I was doing. And then a friend advised me to go to New York and see theater. So that’s the reason I came here in 1977.

Do you call what you do theater?

No.

Do you call it performance?
I don’t have a word.

You’re usually reviewed by dance critics, but School of Hard Knocks could easily be called a kind of theater.

That’s very good. I don’t have a clear answer. I started performing and calling it dance theater because I was using physical elements without talking. School of Hard Knocks was the first time I used words.

How do you think what you do fits in what is going on in dance or theater, or is that another confusion?

I think my work is dance but I’m standing on the edge of dance. It’s very difficult to say which is which right now.

Would you say you were on the edge of where dance, performance, and sculptural installation meet?

Yes. I have a very hard time writing my biographies.

Your work uses sets, props like big tables, and films. So you do use these theatrical elements.

Yes. After I made my first movie I found myself very excited to make movies. For a lot of reasons: one was that I could never see my performance, but with a movie I can be outside. And then you can edit in a movie. Maybe I don’t like this part so I cut it off and then you can put two images together. So two images are going next to each other and I don’t have to think of a bridge in time and space. In movies you can tie together two things on opposite sides of the room without traveling in real time. It’s a way to make a more specific compact image. Now my most enjoyable times are when I’m editing a movie.

When you did School of Hard Knocks you had the two kinds of time in the piece: the tables which shifted space in the film and a real table. Live, you looked as if you thought you could move it, make it move as fast as in the film. How did you decide on a table anyway?

I did a piece last year at the Performing Garage called Rugged Valley and that piece was the first time I tried to use more integrated movement, movement with a soundtrack. So I was trying to do something continuous with images in the movement phrases, to connect the physical movement and its visual embodiment on stage. I liked the table because I could use it as a prop for movement, as a movie screen, and as an object—I made the legs uneven so that it rocked. Jacob Burkhardt and myself were invited to the Venice Biennale for a special project, Sound and Image. So we couldn’t take the table, it’s too heavy. So we kept the table here and took it out all over New York and filmed it. Then Jacob and I had forty-five minutes of a 16mm movie. So with many screens and six people I tried to develop the image more. And I worked with John Nesci who is a very good actor. I liked his character and he can move so well.

Since you have not studied dance, do you have an idea of how you want them to move or a system you use?

I’m not doing choreography so much. That’s a very different job, so I’ve never approached the movement in a second by second way. My movement is not like that. But when I start a piece I am watching people in a workshop and I say, oh, that’s a great movement and I use their movement in a very specific way. The base I use is their movement during workshop. Then I am interested in freer performers. I tie up the movement but it is their movement or their shape, and the timing is fairly loose. They can make choices.

How do you observe movement in yourself?

We share, so we observe each other. But I give the suggestion, the situation, or the image out of which the movement gets made.

You give them an outline and let them color it in?

Yes.

Is there improvisation in your performances?

Finally I avoid improvisation through tightening it up, by giving tasks at certain times. I make a score, then they make the move-
I'm not making stories, I'm just using characters. I'm interested in people's existence on stage, that's enough for me. I'm not using people just to show movement at the beginning. *Hard Knocks* is made of forty images. The movies, the table, and the performers' activity are all included in each image. The whole thing is scored.

Why did you use Alvin Curran's music?

In the beginning he wanted to do a collaboration with Jacob and me for Venice. It was the first time I used music although I've used mechanical sounds in movies. But I used to feel that the sound in movies distorts the image. Now I'm very interested in using sound.

How do you decide what to wear?

That's difficult because I realize that dancers need very comfortable clothes in order to move, but in theatrical terms that's not so convenient. Leotards are not my way because I want to put something into the clothes, maybe character.

I've noticed that it's very difficult for a lot of dancers to figure out the meaning of the piece in costume terms.

I try this way and that way. For *Hard Knocks* I asked a costume designer and she made them.

When you say you take movement from your performers, how do you think about who they are in performance and who they really are? In other words, they don't play roles, but they aren't just walking off the street either.

In the group pieces I try to work more with character which is old age, or younger woman, people of the street, city types and country too, but human beings. I'm not using people just to show movement like in a lot of dances.

When you use John Nesci, who is an actor, how do you talk about character or do you leave it to him to create how he is to appear?

He is a character, a man, but it is his character, not someone else's. I worked with him and thought about him and a girl moving along in the space. My character was maybe a little girl in some way.

But when you think of movement situations, the character comes along with the situation in some way? In other words, well, I want a young girl and a guy to meet on the street.

I'm not making stories, I'm just using characters. I'm interested in the peoples' existence on the stage, that's enough for me. Now after working with John Nesci, it seems like another possibility for me to think about.

Are you saying that after doing *Hard Knocks* you want to make another kind of piece?

I don't know. I was shooting a movie this summer with older men, women, dogs.

What was it like for you to come to New York?

I was so shocked and interested by New York when I came here in 1977. I don't know if I'd want to stay if I came now because it's changed a lot. But when I came I stayed downtown for two years. I didn't go to 57th street or Bloomingdales. And I found some kind of truth here in New York because it is so poor in some way: the people you see in the streets sleeping.

Now that you're used to it, what would it be like to take that truth and your work and show it in Japan?

If a chance came, I might say yes, but I am not trying very hard to do it because I still feel some kind of culture shock within myself. And I am making work here—I think maybe I can't make anything in Japan. In Japan I was never sure if I was a good performer. You know, I never spoke English before I came here. When I came I thought, maybe I am doing a performance everyday, and so my eye was very fresh because I couldn't speak. Everything was like a very clear dream. And it was like world history. In Japan we don't have a physical feeling of the world. Here, for example, the man at the deli is Jewish and he lost his whole family in the Second World War. In Japan it was only in the books. Here it became real to me. New York makes me see. In Japan I wasn't sure what a world was. Here I can see a world.