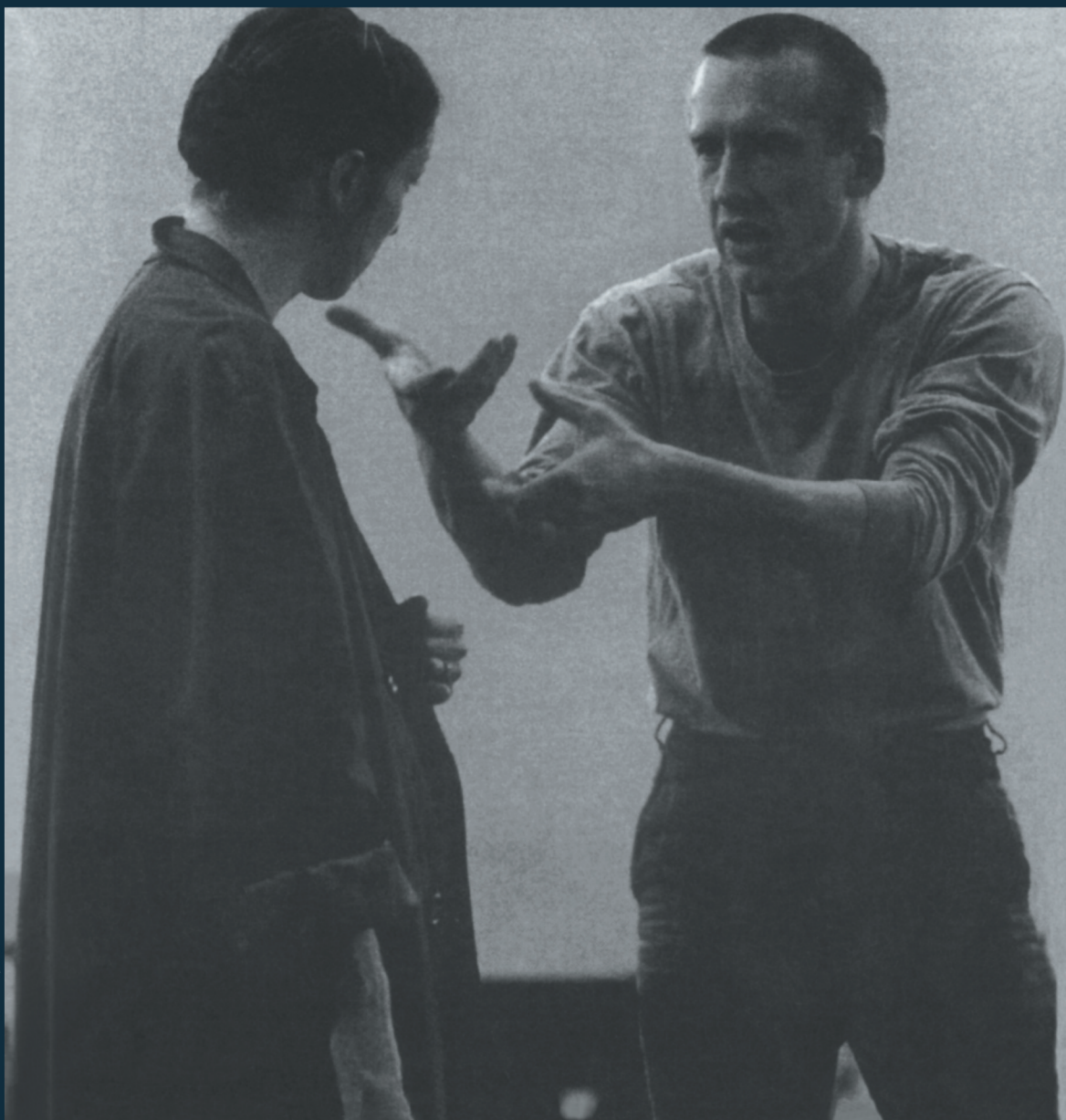


choreography and dance

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WILLIAM FORSYTHE

Issue editor: Senta Driver



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CHOREOGRAPHY AND DANCE

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Choreography and Dance: An International Journal is concerned with the composition of ballet and related forms of dance performed on stage. The journal covers the techniques and training of choreographers, and the development of choreography together with historical, social, folk and other influences on dance. It will also cover its relationship with other components of dance performance such as music and lighting, and the work and influence of individual choreographers. The journal will compare and contrast dance forms worldwide, using dance notation and video to facilitate analysis. A 30–60 minute video tape will be produced for each volume of the journal whenever possible. This video supplement will provide additional illustrations of various points made in the issues of the volume.

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Nijinsky's Heir: A Classical Company Leads Modern Dance

Senta Driver

The real founder of modern dance was arguably Vaslav Nijinsky, who presented new movement vocabularies and new structural models in the repertory of the Diaghilev Ballets Russes, which was generally understood to be a ballet company. Some viewers compared Balanchine's company to a modern dance organization for its unusual focus on one artistic vision and a decisively original movement philosophy. Seen in this light William Forsythe's advances in movement design and range of interests suggest he is in fact leading the field of modern dance through the vehicle of classically trained dancers working on the forward edge of ballet's inherent possibilities. Critical efforts to define him out of the field and lay down rules for where ballet may properly be headed are made irrelevant by the authority of those who make the work.

KEY WORDS Vaslav Nijinsky, William Forsythe, George Balanchine, ballet, modern dance.

I first heard it from Paul Taylor: the suggestion that the real founder of modern dance was Vaslav Nijinsky. The notion comes, in fact, from Lincoln Kirstein. It rests on an appreciation of the choreographer Nijinsky's profound innovations in movement design and group structure. Perhaps it also reflects that the Russian dancer was committed to a personal vision rather than to the primacy of the classical materials he inherited.

What made us think Nijinsky was a ballet choreographer at all? The answer is probably his context, the Diaghilev company, and his training more than his actual product. Consider the choreographic material of his fully completed works. They could all be taken for radical modern dance, but they were performed by ballet dancers, and presented by a company with an otherwise classical repertory.

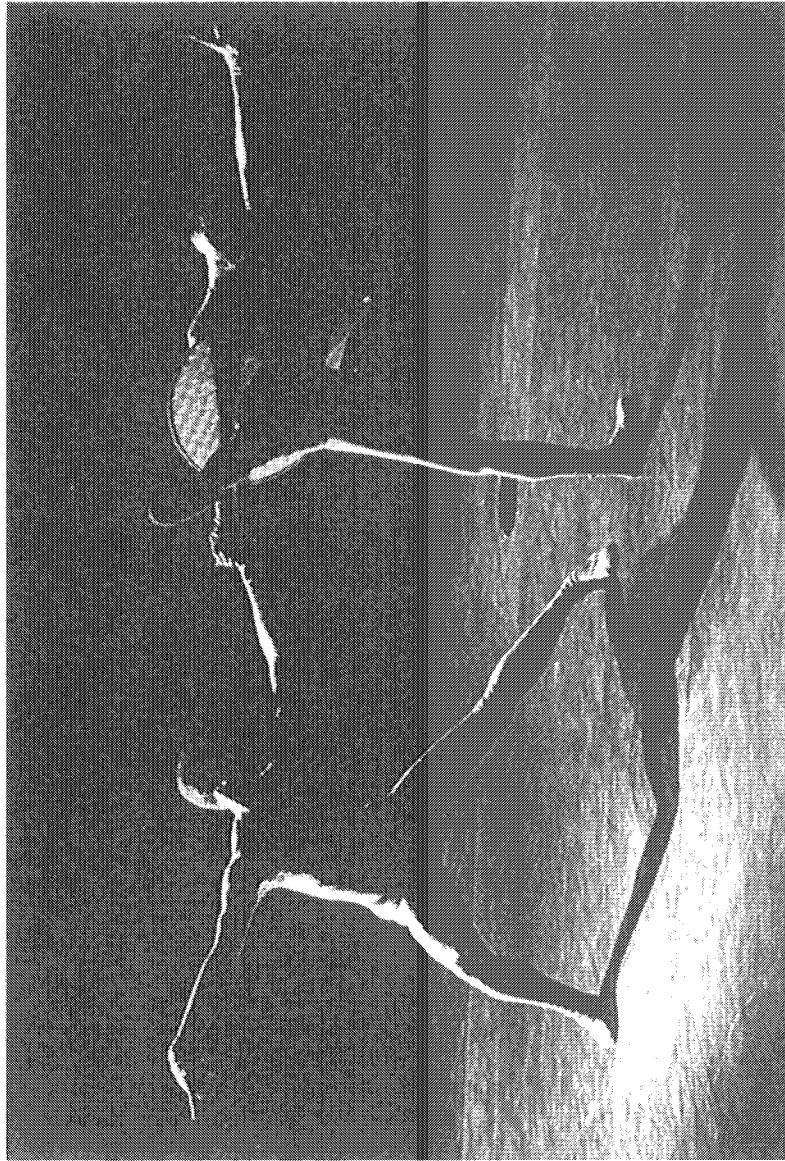


Figure 1 Marc Spradling and Tracy-Kai Maier in *Singerland* (1990), Ballett Frankfurt
Photo: Marie-Noëlle Robert © 1998

The elements of the Russian ballet tradition were being used to forge an utterly original direction. What made us think George Balanchine ran what was essentially a modern dance company, compared to other ballet companies of his era? One usually cited his departure from the classic repertory and school of steps and his commitment to a single, progressive artistic vision and a distinctive movement vocabulary. Ballet is defined, like all arts, by its makers, and by the dancers and choreographers who accept influences that they find persuasive, and build upon them.

When an artist with a thoroughly classical background is denounced on the grounds that he "destroys ballet", either the work is weak or ballet has developed dangerously reactionary thinking. Those who do not make work are periodically moved to lock down its definitions: this was ineffective in 1912 when Nijinsky created his first full professional work, and it will continue to be so. We can celebrate a profound advance into new thinking when a choreographer spends his artistic life inside the classical school, shows veneration for the *ballet d'école*, informed respect for Balanchine and ballet history, and regular reliance on the pointe shoe, but makes work with unorthodox expansions of the vocabulary, fractured yet theatrically astute structure, and constant sympathies with the work of major modern dance innovators. This issue of *Choreography and Dance* is about one such man.

William Forsythe has given his field a daring new direction and scope. His work is frequently begun in notions about light rather than music, as he reveals in the *Conversation on Lighting* with Jennifer Tipton included in this issue. Like the finest artists, he teaches the dance audience new skills for looking at things. For his sake we have developed a capacity to see in extremely low levels of light, even as his dancers have learned to be able to move freely, in groups, through a blackout. We can follow the logic of a known classical step through long new permutations. A *penché* may plunge in extraordinary directions, or a *fouetté* be created by picking up the dancer and hurling her manually around 360° as she executes the legwork – and we still recognize the source. As Forsythe has often stated, he treats the premises of classical technique as a usable language capable of new meaning, rather than as a collection of phrases and traditionally-linked steps that retain traditional rules, shapes, and content subject only to rearrangement. Aside from his enrichment of the *ballet d'école*, his approach greatly strengthens the dancers who use it. This is apparent physically as well as in their



Figure 2 Evan Jones and William Forsythe, the making of *LDC*, Ballett Frankfurt, 1985
Photo: Charles Tandy © 1998

intellectual development, and it shows up in a look of knowledgeability and engagement on stage. Most dancers in outside companies who are cast in Forsythe pieces look like different artists in his work. They visibly know what a depth of information lies behind their movement.

Forsythe has taught classical dancers to generate their own material by applying structural devices to their familiar technique. Drawing upon the theories of Rudolf Laban, which Forsythe has carried forward in what he calls *Improvisation Technology*, he vitally expands the movement vocabulary. His style has developed over the 14 years in Frankfurt from a forceful, weighted, and athletic one using the pointe shoe as a pole vaulter might, into a much warmer and more fluid realm. He has a permanent affection for pointework, and never abandons it for long, but recent works are sometimes danced in socks, soft slippers or even bare feet, and an increasing use of silence and tenderness is apparent. The dancers examine each other, touch and handle and interfere with each other in intricate assignments, and work extensively with and close to the floor. The structure of the

pieces can seem confusing, but they are assembled with astute theatricality. They are carefully built to pace the evening well, and they progress with their own logic. His approach and movement thinking resonate with the methods of the great modern dance innovators such as Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, and Twyla Tharp. Both his artists and the dancers of other companies who have worked with him demonstrate a range of new virtuosity. These days one rarely sees as much original material for the body in a whole season of modern dance as Forsythe offers at Ballett Frankfurt.

The range of Forsythe's thinking is illustrated by the various plans he made for a new work at the Roundhouse, a former trolley-car turntable shed in London. He has described three successive concepts: transformation of the building into a huge *camera obscura* with the image projected into the cellar onto a field of tightly packed narcissus; video on the skylight atop the building; and, finally, (the actual project) raising the "world's largest bouncy castle", an inflated structure with a trampoline floor in which the audience created all the movement. The piece, *Tight Roaring Circle* (1997), is known to him and Dana Caspersen, who made it with him, as the *John Cage Memorial Choreographic Cube*.

Ballet tells us where ballet is going. Not even the most ardent devotees of what used to be can do that.

We had half expected to see moderns, with their alleged superiority of imagination, take over the classical field. The stream of new choreographers making work on and off pointe for ballet companies suggested to some that the future of ballet lay outside its fold. Are we now looking at the opposite, a classically-based artist who emerges as a profound leader of modern dance? Certainly, in addition to his rich physicality, there is more adventure, more risk-taking in topic and visual design and structure in an evening at Ballett Frankfurt than one finds in most contemporary dance. There is also more aesthetic daring. Many modern dance artists have widened their reach into popular culture and its resources, but no one has managed a surreal parody of a Broadway musical, expertly sung Ethel Merman-style by an entire ballet company, quite on the level of *Isabelle's Dance* (1986). Forsythe is, more simply, a profound leader of all dance, going in directions once reserved for moderns by means of a classical vehicle. He observed in the program of his April 1998 season at Theater Basel, "I use ballet, because I use ballet dancers, and I use the knowledge in their bodies. I think ballet is a very, very good idea that often gets pooh-poohed." He trusts the

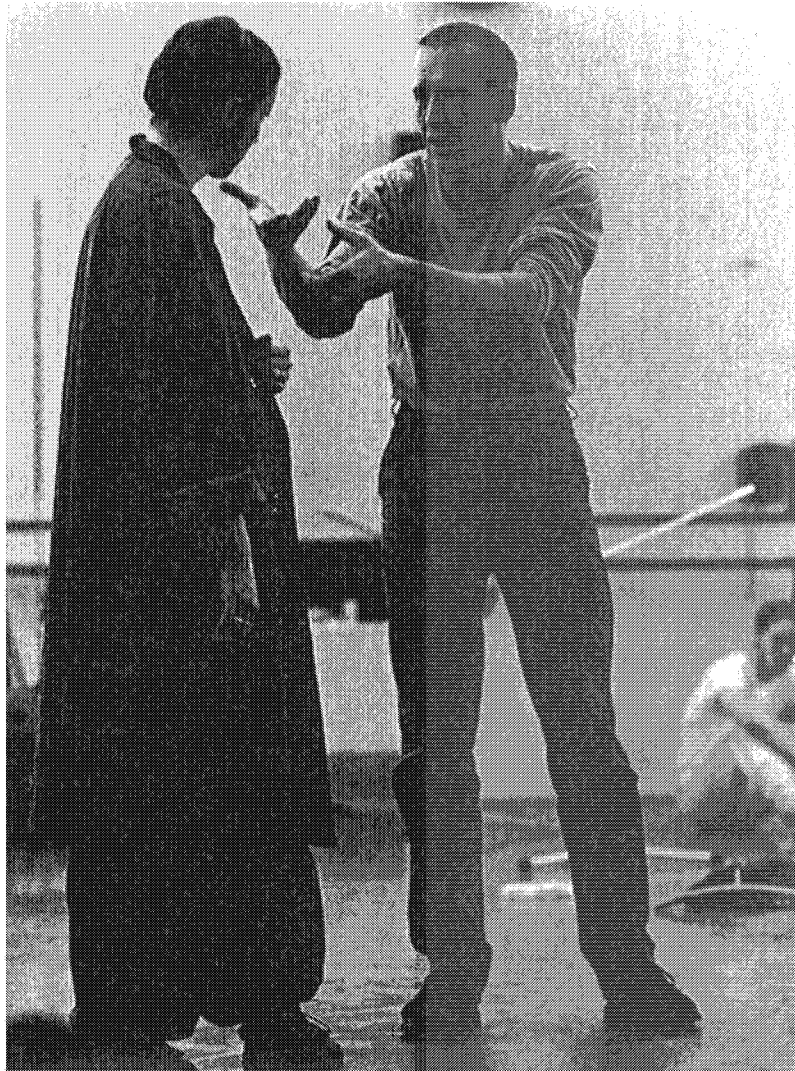


Figure 3 Gisela Schneider and William Forsythe, the making of *LDC*, Ballet Frankfurt, 1985
Photo: Charles Tandy © 1998

tradition. He believes it is his, and that it is fertile. What does his work say about the old dichotomy, now that he has opened ballet's physical vocabulary, without losing its classical base, by the use of modern dance gambits?

The following articles cover some dimensions of William Forsythe's work up to this point: the situation he has built for himself, the questions he addresses, the priorities he holds, and the body of work he has created. To be comprehensive about his achievement, including his pursuit of intellectual theory, irreverence, architectural theory, humor, the advantages of computer technology, and the role of children's perspective in the art of adults, requires a book-length treatment. The illuminating factor in his process is his huge curiosity about everything around him, how it works and what happens if something is knocked awry. This and his simple, candid respect for other artists are the elements that stand out.

Forsythe has profoundly enriched our art form in his 22 years of working, taking the utmost care to evade the center of attention. He has a remarkable capacity, such as I have only seen before in the great teacher Helen Alkire, for keeping his mind open and at work on new challenges.

He has forged a new kind of beauty in dancing.

This issue owes a great deal to the advice and help of

Mechthilde Rühl	Dennis Diamond	Roslyn Sulcas
Denise Jefferson	Michael P. Hesse	Stan Pressner

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