

Starting From Now: Some Thoughts on Beth Gill's Current Choreographic Process

Light is pouring in through the fourth floor windows of a studio at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, in midtown Manhattan, where people have gathered to watch a showing of Beth Gill's new dance, still very much in progress.

There are water towers in the near distance, and the scarred brick facades of surrounding apartment complexes. Beth is pacing, in a dark shirt and jeans, white socks. Her hair is a luxurious dark shock. She stands on the edges of the thing she has set in motion, as four dancers stretch and mark through movement, communicating wordlessly.

There is something magical about stepping into a dance studio. I have been in many with Beth—some full of people, as this one is, and some empty, save for the artist, as she moves through the lonely, labor-intensive work of feeling out steps and phrases, sending movement impulses this way and that in her body, seeing where they flow through, where they get stuck, where they turn into something else.

This play, between what you shape and what shapes you, is a deep and rich source in Beth's choreographic investigations. She says, of her new work, "I've been asking myself questions inside of my own process about my relationship to control. My work in the past has tended to be hyper controlled, micromanaged—I wanted to try a different methodology."

And so she created a system in which she would only allow herself two rehearsals with each dancer (a tiny fraction of how much time she would typically spend with her performers), building a complex improvisational score with each and then "tasking the group as a whole to be responsive for the overall composition," she explains, before pausing to laugh, "It's a torturous process—and also a lot of pleasure."

This group will ultimately consist of 12 dancers, and the sound designers [INSERT NAMES], who are simultaneously making their own decisions about the music. The challenge here is for movement and sound to be arrived at independently, within a larger framework that supports both art forms.

Beautiful slow step, swivel, accordion; limbs folding, locking, skipping. The others watch. Until action: big, looping, arcing steps, body one big luscious curl. So far all is quiet. Arm swings around, momentum pulls. You can't do too little, in art. Heavy slump walk. How does it change me, as a watcher, to know this is improvised? Does it? Dance isn't a dictator. All the bodies quiet on the floor. How the attention can go in & out, how dance [unlike music, unlike words] doesn't tell you what to feel, what to think. An unhurried eye. Aftermath music. It takes the time it takes. What makes an author?

I love watching Beth's work. The deliberateness of it, but also the space. She comes out of a strong tradition of minimalism (as I wrote when I first reviewed her, years ago now, in the *New York Times*, I always think of Agnes Martin's paintings, those almost-not-there striations of light and space). One line you can trace is between the mid-20th Century Judson Dance Theater pioneers—so many strong women!—and a current generation of neo-romantic formalists now exploring what it is to make meaning through form. Anna Sperber. Jillian Peña. Beth Gill. Variations on a theme of exploration through a city that is both a grid and a wilderness.

Bodies fold, shift, settle and straighten, moving through poses so slowly they become abstractions of themselves. It takes the dancers five long minutes [IS THAT RIGHT??] to go from lying on the floor to sitting up. Enough time for the watching eye to grow tired, to wander, to daydream. And then to return. I love how long it takes. It takes the time it takes.

There is a delicious, ongoing tension between the delicacy of content and the strictures of repetition, of devotion to a task. And all the ways in which the pedestrian shades into the virtuosic—we want to make strict either/or distinctions, but as another New York choreographer, Pam Tanowitz, titled a 2009 work, some of dance's best invitations are to *Be in the Gray With Me*.

"Ok, so...we're gonna call that an end. For now," Beth says to us at the end of the showing. "Thank you for sitting with us in this indeterminate thing."

And now our bodies curl and uncurl, move quickly or slowly back into action. The sky roils brightly behind the water towers, which only do not appear to have moved at all.

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