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William Forsythe's Self-Portrait in Absentia

In "A Quiet Evening of Dance," the choreographer pulls ballet's original elements through his own imagination.

Jennifer Homans



In "A Quiet Evening of Dance," Forsythe discovers a new classicism. Illustration by Ana Galvañ

William Forsythe's "A Quiet Evening of Dance"—which I saw at the Venice Biennale earlier this year, and which comes to New York's Shed arts center on October 11th for two weeks—concludes with a joyful balletic piece to music by the eighteenth-century composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. It is the kind of dance we rarely see anymore, one that leaves audiences elevated, energized, overcome by the sheer pleasure of movement and music. Who would have expected this from an American choreographer who has spent the past four decades in the trenches of the European avant-garde, deconstructing ballet's fundamental premises? Forsythe's tendency to push his dancers to physical extremes, and his use of electronic sound scores by his longtime collaborator Thom Willems—to say nothing of his taste for German *Tanztheater* and French post-structuralist thought—have led some critics, especially in this country, to dismiss his work as a violent and pretentious attack on the body and on balletic form.

As a Balanchine-schooled dancer in the eighties, when Forsythe was becoming established, I saw things differently. Forsythe, who knows ballet as well as anyone, was breaking its stultifying orthodoxies without forgoing technique or full-bodied dancing. His companies, based in Frankfurt and Dresden, were always refreshingly informal and collaborative, and his highly trained dancers often had strange, quirky bodies. Forsythe is intellectually voracious—a kind of theory scavenger, who, over the years, has drawn from fields including philosophy, physics, semiotics, and the visual arts. In 1987, for the Paris Opera Ballet—the highest precinct of classicism, where ballet took shape, in the seventeenth century—he made “In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated,” a relentless dance to a propulsive score by Willems, in which the young Sylvie Guillem moved in shockingly new ways: body pitched at swerving angles; arms, legs, hips, head oriented through multiple spatial planes; executing point work that pushed her supple body ever farther in the physical contradictions that she and Forsythe had devised. If this was an attack, it was coming from the inside.

In 1994, Tracy-Kai Maier, Forsythe’s wife and one of his most versatile classical dancers, died, from cancer, at the age of thirty-two. Partly in response to this tremendous loss, Forsythe has said, his work turned in new directions. His dances reflected an even deeper dive into theory, and an expansion of his inquiry into the language of movement. Does it have first principles? What are its grammar and its rules? In the years that followed, he and his dancers opened up the machine and took it apart: time, space, text, voice, sound, music, costume, light, and the proliferating possibilities of movement through every limb were examined and reimaged in an impressive flow of new dances.

“One Flat Thing, Reproduced” (2000) was a gripping piece for fourteen dancers and twenty metal tables, set to music by Willems—although, Forsythe once showed me, since the dance has a structure independent of music, it also works to Beethoven. For “Decreation,” in 2003, he worked with Dana Caspersen, a magnetic performer with a compact body and a spine misshapen by scoliosis, on what she has called “a language of indirectness and fragmentation,” in which they sent the “eyes in one direction, jaw in the other, rib cage in one direction, hips in the other.” Some of his dances took on a dark political edge, as in “Three Atmospheric Studies,” in 2005, with its allusions to the Iraq War and to Lucas Cranach’s painting “Lamentation Beneath the Cross.” What had begun with ballet was becoming a powerful theatre of the absurd.

At times, Forsythe could be maddeningly obtuse. He lost me with “Sider” (2011), in which the dancers wore headphones and listened to an audio track drawn from the rhythms of Elizabethan tragedy while we were hearing a score by Willems. But I never found him nihilistic. At the end of one of his most disorienting pieces, “I don’t believe in outer space” (2008), which included a virtuoso Ping-Pong match with no ball or table, Caspersen danced a duet that left her talking about what you lose when you die. “No more of this,” she said, as she gestured to her partner’s elbow, knee, chest—a bow to the mortal body but also to the elemental daily work that had occupied Forsythe and his dancers for so long. It was a dance, Forsythe said, about his own absence. He was turning sixty. In 2015, he dissolved his company to focus on his international career and moved his base to rural Vermont.

Now Forsythe is turning seventy, and he has recently made several dances that draw directly from ballet. A return to classical certainties with the mellowing of age? Perhaps. But “A Quiet Evening of Dance” was not made for a ballet company. Forsythe has worked with almost all of the dancers in its small cast—two women and five men—for years, on some of his most

experimental pieces; one of the men is the hip-hop dancer Rauf (RubberLegz) Yasit, also a past collaborator.

“Quiet Evening” is a show in two acts. The first is a dance as close to theory as I have ever seen. It is a physical disquisition on the origins of ballet, except that it is composed largely of reconceived fragments from Forsythe’s past, as well as a new dance to music from 1951 by the avant-garde composer Morton Feldman. Forsythe is not just reconstructing Baroque steps; he’s using them as material, pulling ballet’s original elements through his own imagination. The second act is the result. Playfully entitled “Seventeen/Twenty One”—a reference not to the year 1721 but to the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries—it constitutes a new kind of classicism, made from elements of the old.

The first act takes us inside the machine. In a series of sketches, Forsythe presents a range of ideas to be fully investigated. One is a whimsical duet of arms; another lays out the mechanics of hands moving to and from knees. (Ready, go: hands to knees, hands crossing knees, knees turning in and out, this hand, that hand, both hands to hips; it goes on.) Forsythe is interested in movement that comes from movement, not from music, so much of the act is performed in silence—or, less convincingly, to birdcalls. The many iterations can be fascinating, but they can also be boring, a bit like the long hours dancers spend in rehearsal and the tedium that can accompany invention. Do we really need all this? We do. Forsythe is edging his way from everyday gesture to a ballet vocabulary. Soon the feet turn out, the line takes shape, the familiar positions emerge. In a clever reversal, we arrive at balletic steps using Forsythe’s own methods: classicism born of deconstruction.

But this is not ballet like you have seen before. As the music begins, three men fly onto a brightly lit stage in a full-tilt dance. Their movements are wide, open through the chest, with deep épaulement, but they are also torqued and knotted, the limbs working in rhythmic counterpoint. The dancers have what one of them described to me as “swing,” an ease through the hips and joints that makes it all look perfectly natural. We see them walk straight into complex sequences of movements as if they were picking up a conversation on the street, a point emphasized by the presence of Yasit, whose braided break-dance moves fit right in.

Everyone is dressed in bold solid colors—T-shirts, casual pants, arm-length gloves. On their feet are colored socks pulled over sneakers, an ingenious layering that gives the dancers a broad physical gamut, from ballet to street. The slippery sock gains traction from the sneaker, and there’s enough support from the rubber to give the extra lift of a toe shoe. It is footwear that folds traditional gender roles into a single, androgynous style. Still, it is mostly the men who hold the stage, as they did in Rameau’s time. At first, I couldn’t figure out why the five men stood out when the two women were so good, too, and then I realized that the men move the way Forsythe moves. This mirroring comes from years of working together, making the ballet a kind of self-portrait in absentia.

By the end of the evening, when the dancers all rush forward in a line—last beats, hint of a bow, pull back, curtain—we have stopped thinking. We thank Forsythe and his dancers for showing us how they got there, but, in an irony that he surely intended, once they have arrived we don’t really care. We just want more dancing.