

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Johanna Austin, AustinArt.org

All We Are

by Carolyn Merritt

In the beginning

A woman seated alone on the floor laces her shoes deliberately, stands and juts elbows, arms, wrists into the space before her. Her torso ripples with movement, waves forward then lilts back, as she steps, hops, and lunges like a gentle fighter. She balances leisurely on one leg, free leg drifting side to back, and bends forward, arms extended like a plane. Crystal clear, her body doesn't scream, "I'm dancing!" Rather, her relaxed precision reassures. We can sit back, enjoy. As she walks toward us, her gaze open, unwavering, she invites something else.

An elder man's voice crackles sweetly with more than age. Walking the line between muttered and spoken, just above his breath, his non-stop monologue runs alongside her. (Later I will miss his voice and wonder what I missed in those moments when the movement took over, capsized my attention.) *"Make it short,"* he says, *"Nobody likes to pay attention too long."* Yes, I think. And great advice—for students, journalists, choreographers... Then again, it's nice to meander sometimes, to sink into something. The man's voice and the woman's movements go on and on.

"Everybody has their bench, there's room enough for everybody.... We don't have to be close to be together."

She lies flat on her back, arms extend to the sky.

"Because we all hurt so much... the irreversibilities become quite heavy."

One at a time, a slow-motion collapse, arms delicately descend to the floor: fingers release, elbows succumb, limbs rest.

A man commissioned a painting of his wife, only the painting doesn't look like her anymore. "Something happened. What is that?"

Something indeed.

Dust

Evidence of life. Enemy of the domestic goddess. Culprit of hay fever. The stuff we're all destined for. The act of wiping away that stuff, or conversely, sprinkling a powdery substance atop a surface. The word has connotations both mundane and eternal.

The title of [Robert Ashley's](#) 1998 experimental opera, *Dust* first conjured its "bunnies" for me. The ramblings of "street people" on any corner of the world, Ashley's subject matter sounds similar: something, often on the fringes of the landscape, to be ignored if not disposed of. (See, for example, [Mayor Nutter's shameless decree that the city's homeless "dine with dignity"](#); or closer to Ashley, [Mayor Koch's battle with the "cesspool" of Tompkins Square Park](#), [Giuliani's criminalization of the homeless](#), [Bloomberg's hyper-gentrification](#).) But like those pesky particles, Ashley's *Dust* collects. In his aural collage of the conversations of five individuals, piecemeal and not always coherent, profound moments emerge. They tumble along just as quickly, seemingly out of sight, only to reappear, linger in the atmosphere.

Choreographed by Megan Bridge [\[i\]](#) and presented at FringeArts via fidget, the creative platform she shares with her husband composer/musician/digital artist Peter Price, *Dust* is an experimental dance work in which "formalism meets humanity," to quote Lois Welk (from Bridge's Facebook page). Bridge's solo to Ashley's voice opens the work, and then Christina Gesualdi, Beau Hancock, Gregory Holt, and Michele Tantoco join the stage, each executing a 10-minute solo to one of the remaining four monologues:

"I'm afraid of everything...."

Gesualdi bounds through the space—playful, loopy, possessed, giddy. She jumps with arms overhead in praise and the lights shudder like a storm from the heavens. Perfectly loose, her casual energy registers no effort, like an astronaut floating—present, easy.

"The men think about what they might be doing, not what they are doing...."

Holt lunges deeper and deeper, arms circling, scooping more and more air. Falling, flying, tripping, catching himself, running through the space. Slouched over, he sidles up to Gesualdi, hoists from her shoulder to stand upright.

Two guys are kissing... "They are really going at it... This is shocking!..."

Tantoco's arms circle her head, faster and faster, like someone wiping the slate clean, of memories or voices. Swinging arms, bouncing, jazzy like a mom at an aerobics class, grooving like a kid at a nightclub.

"You don't have to work if you're rich.... Fear is like food poisoning...."

Hancock slides into the space, lies on his side. Slowly his arms circle, knees open, legs rotate, butt lifts, he scooches to elbows. Later he wipes the floor, as if dusting it.

During much of this time, the other dancers remain in the space, "supporting" the soloist like backup singers. They repeat different versions of simple rock-step motifs; gather, unravel, and alternate geometric formations; face front and flash toothy smiles; swish arms or legs like wipers to a choral refrain:

ex. "one/ more/ time" = right/ left/ right

The soundscape gathers momentum—there are synthesizers, the voices sing, occasionally overlap. The stage itself seems to open wider as the lights build. Bright white floods the space from either side, deep sea blue bathes the dancers from above, houselights

briefly remind us of ourselves. The dancers continue as an ensemble, retreat into pairs and groups, meet and peel away again. Their movements are not interpretive. The dance and the words co-exist, but what initially feels parallel evolves into something more pleasing, if mercurial and ultimately ephemeral. As in the best stories about time, they move in non-linear fashion—build, swell, loop back, bump into and comment on themselves. And in certain moments of synchronicity, they intersect.

Politics and Poetics

The program contains no information about Ashley's opera, so I don't understand his narrative through-line until after the show:

"Five 'street people' recount the memories and experiences of one of their group, a man who has lost his legs in some unnamed war. As part of the experience of losing his legs, he began a conversation with God, under the influence of the morphine he was given to ease his pain. Now he wishes that the conversation, which was interrupted when the morphine wore off, could be continued so that he could get the 'secret word' that would stop all wars and suffering" (
<http://www.robertashley.org/productions/dust-kitchen.htm>*).*

Is it problematic that a cast of able-bodied, highly educated, mostly white folks is dancing to imagined voices of the homeless? That portions of the conversation are homophobic, racist? Are we romanticizing the homeless if we object to offensive speech in a work, created almost two decades ago, meant to represent "real life," real (and marginalized) human beings in some of their glories and failings? The politics of Ashley's speaking "for, about, with, alongside"^[ii] "street people" aside, I don't perceive Bridge's intent as embodying these characters, but rather constructing a movement score that interacts with Ashley's work, structurally and emotionally. (The question of race and representation is more troubling, perhaps, in Philadelphia than elsewhere, [where estimates suggest African Americans represent 80% of the homeless](#). It is a question that transcends Ashley's *Dust*, fidget's production, and FringeArts' audience base, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth broaching; the demographics of the city and much of its concert dance world are decidedly misaligned.)

The scores could be viewed independently. I wonder, in fact, how I might have received Bridge's work if I were already familiar with *Dust*, if it was precious to me. That it isn't frees me to move back and forth between them. Even if some of the ideas are more profound (for me) than the movement, Bridge's efforts shine in certain moments when form and feeling collide, when the dancers amplify the often heartbreaking words.

I give up trying early, but it is impossible to attend to everything at once. (Did I mention that visuals appear on the backdrop during the latter portion of the 90-minute production? Black and white floral designs twist and dissolve like a screensaver into geometric shapes; a vertical rainbow brings back the good old days when TV channels ran out of programming and actually went "off the air.") So it feels serendipitous, lifelike, when I catch a message in the music aligning with the movement. Like when Tantoco removes her shoes, climbs to stand 10 feet tall on Hancock's shoulders, and Gesualdi tosses her leg over Bridge's shoulder, mounts her. They balance, motionless, as the voice laments: *"I have a strong feeling that if I move, there's going to be consequences."* Later moments of stillness are fleeting, but here time slows down. They remain perched. *"I don't like consequences..."* I sense a collective inhale. It links us—one to another, audience to dancers, dancers to voices—this waiting, hoping for the best, wishing off a twitch, worse yet a sneeze.

The voice speaks about songs from the radio, how they take you back, stop time, make you feel good... *"Among the voices and the pictures and the loneliness that breaks your heart."* The stage goes black, and the dancers appear in a series of spot-lit tableaux that materialize and retreat like a camera's flash. None of this is novel; tableaux are the ultimate stuff of story ballets and their exaggerated pantomime, and spotlights are used to great effect in everything from recitals to burlesque to Broadway. But here the effect is heightened by the temporal contours of the visual and the aural, their intersection in nostalgia—that longing to travel backwards in the mind, to the past, so often prompted by the sensory.^[iii] The words remind that we turn to art for solace, to remember who we were in order to understand who we are, while the particular—the radio—situates us in a "now" already so far removed from that way of looking back. Similarly, the freeze frame tableaux conjure photographs and albums, reminding of a tactile nature of cataloguing life that suddenly seems quaint. There is the brutal speed of life, the moment gone in a flash, yes, but there is also the physical thing, the

photograph—that we hold in our hands, affix to the fridge, stain with tears, rip to shreds, lovingly piece together again. And that fades with time, those changes in color further evidence of distance, age. As the scratch of vinyl and the labor of the mix-tape signal the peculiar meeting point of generation and sentiment, it is an altogether different thing to hold a picture in your hand of someone no longer here than it is to view their image on a screen.

Falling in love again

“I want to fall in love just one more time.” The refrain hits me like a ton of bricks. Goosebumps, flushed cheeks, the whole nine yards: my ultimate entry point. I wonder who else feels it. Audience members of a certain age, sure, but what about newlyweds, new parents like me? I’ve always enjoyed looking back, but the tidal wave of nostalgia swelling over me since the birth of my son had confounded. Until *Dust*. What I’d mistaken for a newfound obsession with what ifs, a certain envy at all that lay before him, was in fact the simple realization that I’d charted a course that could never be reversed for that feeling without great harm. Falling is over for me.

And yet.

There is the new, the consuming, the regenerative love for the child—beloved, blessedly ordinary, miracle I surely did nothing to deserve—that multiplies, seemingly without end. And there are the examples that speak back to statistics, those couples who survive the long haul, remain open, somehow, to give and receive surprise; their love evolving.

But there is more. There is the moment, like this one: stepping out of FringeArts into the warmest night yet of 2015. Anticipating summer. Relishing the aftermath, swimming in the remnants of an evening’s impressions. Bumping into friends, acquaintances. Tossing ideas in my head and in conversation. Linger—though the chatter may subside (seeing what arises in those empty spaces)—because it feels so good. To be out. To be alone. To have legs, a bed and a family to go home to.

If these are all particular feelings, none quite the same as the head-over-heels of romance, they share a quality—they shimmer, we feel vibrant, “alive,” part of something larger.

Dreaming of Einstein

“What I want is yesterday.” Who doesn’t?

Gesualdi and Tantoco turn through the space in *chaînés*, arms paddling like windmills. In their rotations, forward movement; under their arms, the moment yields. This destruction is inevitable. Still, time softens—they glide like sailboats, each stroke carrying traces of the past.

What do we leave behind? What, if anything, can be recaptured? Who wouldn’t give anything to take something back?

The voices console now, “It is easy. Everybody needs somebody. It is easy. We are everyone.... There’s nothing wrong with you that a little love can’t fix.”

If nothing can keep the river of time in place, perhaps the only remedy is to jump in with both feet as often as we can. To seek out those experiences, people, things that help bring us to that place—where, against all odds, time slows, wraps itself around us like a warm coat. Store that feeling in our bones, so that we might revisit it in our minds. Nourish that part of ourselves that is infinite.

Dust, Megan Bridge/, FringeArts, April 16-18.

[i] Bridge is also Executive Director of thINKingDANCE.

[ii] See Jay Ruby, 1991. "Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma," in *Visual Anthropology Review* 7 (2). Ruby's subject is documentary and ethnographic authority and authorship, but the question—on what grounds does one represent someone else?—is also useful for artists.

[iii] C. Nadia Seremetakis, 1994. *The Senses Still*, University of Chicago Press: 4.

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