

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kalila Kingsford Smith

## From the Next Move Studio: Jessica Lang Dance

by Kalila Kingsford Smith

*Meeting the swell in the music, I lift my chest upwards my arms pulsing twice towards the back diagonal.  
I am the hopeful.*

In learning repertory from Jessica Lang's *Thousand Yard Stare* (2015), students participating in the [NextMove master class](#)\* were able to gain specific insight into the intentions of Lang's choreography. Taught by performers Patrick Coker, Milan Misko, and Jammie Walker, the class moved through a technical center-floor warm up, repertory, and an improvisational exercise called "Action Words," which Lang uses to help generate new movement material.

*My leg lifts into a side attitude as I spiral my torso and clutch my abdomen.  
I am the wounded.*

As she introduced the show, Lang spoke of her process working with military veterans to create *Thousand Yard Stare*, which refers to "the blank gaze of soldiers going into battle." In her process, she conducted music therapy sessions with veterans, having them draw pictures as they listened to Beethoven's String Quartet no. 15. She chose this music after learning that Beethoven wrote it while facing what he thought was his imminent death. The veterans' drawings inspired by the music were printed onto the dancers' dark military-style green costumes.

*Pressing my arm down, I undulate into a backbend, softening my chest backwards.  
I am the sacrifice.*

The movement material seemed derived from the impulse of getting shot: sharp twisting contractions, dropping to the floor in a heap,

yearning reaches towards the diagonal. After teaching the combination, Coker and Walker mentioned to us that this work is about war, so we should focus immediately on creating a story for ourselves with these impulses and intentions in mind. Doing this allowed me to shift how I treated the movement, not to execute the sequences with perfection in mind, but to infuse each gesture with purpose and to explore the dynamics that accompany images of war.

*Up-righting myself, I straighten my spine and stretch my arm to the sky, still clutching my side.  
I am the unyielding.*

Throughout the evening's performance, I am reminded of other American modern dance choreographers. In *Her Road* (2017), I saw Paul Taylor's (and by extension David Parsons') high V-Shaped arms and torso lift, as well as Twyla Tharp's quirky petit allegro footwork. In *The Calling* (2006), I saw Martha Graham's spirals and back falls. In the technique warm up, I also sensed this mix of classical and modern dance influences, but these dissolved into more contemporary and creative explorations as we learned the repertory and experienced "action words." As our final exercise, we were asked to improvise sequences across the floor moved by words such as walk, skip, and trudge. Various interpretations followed, and I could see how Lang might use this method with her company of dancers to build new material derived from action-based verbs. Perhaps much of *Thousand Yard Stare* was developed from action words like march, stomp, and pivot.

Continuing the classical modern dance tradition of abstraction and physicality, most of Lang's works tended towards lightness, loftiness, and musicality. *Thousand Yard Stare* felt as if it successfully reached deeper into the possibilities of how serious content can call forward specific movements and choreographic choices. I wonder, though, if this work has benefited the veterans in any way. Beyond the music therapy drawings, did they contribute towards the final product? Does creating a dance about war trivialize it, or does it speak to the experience in a way that allows for some catharsis for the soldiers? I can't help but question the function of this kind of art in the face of trauma and mortality.



Annielille Gavino-Kollman participating in the Jessica Lang Master Class, Photo: Kalila Kingsford Smith

\*Prior class/performance explorations from the NextMove Studio: [RUBBERBANDance Group](#), [Doug Varone and Dancers](#), and [Malpaso Dance Company](#).

Jessica Lang Dance Master Class, Friday April 7, free class to Philadelphia dance professionals and Drexel students offered through [NextMove Dance](#).

[Jessica Lang Dance](#), Prince Theater, April 5-9, 2017.

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April 16, 2017