

Unusual Dance Spaces

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In the 1960s, modern dance underwent a transformation. Choreographers joined forces with visual artists to invent works that incorporated philosophy and technology. Not only were they producing innovative ways of moving and a new dance vocabulary, but they were also generating novel ways of forming and fashioning dance. “The ‘art of making dances’ was on the verge of a revolution.”¹ The avant-garde dancers of the late 1960s created works that were groundbreaking in the way they were challenging the structure and constructs of modern dance.

A different approach views this new attitude toward dance as just another aspect of the hippie and anti-establishment counterculture of the 1960s. In the introduction to her book *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s*, the critic and historian Sally Banes begins by describing the 1960s culture as a period in history when there were no boundaries. The line between art and life was becoming less clear as rules were being broken and limits tested in many sectors of society whether artistically, socially, or politically. “The arts both reflected and participated in pushing the envelope beyond recognition.”² The experimental culture of the 1960s helped to foster a similar creative sentiment among the avant-garde choreographers of that decade.

Whether as a form of rebellion against modern dance or as an expression of the 1960s experimental culture, avant-garde choreographers created revolutionary works that exploded outside the frame of the proscenium stage. They discovered new performance spaces that ranged from church sanctuaries, museums, gymnasiums, lofts, and galleries, to sidewalks, public parks,

¹ Joyce Morgenroth, *Speaking of Dance: Twelve Contemporary Choreographers on Their Craft* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5-6.

² Sally Banes, ed., *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), xiii.

tenement walls, and other places. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Trisha Brown and Twyla Tharp, in particular, were known for their exploratory, non-proscenium dance pieces executed in new and unusual performance spaces. The titles of Brown's works described them. *Man Walking Down Side of Building* (1969) was staged on the side of 80 Wooster Street in downtown Manhattan, while *Walking on the Wall* (1971) was performed on the walls of a gallery in the Whitney Museum. *Roof Piece* (1971) took place on the roofs of buildings across an area of twelve blocks between Wooster and Lafayette Streets in Manhattan's SoHo district. During those same years Tharp produced *Medley* (1969) on the Great Lawn of Central Park, *Dancing in the Streets of London and Paris, Continued in Stockholm and Sometimes Madrid* (1969) in galleries and staircases of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and *Torelli* (1971), a three-part dance that spanned the entire length of the island of Manhattan. The first segment took place in Fort Tyron Park in Washington Heights, the second in Battery Park, and the third in the City Council chamber at City Hall.

The use of these atypical performance spaces transformed the landscape of contemporary dance. No longer was dance solely confined to a theater venue, but any and every space could be utilized. Brown and Tharp created performance spaces in unmarked territories. Consequently, the relationship between the performers and their audiences was altered. In these new public environments there were constant distractions, and the choreographers had to create works that would hold the attention of their spectators.

Brown and Tharp were also considered innovative not only in their choice of unconventional venues, but also because of the way they incorporated pedestrian movements into their dances. Just as any space could house a dance so too could any movement be considered dance. In addition, they incorporated non-dancers into their works. Within limits, the

art of concert dance was becoming democratized. Anybody, anywhere, doing any form of movement was, in essence, dancing. On the one hand, Brown and Tharp were making an artistic statement. On the other, one wonders if limited access to mainstream performance venues led them, at the beginning of their choreographic careers, to these unusual dance spaces. After all, both Brown and Tharp eventually returned to the proscenium stage and created complex choreography for highly trained dancers.

Forty years later, contemporary choreographers such as Noémie Lafrance and Jill Sigman continue to explore non-conventional performance spaces. Their dances draw attention to details of otherwise unnoticed environments. These non-proscenium spaces made them, similar to Brown and Tharp, redefine the spatial relationship between their dancers and audiences. Lafrance and Sigman altered the assigned roles of performers and spectators by encouraging the dancers to make eye contact with the viewers, and by allowing members of the audience to participate in their dances in new and innovative ways. They also used technological devices to keep their viewers focused on the piece being performed. Sigman, in particular, grapples with the implications of universalizing dance and how it both positively and negatively impacts her work. Lafrance's and Sigman's dances are clearly a continuation of their predecessors' explorations and consist of fresh and original ways of approaching non-proscenium dance.

Avant-garde Choreographers: 1960s-1970s

Trisha Brown

Born and raised in Aberdeen, Washington, Trisha Brown studied many forms of dance in her youth, from acrobatics to tap, ballet, and jazz.³ A high school questionnaire recommended that she become a music librarian, a suggestion she only understood after completing a summer composition course with Louis Horst at the American Dance Festival that “set [her] up to love

³ Morgenroth, 57.

structure forever.”⁴ After graduating from Mills College, Brown taught at Reed College for two years. By then, she realized that she had “exhausted conventional teaching methods”⁵ and began to investigate improvisational forms.⁶

Brown attributes her inspiration to create nontraditional dances to John Cage’s lecture *Indeterminacy* (1960)⁷ and to Anna Halprin’s studio classes, which focused on “task-based improvisation, vocalization, and experimental anatomy.”⁸ Robert Dunn’s composition class at the Merce Cunningham studio, however, provided the environment for refashioning “form and content.”⁹ In a 1978 interview, Brown described the setting of Robert Dunn’s class in the following manner:

The students were inventing forms rather than using traditional theme and development or narrative, and the discussion that followed applied nonevaluative criticism to the movement itself and the choreographic structure as well as investigating the disparity between the two simultaneous experiences, what the artist was making and what the audience saw. This procedure illuminated the interworkings of the dances and minimized value judgments of the choreographer, which for me meant permission, permission to go ahead and do what I wanted to do or had to do – to try out an idea of borderline acceptability.¹⁰

Robert Dunn’s composition class was comprised of young people like Brown who wanted to explore and redefine the materials and tools of modern dance. Among the students

⁴ Quoted in “PASTFoward Choreographers’ Statements,” in *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s*, ed. Sally Banes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 194.

⁵ Anne Livet, ed., *Contemporary Dance* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1978), 44.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted in “PASTFoward Choreographers’ Statements,” 194.

⁸ Morgenroth, 7.

⁹ Quoted in “PASTFoward Choreographers’ Statements,” 194.

¹⁰ Livet, 45.

were Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, David Gordon, Dick Levine, and Lucinda Childs. Dunn would assign dance problems that could be solved in any manner the students saw fit. In some cases non-dance media were used as responses to the given assignments.¹¹ Works created in Dunn's class were performed at an end-of-the-year showing in the Cunningham studio. However, participants in the 1962 spring semester course wanted to put on a public concert. The Judson Memorial Church agreed to host the performance, and it was then that a relationship was forged between Dunn's students and the church. Although contemporary dance was being performed in theaters and lofts around the city, the concerts at the Judson Church during the 1960s marked the beginning of the avant-garde dance scene. Brown described the Judson Group as a band of people for whom "any movement could be valid. But it wasn't anything goes. ... It was a supportive environment where you were examining previously digested information."¹² By using new methods of composition, members from Dunn's class and the Judson Group created revolutionary dances. After the group disbanded, many of its participants, including Trisha Brown, continued to produce innovative works of art.¹³

Beginning in 1968, Brown created her signature *Equipment Pieces*. Through the intervention of ropes, pulleys, and mechanical devices, her dancers were denied "a 'natural' relationship with gravity."¹⁴ In these pieces, there existed a "collaboration between performer and place [which] became a contest of strenuous proportions. Movement was the difficult negotiation of a perpendicular walk down seven stories, or along a wall, executed as naturally as possible, in defiance of all normal rules of gravitation."¹⁵ Brown has described these pieces as

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Anna Kisselgoff, "Wall-Dancer Adds a New Dimension," *The New York Times*, 8 January 1976, 26.

¹³ Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ "Trisha Brown: An Interview," in Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, eds., *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 127.

¹⁵ Sally Sommer, "Trisha Brown Making Dances," *Dance Scope* 11.2 (1977): 8.

the “irony of conflicting activities.”¹⁶ Her dancers attempted to remain upright and move naturally, while the force of gravity tried to pull them down.

In her *Equipment Pieces*, Brown exploited surfaces other than the floor. She created the “illusion of free-falling bodies”¹⁷ through the use of “external support systems.”¹⁸ In addition, “Brown created new relationships between the dancers and earth’s gravity; her problem as a choreographer here was not to invent new movement, but to discover what movements and postures were required to compensate for the body’s reorientation in order to create the illusion of a ‘natural’ upright walk.”¹⁹ Brown succeeded in these works in creating the false impression of a new and altered perspective. Rather than viewing the dancers as performing an insurmountable feat, such as walking on the side of a building or across the walls of a museum, one seems to be viewing the piece from a higher vantage point, looking down on the performers as they seem to move naturally in an erect position.²⁰ With mechanical assistance, Brown performed seemingly ordinary movements in highly unusual urban environments.

Wendy Perron, a former dancer in Brown’s company, wrote in her journal that Brown’s “movements are more natural than natural. . . . You can see her thoughts in the dancing and she questions everything.”²¹ Her dancers were described in *The New York Times* as “virtuoso[s] with their casual, loose style, which actually depends on acute timing and a stunning kinetic memory.”²² Brown’s innovative movements exhibited a natural and playful quality despite the choreography’s high degree of stylization.

¹⁶ Anna Kisselgoff, “Walking on the Wall, Or Maybe It’s a Floor,” *The New York Times*, 2 August 1990, C19.

¹⁷ Sally Banes, “From the Judson to BAM: Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs,” *On the Next Wave* 1.2 (1983): 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sally Banes, *Terpsichore In Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 80.

²¹ Wendy Perron, “One Route from Ballet to Postmodern,” in *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s*, 148.

²² Anna Kisselgoff, “A Playful Approach to Perceptions,” *The New York Times*, 7 July 1990, L16.

Brown is interested in pure movement. She has said that her dances consist of “mechanical body actions like bending, straightening, or rotating.”²³ She includes steps and phrases that were not classically considered dance. In an interview she justified her dances, insisting that “walking or lying down are a valid part of the dance vocabulary.”²⁴ Pedestrian, everyday movements, she claimed, are just as much a part of dance as codified steps. She describes her dances as “ordinary activit[ies] presented in extraordinary circumstance[s].”²⁵

Man Walking Down the Side of a Building (1969) featured Joseph Schlichter, with the aid of a harness and visible ropes, walking down seven stories of 80 Wooster Street in downtown Manhattan. The piece was developed by Brown with the help of fellow artists Richard Nonas and Jared Bark. A small group of people sat underneath the building’s fire-escape awaiting the beginning of the performance. The dance began with Schlichter sitting on the edge of the roof. He then swung his legs over the side of the building and slowly raised his feet until the soles of his feet were securely planted on top. By this point, a large crowd had gathered on the street below, watching with anticipation. Some onlookers even situated themselves on the first landing of the fire-escape. Schlichter then stretched out perpendicular to the edifice and began his downward descent. His hands, which were by his sides, were free to move, unattached to any noticeable security wires. However, one could easily see a cable between his legs. Schlichter gradually made his way, step by step, down the side of the building. Depending on the camera angle, the verticality of the building assumed the horizontal position of the ground so that he

²³ Sommer, “Trisha Brown Making Dances,” 8.

²⁴ Quoted in Kisselgoff, “Wall-Dancer Adds a New Dimension,” 26.

²⁵ Ibid.

seemed to be simply walking down a street. The entire piece lasted two minutes and forty-seven seconds.²⁶

Walking on the Wall (1971) was performed in a gallery at the Whitney Museum. Again through the use of observable pulleys, ropes, and harnesses, seven dancers – Trisha Brown, Carmen Beuchat, Barbara Dilley, Douglas Dunn, Mark Gabor, Sylvia Palacios, and Steve Paxton – walked forwards, backwards, leaped, (and on occasion they even bumped into one another) across three right-angled gallery walls. Throughout the piece, their hands remained at their sides, never moving past their shoulders. For the most part, the dancers were walking on the walls. At a certain point, one of the performers swung one of her legs to her side followed by the other. This motion almost turned her upside down. The dancers were, in fact, experimenting with a new mode of traveling quite similar to the way babies learn to walk, often falling several times before executing the movement correctly. Here, too, the walls gradually appeared to resemble the floor, and the mechanics that made this possible were also evident. A ladder against a wall was the device used by the dancers to begin their walk on the wall and again to dismount when they were finished. The feat of walking on the wall was not meant to be an illusion but was conceived in a way that allowed the audience to see its mechanics.²⁷

Roof Piece was originally produced in 1971 as a private performance by eleven dancers spanning twelve blocks between 53 Wooster Street and 381 Lafayette Street in the SoHo district of Manhattan. A second performance by a troupe of fifteen dancers was presented to the public in 1973 and extended across nine blocks between 420 West Broadway and 35 White Street. Both performances consisted of movement phrases continuously relayed from one dancer to the next.

²⁶ “Man Walking Down Side of a Building, 1970,” *Trisha Brown: Early Works 1966-1979*, dir. Trisha Brown, ARTPIX Notebooks, 2004.

²⁷ “Walking on the Wall, 1971,” *Trisha Brown: Early Works 1966-1979*, dir. Trisha Brown, ARTPIX Notebooks, 2004.

This technique recalls the ancient Hebrew practice of announcing the beginning of a new month. After two men witnessed the first crescent of the new moon, they lit a bonfire on a hilltop. Men on nearby hills would, in turn, light a fire, creating a chain reaction until all the Jews learned that it was the beginning of a new month. The performers in *Roof Piece* were described as “remote, depersonalized, yet sympathetically human in their dedication to a task so clearly disinterested.”²⁸ In the piece, each dancer was supposed to replicate movement phrases from the preceding performer. Due to the physical distance between each dancer, some details and nuances of the steps were lost. As the audience could not see all the dancers at once, they could only watch the sending and receiving of movement phrases between those dancers who were visible to them. Thus, they could not see the individual changes, but rather noticed the overall modifications when the dance returned to its original observable dispatcher. This act could only be accomplished by physically distancing the audience from the performers, a feat that under normal circumstances is implausible in a conventional theater.

In a 1970s interview, Brown explained the kind of relationship she wanted with her audience:

I definitely do want my audiences to understand my work although I have done my share of dances that were difficult for the general public. In the 1960’s, my audiences were small but consistent and knowledgeable. We grew up together. Now my audiences are larger, informed through literature and aware that some dance is not entertainment.²⁹

Brown does not strive to keep her audiences amused but rather tries to explore the possibilities of what constitutes a work as dance. In 1980, in a television interview, Brown

²⁸ Dale Harris, “Showmanship, Art and the Dance,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 1989, A16.

²⁹ Livet, 121.

expressed her frustrations with her audience. She mentioned that she wanted a large audience that would be thrilled with her work and one that would not require her to constantly have to defend her choreography, especially when she thought certain questions had been answered and resolved twenty years earlier.³⁰ Over time Brown has expected and demanded different responses from her audiences. When she was creating her non-proscenium works, she was interested in a small but loyal group of admirers that had grown and developed with her intellectually. She experimented with different performance spaces, and her audiences, in return, were curious to watch her do so. However, this also alienated audiences who were uninterested in the theoretical implications behind the work and attended performances solely for their aesthetic value. For them, these pieces seemed more interesting for the performers who were exploring new dance movements and venues, than for the public who came to watch them. Anna Kisselgoff, a dance critic for *The New York Times*, shared this sentiment and commented on how in *Walking on the Wall* “traffic got heavy at times and became perhaps more involving to the participants than the public by the end.”³¹

In 2000, Mikhail Baryshnikov funded *PASTForward*, a project intended to reconstruct dances of the 1960s as well as showcase some new works by choreographers of that decade, including Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, and Yvonne Rainer. In her choreographic statement for the project, Brown claimed that she “can’t go back. It isn’t there anymore. Not the context and not the ratio of what the world does and does not know about dance.”³² Brown’s pieces were revolutionary in their time. They were created because of her personal curiosity to probe certain issues and supported by the

³⁰ *Making Dances: Seven Postmodern Choreographers*, prod. and dir. Michael Blackwood, 1 hr. 29 min., Michael Blackwood Productions and Audio Plus Video, 2000, videocassette.

³¹ Anna Kisselgoff, “Trisha Brown Group In Fun and Games,” *The New York Times*, 1 April 1971, 50.

³² Quoted in “*PASTForward* Choreographers’ Statements,” 196.

experimental culture of the period. Since then she has moved away from those exercises, and for her they remain as past endeavors.

Twyla Tharp

Twyla Tharp was raised in Southern California. When she was four years old, her mother realized that Tharp had perfect pitch and, consequently, took her to have lessons with a children's piano teacher.³³ Over the course of her childhood Twyla studied "baton, ballet, toe, flamenco, drums, elocution, painting, viola, violin, acrobatics, shorthand, German, and French."³⁴ Tharp graduated from Barnard College in 1963 with a bachelor's degree in Art History. While a student at Barnard, Tharp studied dance at various New York City locations. She took ballet classes with Igor Schwezoff, Richard Thomas, and his wife Barbara Fallis, and studied modern dance with many choreographers. It was Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, however, who had a lasting effect on her dancing.³⁵ Lastly, Tharp studied jazz with Eugene "Luigi" Lewis. Toward the end of her college career, Tharp began to identify herself as a dancer, because out "of all the things I could do, dancing was the thing I could do best and enjoyed most."³⁶ Tharp began dancing with Paul Taylor in 1963. However, within a year, because of a comment she had made to the critic Clive Barnes, Taylor recommended that she take some time off and try to create her own choreography.³⁷

On April 29, 1965 Tharp presented her first dance work, *Tank Dive*. She decided to structure this piece with a beginning, a middle, and an end. After selecting an entrance and closing she was overwhelmed by the idea of creating a middle section. The existence of so many options made it impossible to choose. She decided to distill movement until she reached its core:

³³ Twyla Tharp, *Push Comes to Shove* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 7.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 24.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 55.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 78.

“the right angle, the diagonal, the spiral, and the circle,”³⁸ the building blocks of dance that when combined, could result in all types of phrases. From the start of her choreographic career, Tharp was interested in getting to the basics of dance, stripping it to its bare essentials.

Critic Don McDonagh wrote that “an important characteristic of Tharp’s modified-proscenium approach to choreography is her willingness to consider almost any space as suitable for dance.”³⁹ No matter where she chose to perform Tharp was able to “throw lines of movement across and through [the] space and thereby establish a zone of human mastery over the real estate that is our environment.”⁴⁰ She created works for and became adept in dancing in all types of surroundings. “Tharp does not have a specific spatial requirement for her work but will handle the space that is offered to her. It is a freedom of choice which was made possible when proscenium arch was seen as only one possible way of organizing space and not always the best one.”⁴¹ This freedom led Tharp to create works such as *Medley* (1969), *Dancing in the Streets of London and Paris, Continued in Stockholm and Sometimes Madrid* (1969), and *Torelli* (1971). Each dance utilized the entirety of its performing space, whether it was the Great Lawn in Central Park, galleries and staircases of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the three Manhattan locations where *Torelli* was presented. These works succeeded in incorporating sophisticated as well as stylized pedestrian movements in “unique natural setting[s]”⁴² as well as illustrating Tharp’s interest in gigantism. She created dances that extended and filled spaces ten times the size of a proscenium stage.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid, 80.

³⁹ Don McDonagh, *The Rise & Fall & Rise of Modern Dance* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 1990), 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 67.

⁴¹ Ibid, 71.

⁴² Marcia B. Siegel, *Howling Near Heaven: Twyla Tharp and the Reinvention of Modern Dance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 32.

⁴³ Ibid.

Tharp was described by critic Clive Barnes as a “dance avant-garde activist (as opposed to the dance avant-garde reactionaries).”⁴⁴ She was a pioneer in this new form of dance, creating unusual and innovative works. Tharp had a preference for non-proscenium spaces, finding the stage too limiting. “Once out of the confines of a theatre, the audience is in a better position to experience what the dancers are doing. She wants to release the spectator from the visual ‘set’ of the proscenium stage and the physical ‘set’ of an assigned seat. She likes to have her dancing-ground fluid and her viewers mobile,”⁴⁵ an accomplishment that can only be achieved off the proscenium stage. Tharp was also interested in “what dance, as sheer movement, could accomplish on its own,”⁴⁶ without the accompaniment of music. She felt that when people saw dance that moved to music, audiences responded to the music rather than to the dance steps.

Medley (1969) was created with the idea of showing how art and life could co-exist with one another and that they are not mutually exclusive.⁴⁷ *Medley* was “based on everyday movements – running, walking, skipping,” yet it “became [Tharp’s] ‘danciest’ dance yet.”⁴⁸ It was made for a large outdoor space and was performed at a number of sites.⁴⁹ *Medley* premiered at the American Dance Festival, which took place at Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut, and was performed soon after on the Great Lawn of Manhattan’s Central Park. Tharp began the piece with six company dancers who were described by Jack Anderson as follows:

[They were] clustering and dispersing in patterns vaguely reminiscent of balls scattering on a billiard table. The climax came when the company was joined by

⁴⁴ Clive Barnes, “Dance: Brief, Attractive Program at the Delacorte,” *The New York Times*, 14 September 1972, 57.

⁴⁵ Tobi Tobias, “Twyla Tharp,” *Dance Scope* 4.2 (Spring 1970): 9.

⁴⁶ *Current Biography 1975*, s.v. “Tharp, Twyla.”

⁴⁷ Tharp, 120.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Tobias, 9.

three dozen student dancers who rushed down a hillside with a great burst of energy. Finally, the dancers, now suggesting a live sculpture garden, performed an adagio so slow that it was at first almost impossible to tell that they were moving at all. A curious effect of *Medley* was that it made the entire visible landscape kinetic. Automobiles on a nearby street and pedestrians walking across the campus became as much a part of the composition as the dancers themselves.⁵⁰

In 1989 Jack Anderson recalled in *The New York Times*, that the second performance of *Medley* was a “magical production [that] turned the Great Lawn of Central Park into an animated sculpture garden. Tharp spaced dancers across it almost as far as the eye could see, then had them move slowly and calmly while twilight fell about them. Nature and art were in harmony.”⁵¹ Naturalism was an important aspect of this piece, and Tharp grappled with how to achieve a natural movement quality that was unique to each dancer. She used several techniques, “improvisation, everyday gesture or action, [and] technique done in the nude.”⁵² In the end she videotaped her dancers and made them relearn their own movements so that they could teach them to a group of students.⁵³ In *Medley*, anyone could have their moves incorporated into the dance – company members, students, audience members, even passersby. *Medley* was comprised of non-dance steps from atypical movement sources labeled with colloquial terms; “sections of [it], for instance, were called ‘Street Moves,’ ‘Layouts (put-downs)’ and ‘Audience pick-ups.’”⁵⁴

At Connecticut College, where *Medley* premiered, the dance was not executed as Tharp had planned. Not only did some audience members leave to watch Yvonne Rainer’s work, but

⁵⁰ Jack Anderson, “American Dance Festival,” *Ballet Today*, September-October 1969, 25.

⁵¹ Jack Anderson, “When Choreographers Get the Urge to Go Afield,” *The New York Times*, 4 June 1989, H8.

⁵² Siegel, 31.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 30-31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 33.

also an infestation of mosquitoes descended on the dancers, which resulted in the performance finishing indoors rather than outdoors at sunset.⁵⁵ Jack Anderson stated that “by making dances transform environments and environments transform dances, choreographers can work wonders. However, before any such miracles can happen, imagination must be tempered by practicality. The dance must not only be a glorious vision in the mind of its creator, but also a fully visible set of actions before the eyes of its audience.”⁵⁶ Creating a work such as *Medley* demands that many details are perfectly timed and calibrated. During *Medley*'s premiere, unforeseen mishaps in scheduling and unexpected flukes of nature led to its unanticipated ending.

Medley was performed a second time on Central Park's Great Lawn. In this performance there was “an even bigger complement of extras. Contending with the usual occupants of the Great Lawn – Frisbee players, joggers, bikers, mounted policeman, ball games, and strolling civilians – gave the dancers a more realistic chance to test their art-is-life proposition.”⁵⁷ Tharp's intended ending surprised some of the audience members as the dancers farthest from sight were engulfed by darkness. Anna Kisselgoff described the Adagio as “a masterly coup ... an impression of richness in sparseness.”⁵⁸ Marcia Siegel described *Medley* as follows:

[It's] casual beginning and ending made it seem that the dance had been there all along, waiting for the audience to arrive and turn it into a performance. The work unfolded in a series of set-pieces meant to integrate performing into the open-field setting, to bring students into a relationship with the members of the company, to

⁵⁵ Ibid, 31-32.

⁵⁶ Anderson, “When Choreographers Get the Urge to Go Afield,” H8.

⁵⁷ Siegel, 33.

⁵⁸ Anna Kisselgoff, “Twyla Tharp Vies With Park Athletes In Dance Program,” *The New York Times*, 19 September 1969, 51.

incorporate the audience's movements into the choreography, and, in a final series of long adagio solos, to present each company dancer's special qualities.⁵⁹

Tharp did not perform in *Medley* but watched the performance as part of the audience. She overheard comments, both positive and negative. In her autobiography, Tharp recounts how "it has taken years to find the strength to connect with an audience without jeopardizing my own ego, detaching myself to find a director's objectivity."⁶⁰ Despite her wish to create a dance that showed how art and life could co-exist, Tharp herself struggled to forge a bond with her audience.

Dancing in the Streets of London and Paris, Continued in Stockholm and Sometimes Madrid (1969) was a retrospective, incorporating material from Tharp's dances up to *Medley*.⁶¹ It was commissioned by the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, and was designed to "break down every conceivable wall put up to separate life from art."⁶² It was made for a "multi-space environment of a museum,"⁶³ and incorporated commonplace acts such as reading from a book while dancers exchanged articles of clothing. *Dancing in the Streets* premiered at the Wadsworth Atheneum in November 1969. Since the dancers performed throughout the museum, viewers saw different parts of the concert.⁶⁴ Members of the audience experienced their own personal versions of the work while wandering through the museum's halls.

Perhaps, Merce Cunningham's *Museum Event No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3*, which he created for museums in Vienna and Stockholm during the early 1960s influenced Tharp in her creation of *Dancing in the Streets of London and Paris, Continued in Stockholm and Sometimes Madrid*

⁵⁹ Siegel, 30.

⁶⁰ Tharp, 121.

⁶¹ Ibid, 125.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Tobias, 9.

⁶⁴ Jack Anderson, "Twyla Tharp & Co. Metropolitan Museum of Art January 22, 1970," *Dance Magazine*, March 1970, 90-92.

(1969). Cunningham was invited to perform dances from his repertoire in those museums, but adjustments were necessary. The unconventional nature of these venues led him not only to re-sequence segments of the dance pieces, but also required him to use different music. Each performance lasted only between eighty and ninety minutes without an intermission.

Cunningham was so satisfied with his *Museum Events* that whenever he performed in non-theatrical spaces he used this compositional format, which became known as “Events.”⁶⁵

Although Cunningham stumbled upon museums as possible performance venues, Tharp purposefully investigated them to house her artistic vision.

Most critics disliked *Dancing in the Streets* when it was first performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in January 1970. Jack Anderson, Roz Newman, and Anna Kisselgoff criticized Tharp for losing control of the audience and creating a slew of frustrated viewers, like themselves.⁶⁶ Anderson described the piece as follows:

Despite interesting effects of perspective – contrasts between small rooms and vast hallways, glimpses of dancers appearing in doorways or between pillars – the work seemed blurred. Action was not continuous everywhere, and the audience was never sure where anything new would happen. At first, the uncertainty was intriguing – like playing hide-and-seek with the dancers. Eventually, shuffling from place to place – frequently to discover nothing or something which had just ended – grew wearisome, especially since the audience was so large that visibility was limited. In a lecture-demonstration following the performance, Miss Tharp analyzed several of her movement sequences. As demonstrated in a conventional

⁶⁵ *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, s.v. “Cunningham, Merce.”

⁶⁶ Siegel, 41.

auditorium, they were well defined and crystalline. As performed on the galleries, they all too often looked smudged.⁶⁷

Kisselgoff, moreover, declared that Tharp's "once brilliant movement patterns appear less than interesting and smothered by an unpredictable participant public whose presence – if not obstructive – seems beside the point."⁶⁸

Tharp envisioned this dance filling several rooms and spaces of a building simultaneously. People could stand and watch what was happening in one area while viewing what was going on elsewhere on closed-circuit television monitors. The idea stemmed from the fact that most people would stay and watch what was taking place in front of them under the pretext that they did not know if anything better was occurring somewhere else. However, the television sets never arrived for the New York performance, resulting in the loss of crowd control. It was clear that this mishap was the cause of all those unfavorable reviews. In Hartford, the monitors were operating as planned and the Connecticut dance reviews were pleasant and positive. In the words of a *Hartford Times* critic: "[I]t was one of the most exciting and innovative dance concerts that I have ever seen. The audience was fascinated – fascinated by the change of pace, the constant change of environment and this total change in the concept of a 'dance' – an open and total exchange between the audience and dancer."⁶⁹ In Hartford, Tharp successfully executed her vision of *Dancing in the Streets*.

Torelli (1971) was originally conceived as a dance that would span the length of all of Manhattan.

⁶⁷ Anderson, "Twyla Tharp & Co.," 91-92.

⁶⁸ Anna Kisselgoff. "The Met Museum Provides a Setting For Tharp Dance," *The New York Times*, 23 January 1970, 25.

⁶⁹ Excerpt from "Archive," *Twyla Tharp*, <<http://www.twylatharp.org>> (9 December 2007). A review, signed EEB, *Hartford Times*, 1969.

[In actuality, t]he dance would surround a single day, 28 May, beginning in Fort Tyron Park at sunrise, continuing in Battery Park at lunchtime, and concluding in the evening at City Hall. Tharp, Rudner, and Wright performed the basic dance material for all three sections. The first was set to the Baroque music of Giuseppe Torelli, and *Torelli* became the umbrella title for the three sections, “Sunrise,” “Midday March,” and “Evening Raga.”⁷⁰

The initial segment of the performance was repeated when additional people arrived after the first showing. A Brooklyn High School marching band played music by John Philip Sousa for the “Midday March,” and the band’s line formations intersected with the dancers. Problems occurred in the third section when the piano player was not allowed into City Hall. In addition, the dancers ended up not wearing their fancy quasi-Indian costumes, which would have complemented the accompanying raga music.⁷¹ Once again, Tharp had failed to anticipate the mishaps that changed the outcome of the performance.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Tharp attempted to create dances that would blur the line between art and life. She incorporated pedestrian activities into locally accessible public environments. By dancing in these venues Tharp performed not only for her loyal dance audience, but also for individuals who regularly visited that space. Similar to Brown’s dances, Tharp’s pieces incorporated all forms of movement in non-typical spaces. The theories and concepts behind Tharp’s dances were at times more interesting than the pieces themselves. Because of unforeseen complications at most performances, the dances failed to realize Tharp’s vision. These unsuccessful concerts indicate the complexity of creating non-proscenium works. Not only did Tharp need to create movement, but she also had to foresee how the choreography

⁷⁰ Siegel, 50.

⁷¹ Ibid, 50-51.

would be performed in the new environment. For each failed attempt there was also a successful performance at which her objective was achieved. Those concerts demonstrated that dance could exist in non-proscenium venues and expanded the field of possible performance spaces.

Contemporary Choreographers: 1990s-2000s

Noémie Lafrance

A Quebec native, choreographer Noémie Lafrance studied dance at Les Ateliers de Danse Moderne de Montreal for two years between 1992 and 1994. Subsequently, she spent three years as a scholarship student at New York's Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. In 2000, Lafrance founded *Sens Production*, a non-profit experimental arts organization for which she choreographs site-specific works. By integrating choreography and architecture the company hopes to heighten and alter its audiences' perception of space and environment.⁷² "Experimental choreographers [like Lafrance] are intent on creating dance that evoke a world, not just a showcase of steps within a frame."⁷³

Lafrance's renowned work *Descent* (2001) was produced on "Stairwell B of the City Court Building in downtown New York, a landmark architectural treasure located at Lafayette and Leonard Streets."⁷⁴ The movement was influenced by the building's architecture and was created for that unique space.⁷⁵ The choreography consisted of "mesmerizing patterns that echoed the symmetry and depth of the stairwell."⁷⁶ Members of the audience were led down the staircase and instructed when to peer below, above, and around the landings, becoming aware of details of the building's design while dance was occurring all around them. They experienced a

⁷² "Mission Statement," *Sens: Noémie Lafrance*, <<http://sensproduction.org>> (5 November 2007).

⁷³ Gia Kourlas, "Where Dance Is Moving: Off the Stage," *The New York Times*, 27 July 2003, AR18.

⁷⁴ Deborah Garwood, "Descent's Dare On A Stair: Noémie Lafrance in New York," *Performing Arts Journal* (2003): 88.

⁷⁵ Mindy Aloff, "Crouching on the Steps," *Ballettanz*, January 2003, 38.

⁷⁶ Garwood, 88.

desire to look, while being simultaneously filled with a fear of falling down the stairs and forced to grip the banister for safety.⁷⁷

Descent also highlighted the history that is embedded in the City Court edifice. Each landing consisted of a different vignette:

Some of the bedroom groupings on the landings recall the Victorian era when this McKim, Mead & White building was constructed. Tenement groupings, where women lean precipitously over the banisters giving onto a 200-foot stairwell, suggest the 20th century when the City of New York acquired the building, which now houses the Domestic Violence Court and services for juvenile offenders.⁷⁸

In the piece, Lafrance blurs the line between performer and spectator as it becomes unclear who is watching whom. Since the clocktower of the City Court Building is a public space there were actually two audiences at the event. The first group consisted of the patrons who came to the performance and were ushered down the staircase, while the residents of the buildings on Worth Street, whose apartments looked into the performance space, comprised the second group. Kim Naci, a local inhabitant, described that experience as analogous to “staring into someone’s bedroom. At one point, we just turned down the lights, poured some wine and pulled up chairs.”⁷⁹ During rehearsals, the dancers admitted that they too were able to look into the adjacent buildings, and watch the residents carry out daily tasks. *Descent*, a piece about domestic life, occurs appropriately in a residential environment. It goes “deep into the psyche of the domestic goddess, where scenes of daily life reveal the desires she dares only dream about. ...it’s as innocent as a sleepover and as erotic as a secret love affair.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Aloff, 38.

⁷⁹ Steve Kurutz, “Not Quite Nudes Descending a Staircase,” *The New York Times*, 7 December 2003, 14.

⁸⁰ Adele Nickel, “Descent,” *The Village Voice*, 29 October 2003, C84.

In 2004, Lafrance created *Noir*, a work intended to be performed in a municipal parking garage between Delancey and Essex Streets in downtown Manhattan. The piece was inspired by the *films noirs* of the 1940s and 1950s. While spectators were being escorted to cars from which to view the production, dancers dressed in period costumes walked around the garage. There was no clearly defined commencement to the piece. This type of beginning is common in Lafrance's dances. She tends to blur the distinction between dancers and viewers. In this particular piece it was not apparent at the outset which individuals were dancers and which were audience members, as some spectators came to the performance dressed in historically appropriate attire. The dancing, which took place on one level of the parking garage, did not seem to affect the business-as-usual atmosphere on the other floors. This heightened LaFrance's successful "sharp contrast between fiction and reality."⁸¹

Lafrance choreographed *Noir* for its performance environment. It was created for the viewer who would be watching it from inside a motor vehicle. The windshield became the dance frame. The performance space was what could be seen from inside the car. Lafrance compared it to "watching a drive-in movie, but with live action."⁸² In *Noir*, as in *Descent*, there was a blurring of the separation between dancer and viewer as performers made eye contact with audience members.⁸³

In general, when creating site-specific work, the choreographer deals with many elements that are out of his or her control. *Noir*, in particular, because of its location and the time of day of its performances, demanded a readjustment of the lighting each day to balance the effects of the

⁸¹ Quoted in Jack Anderson, "The Parking Attendant Always Rings Twice," *The New York Times*, 2 May 2004, AR15.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Jonathan Birchall, "Noir Noémie Lafrance," *Financial Times*, 11 May 2004, 10.

natural sunlight or lack thereof.⁸⁴ Despite the myriad of possible problems, Lafrance succeeded in dealing with all the mishaps that did occur and had a successful show.

Jill Sigman

With a B.A. and Ph.D. from Princeton University, Jill Sigman is considered an intellectual, thought-provoking choreographer. In 1998, she founded jill sigman/thinkdance, an experimental dance company located in New York City. Its works incorporate dance, theater, and visual installations by using “non-traditional environments, formats, and ways of engaging the viewer.”⁸⁵ Initially trained in classical ballet, Sigman has been influenced by Ze’eva Cohen, and Jim May, as well as the Humphrey-Limón technique. Many artists, including Elizabeth Streb, Deborah Hay, Pina Bausch, Ann Carlson, and Cindy Sherman, have inspired her.⁸⁶

Sigman has been described as a riveting performer who exhibits “the rebelliousness of the ‘60s avant-garde, the piscine fluidity of a Tharp dancer, and the charisma and athleticism of today’s virtuosos.”⁸⁷ She has been depicted on numerous occasions as an imaginative and fearless artist. She has “performed in a dilapidated socialist printing house, a former munitions storage unit, a fence over a toxic canal, a 19th-century gymnasium,” and other unusual spaces.⁸⁸ The purpose of her work is to “raise questions about the world and the actions and identities we choose to have in it,”⁸⁹ while her “company’s mission is to raise questions through the medium of the body.”⁹⁰

Her pieces combine physical dance training with theoretical inquiries. She has written about the relationship between her academic studies and her compositional explorations:

⁸⁴ Fiona Kirk, “No Parking,” *Stage Directions*, November 2004, 52-55.

⁸⁵ “Jill Sigman,” *Major Choices*, Princeton University, 2007, 143.

⁸⁶ Jill Sigman, personal interview with author, New York City, 1 November 2007.

⁸⁷ Eva Yaa Asantewaa, “Free To Be?,” *The Village Voice*, 9 April 2002, 61.

⁸⁸ “Jill Sigman,” 143.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Philosophy of art allowed me to investigate artistic interpretation, to turn a philosophical eye on the dance I had studied seriously since the age of seven and the visual arts I loved. ... I wrote a doctoral dissertation on artistic interpretation and created solo dances that grappled with issues like social responsibility, militarism, gender identity, and mind/body dualism.⁹¹

Sigman wrote, “I want audience members to be intellectual partners in my explorations – to think and feel and question in response to seeing multi-layered performance that is both challenging and exciting.”⁹² In her dances, “audience members have been invited to write on eggshells, hear messages on cell phones, travel from place to place, and vote on questions of gender equality.”⁹³ These tools have helped her to engage her audience. Whether she is doing site-specific, non-proscenium, or theater pieces she demands that her work engross her viewers. She utilizes various tools, including technology and written directions that help her achieve that goal. She has created “solo dances that encourage their audience to question and interpret”⁹⁴ what is placed before them. The dances “take on questions about embodiment, gender, and social issues, and their idiosyncratic style and content has been indirectly shaped by her study of the philosophy of art.”⁹⁵

Sigman distinguishes between site-specific and non-proscenium works. A site-specific work, according to her, should be created and performed in the environment for which it was produced. It was fashioned for a particular setting and presenting the dance somewhere else changes its essence. Sigman admitted to having once choreographed a dance on a particular tree,

⁹¹ Ibid, 142.

⁹² Ibid, 143.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “Jill Sigman in Bodies of Knowledge, an Evening of Solo Dances,” *Program Notes*. Program in Theater and Dance, Princeton University, 11 November 2000.

and when she performed it on a different tree, the piece was not the same. The tree had become her partner, and by changing it, details and nuances were lost. Sigman notes, however, that this unique aspect of site-specific work is problematic. Creating work that can only exist in one setting is limiting, stifling, and uneconomical because those pieces cannot be replicated in another space, ultimately thwarting their cost-effectiveness. In the non-lucrative field of professional dance it is extremely restricting to choreograph non-transferable pieces. However, young unknown artists who are very eager to work, are sometimes given their only opportunity to perform in unusual non-proscenium venues; therefore, dances need to be created that can succeed in those spaces.⁹⁶

Sigman was originally led to site-specific work because she did not wish to create a commodity that could be bought and consumed passively by audiences. She was looking to create an artistic relationship with her viewers, one in which they were engaged in the work emotionally as well as thinking about it critically. Site-specific work was one way in which she could accomplish that task. By repositioning an audience in a different performance space the viewers would be forced, from the outset, to question the work and look at it critically. Sigman is currently struggling to create traveling site-specific work; dance pieces that can be successfully performed on site as well as in other performance venues without losing their authenticity.⁹⁷

The avant-garde dancers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially, Trisha Brown and Twyla Tharp, freed contemporary dance from the confines of the proscenium stage. They still, however, left a finite spatial separation between the performers and the viewers. Brown expressed how in her dances “[y]ou see me doing works where I am constantly attracted to walls,

⁹⁶ Sigman interview.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

edges and corners[, however] I'm always defining my stage."⁹⁸ Brown still felt the need to mark the boundaries of her performance space. Despite Tharp's intentions to erase the line between reality and art, she still created non-proscenium pieces in which the dance was self-contained. The dancers moved throughout the environment but remained separate from their audience. By taking dance out of proscenium theaters Brown and Tharp forged a new type of dance, one that was becoming democratized and more accessible to the public. Any space could become a performance space; anyone could be a dancer, and any type of movement could be used in a dance.

Noémie Lafrance and Jill Sigman created site-specific works, dances that were created for a particular environment. Their choreography highlighted details and aspects of the performance spaces, thus enabling their audiences to leave the concert with a new and enlightened understanding of the site. Lafrance enjoys blurring the line between performers and viewers. In her pieces it is unclear who is viewing whom. Sigman, in her pieces, has successfully forged a different type of relationship with her audience. She invites them to take an active role in the dance; either in a theoretical questioning of the work or by actually creating their own experiences by participating in the activities that she has provided for them in some of her pieces.

All four artists investigated non-proscenium work at the beginning of their choreographic careers. As young unknown artists they were interested in investigating new forms of dance, movement, and spaces. In addition, these particular venues were readily accessible to them. Perhaps, if they would have had greater access to mainstream performance spaces they would not have left the proscenium stage. Regardless of the motivations behind their dances, Brown and Tharp choreographed non-proscenium works that incorporated pedestrian movements and

⁹⁸ Kisselgoff, "Wall-Dancer Adds a New Dimension," 26.

actions as well as non-dancers, thus creating a more universal form of dance. The public non-proscenium spaces that they chose to use informed their movement by demanding certain kinds of steps and performers. Lafrance's and Sigman's pieces are site-specific. Their dances highlight certain details and sometimes the history of their particular environments.

These four choreographers created works in which their audiences' perceptions of dance or of a specific space were redefined or expanded. In comparison, the Berlin/NY Dialogues was an event, sponsored by the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies in collaboration with the American Institute of Architects, which brainstormed the recent LIMS Mosaic entitled *Changing Landscapes* (2007). This initiative involving choreographers, architects, and urban planners investigated how New York City's landscape could be a performance venue and how dance could redefine "the immediate conditions, the specific processes and the surrounding issues that define urban planning and architecture."⁹⁹ The resulting work would not only use movement as a tool to comment on a social space, but would also invoke change on the metropolitan landscape. Although, in actuality, this project did not succeed in fulfilling its initial goals, its conception was unique in its attempt to inform a performing space, change the perception of that area, and ultimately modify it architecturally. The concept behind the LIMS Mosaic exhibits a future potential for dance, one in which movement is not only affected by its environment and subsequently defined by that space but where also movement changes and transforms its surroundings.

⁹⁹ *The Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies-LIMS Online*, <<http://limsonline.org/arts002.html>> (4 November 2007).

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