

## Preface

---

This manuscript presents a revised version of my dissertation, defended in February 2020 at the University of Bern within the field of dance studies (*Tanzwissenschaft*). The choice to develop a dissertation about *one* choreographic piece within the small scholarly field of dance studies—even when focusing upon a well-known choreographer—makes this, like many dissertations, a niche publication. I am thus especially grateful for the financial support of the Swiss National Science Foundation, which enabled me to invest years of study in this research and, by funding open access publication, to bring this text to a sizable public. In the year following my thesis defense, I revised my dissertation into a shorter and gentler book, thinking of the broader audience potentially interested in a dancer's writing about Forsythe's oeuvre. The theoretical arguments and footnotes ideally make this both a lively and a critical ethnography, giving insight into dancers' labor and choreographic theory.

The piece *Duo*, made by William Forsythe in 1996 for the Ballett Frankfurt, is the subject of this manuscript. This short duet of 10–20 minutes is performed by either two women or two men. It features spellbinding passages of unison movement and captivating sections of rhythmical counterpoint, danced side-by-side. It is a “project” according to Forsythe, because of its longstanding development over two decades—transforming with new performers, stage elements and movement styles.<sup>1</sup> Reconstructing this project's history and finding out how and why the piece changed required years of careful scrutiny and interviews with the participants.

*Processing Choreography* is written from my unique position as a dancing-scholar and through my embodied knowledge as a former Forsythe dancer. In contrast to the kind of dance scholarship that analyzes the aesthetic style and form of the dance on stage and in performance or interprets ‘a’ choreography's unique meaning and affect (*Wirkung*) on the audience, my approach to examining the *Duo* project makes a number of noteworthy turns: I examine the project of *Duo* longitudinally; I foreground the perspectives and testimonies of the dancers; and I establish novel ways of analyzing digital traces, archival documents and memories of dancing in concert. Rather than narrating the history of this piece chronologically, my writing topically addresses different layers of the

---

1 William Forsythe, phone interview with the author, January 30, 2019.

dancers' cooperation: considering the occupational culture of Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company, deciphering the dancers' movement practices and investigating the creativity that surged in making and adapting choreographic pieces.

While all description is an act of interpretation, in my writing this takes on particular significance. Having sweat and slithered for nearly a decade in Ballett Frankfurt/The Forsythe Company, I write through a unique position and set of competences that influence how I access, understand and perceive my study 'object.' My status as a former dancer enabled me to receive copies of precious archival videos and spend long hours in discussion with the dancers. It made it possible for me to enter the dance studio and meet directly with the artists after performances. My research required negotiating my obligations as both a dancer and a scholar. Like Forsythe and the *Duo* dancers, I *love* dancing. The intellectual effort required for this book—necessitating distance from my emotional connection to the dancers and many uncomfortable hours sitting at the computer—was difficult for me to sustain. Yet it was a path that I chose because it enabled me to cultivate my voice and share with others the profound embodied knowledge that dancers develop. As the Covid-19 pandemic showed us, physical interaction and bodily presence are seminal to humanity, and it is distressing when they are disrupted. Throughout this manuscript, my reflection is always doubled: I reflect both upon the existing documents and traces enabling reconstruction of the case study of *Duo* and upon my ongoing relationships with these people, places and traces. The multiple narratives of the dancers and myself—all of us *thinking with, through* and *about Duo*—are interwoven by my choices as the author.

As a former Forsythe dancer who gradually ended my work with the ensemble between 2012 and 2015, I chose to write this text because I wished to continue the artistic work of *processing choreography* using the tools and methods of scholarly study. Academic research and writing were not unfamiliar to me. I had pursued my undergraduate and master's degrees before dancing professionally. While dancing in The Forsythe Company, I participated in dance studies conference networks as much as my busy schedule as a performer allowed. With my investment into my dissertation, I sought to contribute something still insufficiently grasped in the scholarly writing about Forsythe's oeuvre: to sensually transfer knowledge about the dancers' experience of dancing and to elucidate the multiple voices and narratives within a historiography of Forsythe's oeuvre. By learning from a dance studies perspective how to write about dance practice and by integrating approaches from the social sciences, I was motivated to document what we had practiced—the dancers' knowledge—in a carnal way that could move the reader.

This manuscript is part of the growing documentation and theoretical analysis of Forsythe's work, in dance studies and more recently in the context of visual art. My book contributes my insight, based on my perspective as a late-generation dancer from The Forsythe Company and through my attention to other dancers' testimonies. More generally for the field of dance studies, this exploration serves as an example of how production analysis can be undertaken to learn more about aesthetic practices and artifacts. My writing also demonstrates how ethnography can be employed to collectively remember and thereby to reconstruct the past, and to develop arguments relevant to dance historiography and dance practice. And hopefully it moves my readers, and moves a few more dancers to write about their experiences.

I would like to thank many people and institutions for making this book possible.

Foremost, I thank the *Duo* dancers for their investment and cooperation on this project. I could never have rich enough words to honor the brilliance of: Riley Watts, Brigel Gjoka, Allison Brown, Roberta Mosca, Regina van Berkel, Jill Johnson, Cora Bos-Kroese, Francesca Harper, Parvaneh Scharafali, Bahiyah Sayyed Gaines and Natalie Thomas. I am also extremely grateful to William Forsythe and ensemble members Cyril Baldy, Dana Caspersen, Brock Labrenz, David Morrow, Thom Willems, Nicholas Champion, Irene Klein and Tony Rizzi for their investment and care during my interviews and questions. For help with countless questions relating to Forsythe's documents and history, I thank Alexandra Scott profusely. I also want to thank Bruni Marx for her correspondence and discussion of the history of Ballett Frankfurt.

My advisors, Christina Thurner and Priska Gisler, have provided prolonged support and modeled how thinking with *Duo* could become inscribed. Our exchange—trying to articulate ideas about dance in different academic languages—enriched this project and enabled dance practice to find a way onto the page. My editor Jules Bradbury partnered the transformation of this dissertation into a book. Through her subtle yet substantial intervention, she gave my voice new clarity and pressured my open-ended writing process to take a final form. I am also grateful to Graeme Currie for proofreading and Claudio Richard for double-checking. Mirjam Galley, my editor at transcript, supported me patiently throughout this process, and made important suggestions about how we could best layout my content on the page.

As in *Duo* itself, the authorship of this book is shared with a network of significant partners. I would in particular like to thank James Leach, Tilman O'Donnell, Claire Vionnet, Dana Caspersen and Lennart Dohms. All of you invested substantial time reading drafts of different chapters and discussing my ideas as works in progress. I am also grateful to Anne Schuh and Katarina Kleinschmidt, with whom my discussions of this practice-informed approach benefitted considerably.

The best possible way to start writing a dissertation is within a sea of communicative and supportive friends who inspire you to think differently. I had two such groups. First, the core team of artists and scholars of *Motion Together*: Timo Herbst, Mark Coniglio, Sophia New, Dan Belasco Rogers and Susanne Schmitt. In particular, Susanne Schmitt coached me on ethnographic methods, offering me personal mentorship that was vital to my scholarly vision and approach. Timo Herbst enabled my refined ability to look at *Duo* videos frame-by-frame and to see the codes that guided its invention and rehearsal. I am also grateful for the exchange during this project with Gabriele Brandstetter and her generous support to embed the project *Motion Together* within the infrastructure of the Free University of Berlin. The group HOOD, an experiment with eight ex-Forsythe dancers, was a second platform sustaining this research. We were generously supported as ensemble in residence at PACT Zollverein in Essen, Germany, between 2015 and 2018. As HOOD we were: Cyril Baldy, Katja Cheraneva, Frances Chiaverini, Josh Johnson, Fabrice Mazliah, Roberta Mosca, Tilman O'Donnell and myself. The interviews I initiated in this frame developed my understanding of the occupational culture of Forsythe's ensembles. While these artists are not cited often in this manuscript, many of the ideas were tested in conversations with them, for which I am thankful.

My research is marked by the extensive and creative effort of programming artists Florian Jenett, Monika Hagar and Mark Coniglio, whose vision went into the graphics of section 9.2. Without their persistence, I would never have been able to imagine *Duo* in such minute detail. I also thank Karin Minger for her collaboration on the graphic in Appendix C, which visualizes the pairs' history.

My approach to working with interviews, similar to methods used in oral history and ethnography, required accurate and extensive transcription. This is time consuming and difficult work. I am grateful to all those who produced these transcripts: Katja Cheraneva, Tilman O'Donnell, Selina Hauswirth, Anne-Marthe Kühne, Nadja Rothenburger and Regula Schelling.

Before becoming my doctoral research, this project was supported by two frames: Monica Gillette integrated a preliminary investigation of the topics addressed here within the project *Störung-Hafra'ah* in 2015 and has been an important conversation partner. Bettina Bläsing, with whom I began my *Duo* research in 2013, has buttressed this project since its inception; I value our collaboration more and more with each passing year.

The administrative personnel who have assisted this project are its golden angels: Rosemarie Backwinkel, Jacqueline Devinenti, Pia Zühlke, Ursula Fürst and Sabine Hausbrandt. Thank you especially for helping me across language barriers.

And without the support of my parents, my friend Angela Koerfer-Bürger, and movers Chris Lechner, Eliane Eicher and Susane Canonica, I would never have been able to sit well and happily to write these pages.

This book is dedicated to the *Duo* dancers.

In the small space just in front of the curtain, just at the edge of the stage, *Duo* is a clock composed of two women. The women register time in a spiraling way, making it visible, they think about how it fits into space, they pull time into an intricate, naked pattern in front of the curtain, close to the eyes of the audience. The pattern grows and unfolds as they tumble, shear, strike, reverse. Their bodies brilliant in a shimmer of black, the women fly with reckless accuracy, their breath sings of the spaces in time. Distant music appears and vanishes as the women follow each other through the whirling, etched quiet. A clock which regards the limitless by returning to where it began.

—*Dana Caspersen*<sup>1</sup>

---

1 Program note from the Ballett Frankfurt tour to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, June 17–19, 2004.

