Chapter 1: Ensemble: William Forsythe & Team

> I wanted to get it [*DUO2015*] out there because it is an unusual use of ballet. All the movements are based on the classical vocabulary, although it offers an alternative structuring of academic material. It creates a place where ballet can thrive, without set, costumes, orchestra. It relies on the proportioned organization of ballet. It is a work to be listened to as well as watched. You can hear it ticking.
> —*William Forsythe*[1]

William Forsythe (b. 1949) is arguably one of the most significant and controversial choreographers of the 21st century—someone who has taken the tradition of ballet in unexpected directions, bringing it into contact with other mediums and exploring its limits and ability for aesthetic renewal. Forsythe's pieces have become a coveted part of the artistic canon, performed by ballet and contemporary dance companies internationally. This circulating and visible repertoire is, however, only a fraction of his entire corpus of work—missing many pieces made with his ensembles Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company between 1984 and 2015.

During this period Forsythe's works operated at the margins of ballet, where they reinvented and subverted many aspects of the dance art form. Dance critic Roslyn Sulcas writes "the word 'ballet' doesn't instantly come to mind when looking at the work of William Forsythe." Rather, she observers, the dancers "move in undefinable ways, their bodies arcing and convulsing around invisible forms, their limbs swerving in contrary directions and their movements apparently refracted from one part of the body to another with no implicit reference to any predetermined dance vocabulary."[2] Already within Forsythe's first piece for the Ballett Frankfurt, *Gänge* (1983), dance scholar Gerald Siegmund observes the trajectory that Forsythe will follow for the subsequent decades:

1 Interview of William Forsythe with Sarah Crompton, published in the program text for *A Quiet Evening of Dance*. See Crompton, "A Different Focus."

2 Sulcas, "Using Forms Ingrained in Ballet to Help the Body Move Beyond It," p. 11.

"The examination of one's own profession, i.e. the classical ballet, its laws and production conditions, as well as the cooperation with the dancers, who with their own ideas, their own creativity, personality and movement intelligence in the pieces become partners of the choreographer."[3] Forsythe's choreographies have questioned each layer of the theatrical apparatus: from movement design, to musicality, narrative, scenic elements (setting, light, costumes), the dancers' role and the principles of organizing all of these in space and time.

Perhaps because of the way that these pieces prompt an immediate visceral response and evade intellectual synthesis, dance and theater scholars have written avidly about them. They have interpreted and theorized Forsythe's intellectually sophisticated assemblies of movement, signs and multimedia. Describing how these works overturn the conventions of ballet and theater performance, scholars have grappled with Forsythe's references to deconstruction, postmodernism and post-structuralism. Studying the American reception of Forsythe's choreographies, dance scholar Mark Franko has examined the varied reactions of critics and spectators to Forsythe's ballets: ranging from jubilation to hostility.[4] Forsythe's pieces have, overall, been loudly received—garnering both laudatory praise and livid denunciation.

In this chapter, I will introduce the genre of dance that William Forsythe has fostered by interpreting his biographical statements, summarizing the existing discourse on this work and considering *Duo* dancers' testimonials about their teamwork *with* Forsythe. As an ensemble, Forsythe and his team were able to create challenging works—nearly one hundred pieces—that have "enlarged our notions of what the art form [of ballet] can do both physically and theatrically."[5] Relevant questions raised by Forsythe's nearly four decades of choreography include: What defines the limits and operation of ballet as an aesthetic and occupational culture? How coherent was the tradition of ballet and how do these threads of tradition engage with contemporary renditions? Can the aesthetic of ballet in performance retain the rigor of traditional technique and yet be inhabited by different rules of discipline, social order and power structures? *Duo* offers us a case study to think these questions through—enabling us to critically explore the nexus (of artists, practices, materials, beliefs, discourses and institutions) that enables ballets to be remade and rethought.

1.1 William Forsythe

1.1.1 Forsythe's Biography

Forsythe's personal history as a ballet dancer gives insight into his temperament towards the balletic oeuvre, which is both loving and critical. In an interview in 1991, Forsythe explains:

3 Translation by the author. Siegmund, "William Forsythe: Räume eröffnen, in denen das Denken sich ereignen kann," p. 16.

4 See Franko, "Splintered Encounters."

5 Sulcas, "Using Forms Ingrained in Ballet to Help the Body Move Beyond It," p. 11.

> I love movement. I love dancing. I care enough about dancing enough to risk the other stuff I do. I see the apparent potential of ballet because, first of all, so many people know it. It's like a language. Ballet can't just stop evolving now. There must be a way to imagine new approaches. […] A lot of people from different disciplines, strangely enough, seem to understand what I am doing and that I am definitely concerned with ballet.[6]

Unusually Forsythe began practicing ballet late—beginning not as a child or teenager as is common for success in this physically demanding profession, but at the age of 18. Despite this, he remembers himself as a child who was "always dancing." Born in 1949 and raised in Long Island, New York Forsythe describes his disposition to dance as a child as follows:

> First dancing I remember is … pretending I was Fred Astaire, and pretending I had Ginger Rogers. And doing a ballroom dance for my parents. […] They said, "do it again." And I did it again, and the sunlight was streaming in and it was late afternoon on a summer day. It was a relatively modern house, it was a split level. That's what I remember. Then I remember splitting my head on the coffee table because I was dancing so wildly, also at the age of something before ten. And (*emphasizing each word)* always dancing. Just literally I was … I just was always dancing, that's all. Then putting on music and dancing. Just … just dancing. And then we moved when I was eleven. And the only way I felt confident in the new high school was to win all the dance contests. So, that was "The Twist" and the "Mashed Potato."[7]

Forsythe's teenage memories of dancing give insight into what he finds meaningful in dance, upon a personal level. These are what I would call *relational* qualities, qualities which bring him in relation to other entities—through his imagination, amidst a constellation of relatives and their attention on him, recalling an imaginary partner, perceiving the movement of light, remembering the architecture of the space, and feeling the groove of dancing to the music. These remembered attributes suggest that dancing for Forsythe is not fundamentally an expression of one body, but composed of relational qualities of moving in concert with others in an environment. The discipline, control and form that would come later through his dance studies are initially not part of Forsythe's dancing experience.

As a young man in the late 1950s and 60s, Forsythe danced socially, influenced by mainstream rock 'n' roll and television programs, such as *American Bandstand*. Rock 'n' roll was a very different sort of dancing to classical ballet—involving improvisation, electric music and learning-by-doing. Dancers, moving as individuals and freed from specific male-female vocabulary, danced in a manner that appeared unrestrained and uninhibited, with movements that engaged the pelvis and released energy freely in many directions. It was an expression of American culture and also an active force, shaping Americans' understanding of their identity. Considering this, dance scholar

6 Driver and the Editors of *Ballet Review* (hereafter, Driver et al.), "A Conversation with William Forsythe," p. 86.

7 Mike Figgis, *Just Dancing Around*, 3:00–4:00.

Cynthia Novack writes, "Along with the rock music of the period, dancing both reinforced and crystalized an image of the self: independent yet communal, free, sensual, daring."[8]

The impact of rock 'n' roll culture upon Forsythe was as significant as his first dance experience. First, it was a form imbued with African American attributes: polyrhythms, coolness and a rejection of the doctrine of vertical alignment. Forsythe recounts fluidly crossing boundaries to dance with black students ("I was the only white kid allowed to dance with the black kids"), sharing the pleasure of learning to groove.[9] As a young man, he also took on his first choreographic projects, developing his high school musicals. Forsythe's body politic was thus shaped by the American cultural heritage of the late 1950s and 60s. This influenced his musicality, giving him experience with improvisation, and supported his investigation of movement in a collective egalitarian plane in which individual kinesthetic experience was still important. I highlight these aspects of his biography to shed a different light upon what Forsythe has said often in public statements, namely that ballet is his "mother tongue" or that he "feels like a native ballet speaker."[10] While Forsythe surely is fluent in ballet, it is important to remember that he gained this fluency after primary (national, familial, class) and secondary (pedagogical) formation.[11] This background is also a resource that he draws on and returns to. Late acculturation, as well as his first dance experiences in American social dance and musicals are factors that may have enabled him to be more resistant and critical towards ballet ideology or, one could say, to have resources of an outsider that better qualified him to invent and lead a social movement transforming the ballet genre.

Forsythe began the discipline of technical dance training when he entered Jacksonville University in 1967, learning American styles of ballet and modern dance technique, and choosing a major in theater (practice) and a minor in art history.[12] After two years, he left Jacksonville University to further study ballet at the Joffrey Ballet School in New York City. At night he watched the neoclassical ballets of George Balanchine (1904–1984) performed by the New York City Ballet, which Forsythe states were a seminal influence upon his view of choreography.[13] Balanchine's work explored abstraction, musicality and rhythm, appropriating aspects of African American music and dance present in New York City at that time.[14] Forsythe was thus part of a predominantly Caucasian and privileged community learning ballet discipline and performing classical ballets in New York, but he also grooved and jived in ways reflective of the multicultural, urban culture of New York City. He was a latecomer to ballet, a movement

8 Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, p. 38. On rock 'n' roll see ibid., pp. 33–38.

9 Forsythe interviewed by Driver et al., "A Conversation with William Forsythe," p. 94.

10 Tusa, "Interview with William Forsythe"; Crompton,"A Different Focus."

11 On primary and secondary habitus see Wacquant, "*Homines in Extremis*," p. 7.

12 Email correspondence with William Forsythe, March 26, 2019.

13 Driver, "The Life, So Far," p. 10.

14 Dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild makes the provocative argument, "And any white choreographer you name, from Bob Fosse to Bill Forsythe, is somehow using black aesthetic riches as their own." See Gottschild, "The Black Dancing Body as a Measure of Culture," p. 51. On "appropriation" see also Gottschild, "Stripping the Emperor."

polyglot, highly sociable and (as many of my interviewees reminded me) precociously clever.

In 1971 Forsythe was promoted to be a company member at the Joffrey Ballet and in 1973 he joined the Stuttgart Ballet, chosen by John Cranko shortly before his untimely death.[15] Within the highly international ensemble of dancers that Cranko had established, Forsythe's career as a ballet maker took flight. In 1976, his first choreographic work, *Urlicht*, was a duet for himself and his first wife, Eileen Brady, to the 4th movement of Mahler's 2nd Symphony. He was subsequently given the position of resident choreographer of the Stuttgart Ballet, which enabled him to both perform and make work for the company. One informant remembered 'Billy' as always traveling with a stack of books, an indication of how keenly he read—reading diverse material such as dance analyst Rudolf von Laban, semiotician Roland Barthes, and writer/filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet, among others.[16] Forsythe eventually left this post to focus upon making choreography.

In the early 1980s, Forsythe worked internationally, choreographing pieces for the Stuttgart Ballet, Bavarian State Opera Ballet, Nederlands Dans Theater, Joffrey Ballet, Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris and the Frankfurt Ballet. These works, with titles such as *Say Bye Bye* and *'Tis A Pity She's A Whore*, earned him a strong reputation as an avant-garde choreographer. In a laudatory review for the *New York Times* in 1982, American dance critic Anne Kisselgoff praises Forsythe—America's new "talent" for choreography. She also describes the challenge of viewing his recent work:

> *Say bye-bye* [sic] is a kind of ballet not yet created in the United States. It is relevant to note that Mr. Forsythe, who began choreographing in 1977 [sic], has been working in Germany and the Netherlands. After seeing *Say bye-bye*, [sic] the director of a major American ballet troupe said he would like Mr. Forsythe to do a work for his company "but not so violent."[17]

Ballet was, and is, a transnational phenomenon, and it has, as a consequence, a history of different styles and aesthetics, as remarked upon in Kisselgoff's review.[18] Forsythe was a New Yorker immersed in a European context in which there was considerable internationalism. His ballets made use of this motley character and influences.

Having worked with the municipal ballet company in Frankfurt in 1983, Forsythe became Artistic Director of the Ballett Frankfurt in 1984, and additionally General Director (*Intendant*) in 1989, molding and directing this company under quite stable and lucrative conditions for two decades. Under Forsythe's direction, the Ballett Frankfurt became a company of high international status, performing 'ballets' which were contemporary, critical and provocative. In these two decades, Forsythe's works crossed genres, making ballets, a musical, multimedia performance-installations, films and cultivating knowledge-production projects.

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15 Choreographer John Cranko was Artistic Director of the Stuttgart Ballet from 1961–1973.

16 Kisselgoff, "Dance View: Forsythe's 'Say Bye-Bye' [sic] Startles and Excites," p. 8.

17 Ibid.

18 See section 3.3 Transnational Careers.

After complex political negotiation with the city of Frankfurt in 2004, the city closed the Ballett Frankfurt, much to the dismay of many participants and an international community of support. The following year Forsythe opened The Forsythe Company, a smaller dance company working more broadly in the field of contemporary dance and performance, based between the cities of Frankfurt and Dresden. In the subsequent decade, Forsythe was to use the structure of his dance company to support the development of his "choreographic objects," which circulated in the form of solo exhibitions within frameworks and institutions of the visual arts—such as the Venice Biennale, the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, and the Gagosian Gallery in Paris.[19]

In 2015, at the age of 66, Forsythe resigned from his post as Artistic Director of The Forsythe Company, enabling him to work more flexibly across the fields of dance, dance education and art. He resumed work with various ballet companies that same year, staging existing repertoire and choreographing new pieces. This reflected a return to his "mother tongue" of ballet.[20] Forsythe continues to make works that offer the dancers new liberties. Forsythe explains: "it's got really to be done by people who have a discursive relationship with what they are dancing, rather than just 'performing' it. I say to the dancers, you must make a discourse when you dance. You have to make a re-affirmation of ballet and yet at the same time bring into question how ballet is danced."[21]

1.1.2 Choreography, Dance and Counterpoint

> I do always keep in mind this idea of counterpoint, which I seem to see everywhere. I see it accidentally in Merce Cunningham. I see it very consciously in Trisha Brown. You see it in all forms of classical dancing, its apotheosis being with [George] Balanchine and great stuff with [Marius] Petipa. Of course, in music it's still used. Hip-hop uses counterpoint, big time. So, I think that there is something—a principle embedded in music that … we're looking for patterns. We like to identify patterns, even subconscious patterns like harmony. We don't even need to think about [it]. Our body recognizes it. And in this case [*Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing, reproduced*], part of the joy of viewing is staying curious about where this structure is going. What is it? Is it talking about itself? Does it talk of itself? Is it talking about other things?[22]

The longitudinal study of *Duo* undertaken here considers the practices of choreography and dancing across the activities of making, rehearsing, performing, touring and reconstructing a choreography. The distinction between dancing and choreography follow from Forsythe. He writes: "Choreography and dancing are two distinct and very different practices. In the case that choreography and dance coincide, choreography often

19 See Forsythe, "Choreographic Objects"; see Gaensheimer and Kramer, *William Forsythe: The Fact of the Matter*.

20 See Tusa, "Interview with William Forsythe."

21 William Forsythe, interview with Ismene Brown in Frankfurt, October 2000. See Brown, "Artifact, Royal Ballet of Flanders, Sadler's Wells."

22 Unpublished interview with William Forsythe conducted by Thierry de Mey in Frankfurt, April 13, 2006, transcribed by me in 2006 for the project *Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing, reproduced*.

serves as a channel for the desire to dance."[23] In other words, in the best case, dance flows in the constraints enabled by choreography. Dancing, which Forsythe described in his memories of childhood as improvised and at times wild, is different for him than processes of organization, through which he produces a choreographic work as an adult. What I believe Forsythe emphasizes with this distinction between dance and choreography, and what I shall continue to reflect upon in this manuscript, are different means of relationality: how dancing (combining imagination, personal connection, relation, light and improvisation) is more emergently organized than Forsythe's planned and constructed works of art (which are also, as I shall stress, *relational constructions*). It is the purpose of this publication to further explore these distinctions, as consequent for the experience of the dancers in enacting *Duo*.

An important aspect of Forsythe's choreographic practice is *counterpoint*—a term Forsythe has appropriated from music, where its historic origins lie in the emergence of polyphony as the overlay of voices.[24] Through collaboration with scholars at The Ohio State University on the case study of counterpoint in his stage work *One Flat Thing, reproduced*, Forsythe defined counterpoint in organizational terms as "a field of action in which the intermittent and irregular coincidence of attributes between organizational elements produces an ordered interplay."[25] In an interview with director Mike Figgis around 1994, Forsythe explained more candidly what he means, by choreography and counterpoint:

> It's not about steps anyway. Choreography is about organization. Either you're organizing the body or your organizing bodies with other bodies. Or a body with other bodies in an environment that is organized. And there are these framings of organization. For me, this seems to be the challenge of choreography at the end of the 20th century, when I look at those colleagues who I really admire.[26]

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23 Forsythe, "Choreographic Objects," p. 90. The distinction between dance, choreography and performance has been a critical theme in contemporary European dance since the 1990s. By the time that Forsythe writes this statement in 2008, the field of European contemporary dance is richly questioning the extent to which choreography can take place without problematizing or critically reforming dance—leading to extensive scholarship that examines these concerns. Rudi Laermans discusses this with regard of the legacy of postmodern dance and the rise of "reflexive dance"; see Laermans, *Moving Together*, in particular pp. 203–12. Pirkko Husemann's writing investigates the critical choreography of Xavier Le Roy and Thomas Lehmen during this period, drawing from the theoretical perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory; see Husemann, *Choreographie als kritische Praxis*. For a discussion of how this transformation has changed working practice and production conditions, see Sabisch, "For a Topology of Practices."

24 *Counterpoint* is a term dating from the 14th century meaning the "combination of simultaneously sounding musical lines according to a system of rules." See Sachs and Dalhaus, "Counterpoint." The term is often used as a synonym for polyphony. Distinctions may be made about whether the voices make an equal contribution or are organized hierarchically, as well as the extent to which the voices form a whole through their relations, or achieve complexity through layering/chance. See Frobenius et al., "Polyphony."

25 Forsythe and Shaw, "Introduction: The Dance."

26 Figgis, *Just Dancing Around*, 4:20–5:00.

While Forsythe's art of making counterpoint is specific to his aesthetic, the above understanding of choreography as a practice of organizing bodies in space and time remains pervasive in the field of contemporary dance.[27] As noted by performance maker and scholar Bojana Cvejić, by 1998 Forsythe shifts this definition to "organizing things in space and time," anticipating an expanded thinking of choreography involving nonhumans, and movements beyond those initially envisioned as dance.[28]

Dance scholar Vass-Rhee concurs: "Forsythe's works apply improvisation as a generative and augmentative strategy, problematizing both ideas of *choreography* as preestablished sequences of steps and of *choreographer* as the individual who establishes these orders."[29] Rather Forsythe's practice of choreography, as I shall show, may produce arrangement upon many scales and across registers: within the body, between bodies, and within an environment which itself may be organized (containing light, sound, props, texts, costumes and stage elements). To achieve the complexity that interests him, Forsythe explains his approach of having to work from the inside:

> It has to do with the fact that you cannot organize these things from outside. Because you can only perceive these events, because they are very complicated, from the inside. You have to be inside the event to notice enough to make a counterpoint like that work, at least the way we work here.[30]

With regard to Forsythe's claim that his events are organized through being inside, this study aims to explore this insider view—to understand how dancing together and becoming organized take place—how dancing and choreography interlace and bifurcate. Choreographic organization and social organization are entwined within Forsythe's understandings of dance and choreography. Through thinking with *Duo*, I seek to investigate this concretely: examining the dancers' practices of *Duo* and drawing theoretical insight from dance and practice theories. I ask: What explains the forces of dancing and choreography as processes that enable organization to emerge and also change? How do they unfold within Forsythe's work and working processes? What understanding of the social can be used to explain this?

1.1.3 The Current State of Research on Forsythe's Work

Ample scholarly writing has focused upon analysis of Forsythe's choreographic works and working processes, using Forsythe's plentiful interviews as key sources for interpreting these aesthetic objects.[31] This writing has informed our understanding of how

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27 Bojana Cvejić references the survey by the online dance journal *Corpus Web* in 2011, which reached out to affiliates of the field of contemporary dance: "Many respondents agreed upon a generic determination of choreography as the organization of movement in time and space, each placing accents on a different term or relation within the statement." See Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems*, pp. 7–8.

28 Ibid., p. 8.

29 Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*, p. 22.

30 Figgis, *Just Dancing Around*, 5:00–5:30.

31 For overviews of the scholarly writing on Forsythe's work, see Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*, pp. 34–60 (2011) and Hartewig, *Kinästhetische Konfrontation*, pp. 13–20 (2007). At the time of writing

Forsythe's pieces break the norms and conventions of ballet performance. It has considered how Forsythe has critically reoriented ballet from its lingering imperial ties and ideology—also how Forsythe's ensembles have cultivated egalitarian and democratic social relations based on values of diversity and difference.[32] In particular, scholars and critics have noted how the ensembles' performances and working process have engaged ballet-trained artists to move beyond the hierarchy of ballet alignment,[33] movement figuration,[34] and the gender norms of classical ballet partnering.[35] They have also observed how Forsythe's pieces exceed the orderly inscription of steps by exploring the potential of improvisation. Scholarship has looked at key examples in order to note how the choreographies prescribe tasks and arrangements that require considerable decision-making by the performers, leaving gaps in the artistic works that make them flexible and authentic to the performers' choices each evening.[36] Lastly, it is well established that the processes involved in making Forsythe's works are richly collaborative and cooperative, changing the manner in which ballet-trained dancers contribute to choreography.[37]

This insightful and theoretically sophisticated scholarship, however, still lacks attention to key aspects that would warrant further understanding of Forsythe's oeuvre. Above all, the scholarship is written with a greater focus on the Ballett Frankfurt period (1984–2004) and without comparative review of the different eras of Forsythe's work, especially the late Forsythe Company period and thereafter, which I examine in

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there are three volumes of essays focusing exclusively on Forsythe's work: Driver, *William Forsythe* (2000); Siegmund, *William Forsythe: Denken in Bewegung* (2004); and Spier, *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography* (2011); additionally, Siegmund focuses extensively on Ballett Frankfurt productions in his *Abwesenheit* (2006). Three dissertations in the last decade also focus on Forsythe's oeuvre: Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress* (2011), Tomic-Vajagic, *The Dancer's Contribution* (2012); Maar, *Entwürfe und Gefüge* (2019). Ample articles have also been published, in particular by longstanding Forsythe scholars Roslyn Sulcas and Gerald Siegmund. Recent publications have focused on Forsythe's choreographic objects; see, in particular, Gaensheimer and Kramer, *William Forsythe: The Fact of Matter* (2016) and Neri and Respini, *William Forsythe: Choreographic Objects* (2018). The myriad of interviews that Forsythe has offered to journalists is too vast to be cited here; my study is influenced by my readings of Forsythe's published conversations with Roslyn Sulcas, Senta Driver, Nik Haffner, Paul Kaiser, Louise Neri, John Tusa, Steven Spier and Zachary Whittenburg.

32 Forsythe is also critical of the limits of such egalitarian and democratic changes. He has stated: "I feel the project of a democratic dance is perhaps almost impossible to achieve within a theater. It seems that only by ambushing amateurs can you arrive at a truly democratic way of organizing dance." Spier, "Choreographic Thinking and Amateur Bodies," p. 143.

33 Kaiser, "Dance Geometry."

34 Brandstetter, "Defigurative Choreography."

35 On these norms, see Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, pp. 125–32. Reviewing the literature on gender construction in Forsythe's work, see Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*, p. 46.

36 Lampert, *Tanzimprovisation*; Brandstetter, "Defigurative Choreography," in particular p. 50.

37 On collaboration in the context of the Ballett Frankfurt, see Spier, "Engendering and Composing Movement." On collaboration in the context of The Forsythe Company, see Vass-Rhee, "Distributed Dramaturgies"; "Schooling an Ensemble." For a dancer's account of the Ballett Frankfurt period, see Caspersen, "It Starts From Any Point"; "The Company at Work, How They Train, Rehearse, and Invent"; "Methodologies." See also Rizzi, McManus, Haffner, Caspersen and Lang's writing published in Siegmund, *William Forsythe: Denken in Bewegung*. For dancers' accounts of The Forsythe Company period see Waterhouse, "Dancing Amidst"; see also Waterhouse et al., "Doing *Duo*."

this study. Also, while this literature has much enriched our understanding of Forsythe and the dancers' collaboration, it typically foregrounds Forsythe's testimony and the special collaboration of Forsythe with dancer Dana Caspersen (Forsythe's wife). More comprehensive study of the various positions and perspectives within the team is warranted.[38] Further methodological attention should also be paid regarding how to conduct and interpret interviews with the dancers. There is also the difficulty, when discussing Forsythe's work, of making the complex processual components understandable—especially to people who are not fluent in the ensemble's working terminology. Lastly, as Forsythe's archival materials are not yet organized in a public archive, there is the problem that new materials for study—which would fill gaps in the literature—are not yet available. As a former Forsythe dancer who was given access to these materials, I aim to bring forth a rich view of dancers' practice into a systemic and analytic discussion that will enable readers to gain a fuller perspective.

The radical nature of Forsythe's works is linked to processes and sociality. For the dancers, these pieces expand the potential of how motion can be contextualized, imagined, generated and performed; as a consequence, they also shift modes of how motion is thought[39] and perceived[40] for the audience. Indeed, as dance scholar Sabine Huschka has observed:

> Forsythe distrusts and resists the aesthetic articulation of dance as moving bodies situated in an antiquated and inherited movement vocabulary, as well as the articulation of choreography as a codified movement space for the body. […] The provocative moment of these works lies in the radical and medial broadening of the notion of "body," which now begins to encompass traces of the remembered, imagined, visual, and acoustic, in order to expand itself, in a sense, as an apparition of space-time. And the audience participates in the construction of that apparition.[41]

For Huschka, Forsythe's performances and performance installations "unfold" movement research into constructions of movement images, spaces of sensual experience, fragmented narratives and memories.[42] Vass-Rhee has rightly emphasized the importance of the acoustic layers of Forsythe's work: the fact that dancers speak, sing and vocalize as well as interact with sounding objects, sounding environments, and musicians.[43] Forsythe scholars have thus quite unanimously characterized Forsythe's artistic work as addressing the practices and conventions of ballet, through complex processes that transform and transgress these conventions.

The practice of ballet, in its forms of dance and choreography, is thus a central axis within Forsythe's creative work with dancers. It is also one Forsythe deems critical to the

38 Cf. Vass-Rhee, "Dancing Music"; "Distributed Dramaturgies"; Driver, *William Forsythe*.

39 Siegmund, *William Forsythe: Denken in Bewegung*.

40 See Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*; Huschka, "Verlöschen als ästhetischer Fluchtpunkt oder 'Du musst dich selbst wahrnehmend Machen'."

41 Huschka, "Media-Bodies," p. 71.

42 Ibid., p. 62.

43 See Vass-Rhee, *Audio-Visual Stress*; Vass-Rhee, "Dancing Music"; Compare to Brandstetter, "Defigurative Choreography"; Manning and Massumi, "Just Like That."

enactment of *Duo* and his wish to share this piece with a public. Similar to the questions I posed earlier, Forsythe himself asks:

> How does ballet get put together? When is it still ballet and when is it no longer ballet? If you are making something that is visibly balletic, how do you wish to participate in that history, and to what degree do you want to be complicit in its politics, its ideologies of gender and so on? Can you arrive at an essential, non-ideological state? Is that even an appropriate goal? […] I think the mechanics of the form are extraordinary and I see it more as a coordinative phenomenon. I am not interested in undoing the propriety, the decorum, the politeness, or the behavior of ballet; just in going to its functional state, which is how dancers experience it.[44]

Duo is an example of one of Forsythe's investigations of the potential to strip ballet away from its ideology, to give new allowance to the organization—to think it through, to revolutionize and change it. As indicated here, and which I believe is the central point, Forsythe places the dancers' experiences in the middle—what they experience, biomechanically in their bodies, while enacting ballet.[45] He recognizes their bodies as a locus where making meaning is critically at stake in processing culture and norms. One purpose of my research is to inspect how this is the case through a study collecting and analyzing the dancers' experiences doing *Duo*. What dilemmas do *Duo* dancers experience in their bodies, when their bodies exist as the locus of choreographic and dance practices? My project is to explore theoretical terms for better understanding of exactly what *doing* ballet, dance and choreography signify—something that is critically missing in the wider discourse.

1.2 Teamwork

"Bill is the nucleus." Interview with *Duo* dancer Riley Watts in Bern, January 11, 2017.

I ask Riley Watts to make himself comfortable and to find a place in the room for an interview, giving him the option to move the chairs or sit on the floor or cushions. Riley choses the corner of the seminar table. After some discussion we decide to use audio recording, rather than video, to feel that we are exchanging more intimately rather than poised to perform physically. The transcript below reflects a short excerpt from this discussion, when Riley shares his memories of working with "Bill" Forsythe.

44 Forsythe cited in Noltenius, *Detail: Forsythe*, p. 49.

45 Forsythe says: "I have always wanted to facilitate dancing that shows the body's own experience of itself, and this is an idea in opposition to my desire, as a choreographer, to organize movement. Trying to have each dancer articulate, choreographically, what he or she knows about dancing has made some coexistence possible between the two apparently irreconcilable elements." See Spier, "Engendering and Composing Movement," p. 141.

> LIZ: How would you describe the dancer-choreographer relationship as you experienced it in the Forsythe Company?
>
> RILEY: (*laughs*) It's such a complicated question. I always thought of it like Bill [Forsythe] is the nucleus and it was like a 3-D model. So, Bill is the center—center not in an absolute sense, but center in that everybody is strongly connected to him. So, we were like dots around him, you know? Not on a flat surface but really in a three-dimensional model. There would be certain times, depending on what we were working on, there might be one person that would be near to him—near to him somehow in spatial terms or they might be further away but have a very strong bond, like a very tense bond, even though they might be further away. Every dancer had their own relationship to him, that was unique to every single person in the room. And that was what sort of shaped the whole form of what it felt like to be in the company, that none of us had the same relationship to him. You and I don't have the same relationship that I have with this other person … So every single person had—It's *point-point line* [a term from *Improvisation Technologies*]. Honestly, like it's just a 3-D model of *point-point line* in social terms. And it's constantly moving too. So, it's not like this sort of flat, hierarchical ballet model where you just like assume, oh great, now I'm a *coryphée*, now I'm a soloist—so that's just where I am. It doesn't work like that because we are making. Depending on what you're doing, this piece or this piece, or where you have that one conversation with Bill and suddenly it's like, oh, like, then there's a whole idea that emerges. […] It feels like physics; it feels like magnetized personal physics.

When asked about the dancer-choreographer relationship, *Duo* dancer Riley Watts described a swarm of relations around the "nucleus" of Forsythe, changing with the practice of making choreographic works.[46] The intensity of bonds with Forsythe was reiterated in my interviews with other team members, who spoke about the ways that they felt professionally and even personally bound to Forsythe, all citing his specific artistic vision as the reason why they wanted to be employed at Ballett Frankfurt/The Forsythe Company. However, my interviews also probed the importance of the teamwork—which *Duo* dancers all coveted—recognizing the synergistic potential between dancers as a key force within the ensembles' choreographic culture.

Forsythe's ensembles operated through dynamic clusters of communication and process, distributing labor according to the different mediums of people's competence (dance, music, light, sound, video, costumes, marketing, theory, etc.). Rather than Forsythe managing hierarchy from the top, by delegating power—implemented through organizational managers—his control reached through the organizational clusters of his team, involving interaction at all levels. This enabled a malleability of changing arrangements, relying on self-organization within the choreographic processes. The mediums and materials of work congealed subgroups of activity—centering around the on-stage dancing, technical and stage design, costumes and make up, and offstage administrative action. These subgroups generally worked independently in the preparation or rehearsal phase then cooperated most intensely in the work leading up

46 Riley Watts, interview with the author, Bern, January 11, 2017.

to and during the act of performance. One division within the company that affected its operation and working climate was that between an international English-speaking body of dancers, and the technical and administrative team—who were predominantly German natives, and conducted their work in German. Forsythe, who was bilingual, could move between these groups fluidly.

The different mediums, education and preferred languages of the team members were reflected in the variable terminology used among sections—as exhibited in the different scores for *Duo* (from the stage manager, the composer, the pianist) in contrast to the dancers' notebooks. This meant that each subdivision of the team focused on their area of specialization and could be unaware of information that might be relevant to others. Furthermore, allowing for this splintered way of working, official meetings of the entire company were uncommon. Creation was neither efficient nor optimized. When making a new work, often materials or set design or costumes would arrive, as requested by Forsythe, without the dancers knowing of this. Similarly, the dancers could be added or cut from pieces without the costume designer being consulted. There was never an established model or defined timeline for how development of a piece should progress, nor were there meetings to centralize and control this process of emergence. Coining the term "distributed dramaturgies" to indicate the potential by which the performers could all becomes dramaturgs within this setting, Vass-Rhee looks at the proclivities of this decentralized structure, finding: "Forsythe's ensemble's practice exemplifies a reversal of the trajectory towards informational coherence that typifies problem-solving, and in doing so, highlights a key aspect of devising work in theatre."[47]

1.2.1 Supporting the Dancers

Every day there were many people working with the dancers, contributing to their bodily routines: there were one to two full-time rehearsal directors, who assisted or led rehearsals in Forsythe's absence; ballet masters working on a temporary basis training the dancers each morning;[48] physical therapists and trainers.[49] In addition to the composer Thom Willems, there were one to two musical *répétiteurs* who played for ballet class and assisted with the composed and recorded music in rehearsal and performance. Forsythe also had his support team: one, if not two personal assistants and, after 1992, a staff member dedicated to video archiving.[50] Forsythe also typically worked with a

47 Vass-Rhee, "Distributed Dramaturgies," p. 92.

48 In the Ballett Frankfurt this alternated between the rehearsal directors and guest teachers with short-term contracts. In The Forsythe Company these teachers were always guest artists with short-term contracts.

49 Ballett Frankfurt worked with a masseur in the 1990s and, later on, a physical therapist. The Forsythe Company had short-term contracts for healing assistants (physical therapy, osteopathy, massage, shiatsu, reiki). After 2008, Patrick Rump, a trainer with a degree in sports science, was taken on for Forsythe and the dancers. He went on to have an important role training and supporting *Duo* dancers for performances.

50 Nicholas Champion, a former dancer with the Ballett Frankfurt. See Section 10.1, footnote 4.

dramaturg, and these individuals have subsequently played an important role in developing the scholarly literature about his work.[51]

Though the technicians were a separate operational unit, their work 'touched' the dancers through light, sound, stage elements and video. The stage manager was responsible for communicating cues to the dancers during the show. Costumes designers made costumes that were then cared for—washed and ironed, and hung up for the dancers—by dressing room assistants. One to two artists assisted with the dancers' hair and make-up. Lastly, the ensembles had a managerial team for business, press, marketing, touring and eventually a website. The dancers engaged in photo shoots for these purposes. This organization is summarized in Appendix G.

1.2.2 Working with Forsythe

"It's like pushing the limits." Interview with Forsythe dancer Cyril Baldy and *Duo* dancer Allison Brown in Bern, January 24, 2017

Using my phone as an audio recorder on the lunch table, set next to our empty espresso cups, the dancers are aware that our conversation about Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company is on record. Conversing without a script for this interview, after warming up together in the studio, I aim to see how reuniting elicits our memories of the work. We discuss differences between Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company, with Allison citing her general "stress" over the costumes which she found often too "naked." Triangulating, I ask Baldy for his insight, bridging from the word "stress." What resulted was one of the most succinct portraits of this workplace generated in my interviews, one that also offers a dancer's impressions of working together with "Bill" Forsythe.

LIZ: And you? Stress?

CYRIL: I think the fact that at no point you could just rely on what you knew, on what you've done. There was like a common understanding of all the artists that I worked with—that there's your limit and there is beyond it. And there was this constant tickling of the limit. Like pushing further than your own understanding, than your colleagues' understanding, than Bill's understanding. It's like pushing the limit […] of excellence—which to me both kind of blurred into each other. Because then you can talk in a mellow context about excellence … it's to, like, replicate exactly what has been told. But I don't think he is … Bill understands excellence as this dedication to make something artful beyond your own knowledge, beyond what is known to be known. We are not talking about something new, we are not talking about something that is like … it's like pushing the limits, yeah. It's very thrilling when you have the life force that goes with it. But after a point that … it can work against you. And I think that's when it becomes stressful. To me, it's stress on my nervous system, so you just shut down. So, it's

51 David Levin (1987–1988), Heidi Gilpin (1989–1991), Patricia Baudoin (dates unknown), Sabine Huschka (1998–1999), Steve Valk (1998–2002), Rebecca Groves (2002–2006) and Freya Vass-Rhee (2006–2013).

> primarily why I left, because my nervous system couldn't handle it. It's that thing there is not one moment that you can just relax, or let it happen. There is always this, like, push underneath that was like … it's never enough, it's never resolved.

The accounts of dancers Riley Watts and Cyril Baldy reproduced in this chapter indicate how forcefully the charismatic leadership of Forsythe riveted his team. The dancers observed the complexity and mobility of the system of relations made with Forsythe. Dancers expressed gratitude for the workplace that Forsythe facilitated—and also described the stress involved. Rather than being tools or muses, their relationship working with Forsythe was a common investment in mutually developing their potential—as colleagues working together on artistic pieces. Dance scholar Rudi Laermans calls this co-creation. He observes: "Self-transformation is a desired outcome: in sealing an artistically motivated collaboration, the dancer is often motivated by the desire to go through a parallel process of artistic de- and re-subjectification."[52]

The bonds between the dancers and Forsythe—their *sociality* and *relationality* were resources through which choreography emerged. Forsythe was highly socially competent, as demonstrated in his facility to communicate effectively and forge strong ties with many different people. These bonds made people vulnerable to him, and him to them. His ability to sense the potential and direction of what could be produced *through* those social formations was significant. In this respect, this emotional investment was difficult to sustain. Forsythe himself notes: "It was impossible to communicate at the level I wanted to communicate. With such a large group I couldn't have a personal relationship with everyone, I couldn't take care of everyone."[53] Care and personal relationships were part of the exchange of working with Forsythe, in which dancers also could give and develop their choreographic potential.

The dancers were aware that, as the choreographer, Forsythe's complex effect on people was interlaced with many aspects, including psychological ones. Noting these, Laermans observes: "It can thus be premised that in an intense collaboration between dancer and choreographer, both frequently come to stand for the other's object of desire."[54] Forsythe was viewed by the dancers as non-patriarchal and, rather than heteronormative, flexible in his gendered relations and performance. The dancers noted that the process of working with him was never consistent, but involved shifting roles and relationships—changing long-term as well as short-term within the flow of one rehearsal. At times, he was the master whose movement they should learn; other times he was a nurturing and mentoring figure. He was also frequently a collaborator, investing and searching right beside the dancers; then sometimes he was eager to laugh or goof around, or to simply have lunch.[55] These relationships also varied according to the generation of dancers: the Ballett Frankfurt dancers emphasizing more peer-to-peer relations than the younger generation of The Forsythe Company.

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52 Laermans, *Moving Together*, p. 316 (italics in the original).

53 Forsythe, cited in Mackrell, *A New Dynamic*.

54 Laermans, *Moving Together*, p. 343.

55 See Rizzi, "Die Bühne als der Ort, an dem ich mit mir im Reinen bin," p. 91.

Duo dancers each had very distinct and multifaceted relationships with Forsythe, describing their role as fundamentally cooperative.[56] Van Berkel, one of the two original *Duo* dancers, described working "with" not "for" William Forsythe.[57] Recounting her relationship to Forsythe in the choreographic process, she used the metaphor of him being the "painter" and they were the "colors"—noting that he would often give very clear starting points and people would work on many ideas. Van Berkel worked with "Billy" in mind, creating while giving authority to him in the editing phase. Working with Forsythe was—she makes a gesture like holding two ends of a rope, one hand at her rib cage and the other held forward in front of her—like a lasso or a tug of war: a close negotiation of ideas in physical dialogue.[58]

The working process was not always perfect and peaceful. Forsythe's leadership was charismatic, and his way of working was unpredictable. Forsythe, in his own words, described his methodology as follows: "I'm quick. Da dee, da duh. I'm very impulsive. […] I'm entirely instinctive […]. I tend to instinctively throw things out there, and then deal with them afterwards."[59] Dancers confirmed this, with statements such as: "You didn't know how he was gonna come into the studio" and "I never knew what I was going to be asked to do that day."[60] Forsythe was reflective upon the impact of his own authority upon people and developed strategies to move outside his own habits of cooperation: for example, by randomizing tasks he assigned to dancers, learning that dancers could defy expectations of what he thought they could and could not do.[61] Dancers also worked towards freeing themselves from Forsythe's authority and gaining insight into how to expand their own artistic potential.

One significant challenge in both Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company, and a frequent point arising in my interviews with the dancers, was the impact of not having ample time to rehearse. Another was Forsythe's tendency to revise his pieces. *Duo* dancer Cora Bos-Kroese described:

> Bill was always thinking out of the box. You never knew what you were dancing, because he would make changes. […] It was free-falling. A trip! Dealing with situations,

56 Dancers used both collaboration and cooperation as descriptive terms, even once the term "co-collaborative." One aspect of my research was to try to understand what they meant by these terms and how to position this within the discourse. In this manuscript, I differentiate between collaboration and cooperation. I understand collaboration to be people working together to achieve a mutual goal, sharing interest and ownership of the outcome; collaborative projects involve equal responsibility and potential to initiate and revise this shared goal. I designate cooperation to be when people work together in a distributed fashion, in situations where their interests and responsibility within the project may be different. As I shall develop, few dancers (aside from Dana Caspersen) have collaborated with Forsythe, sharing authorship and project direction; I thus define their work predominantly as cooperative.

57 Regina van Berkel, email to the author, September 9, 2019.

58 Fieldwork notes. Meeting with Regina van Berkel in Frankfurt, April 22, 2017.

59 William Forsythe, interview with Steven Spier in Frankfurt am Main, October 21, 1999. See Spier, "Inside the Knot That Two Bodies Make," p. 108.

60 Forsythe dancers, anonymous interviews with the author.

61 Driver et al., "A Conversation with William Forsythe," p. 93.

> you are constantly using survival instincts. You do things you didn't think you could do. You fall, you get up and you manage. Every day was a challenge.[62]

In the way they responded together to the shifting tasks of rehearsal, Bos-Kroese observed the "strength" and "close-knit" quality of the dancers of Ballett Frankfurt, despite factions and divisions between groups of friends and speakers of different languages. She also noted she was "always on her guard." Other dancers echoed that the workplace, while euphoric, also generated stress and fear: stress to perform and adapt, and fear of not being able to meet demands. Cyril Baldy described this biologically as stress to his nervous system, reminding me how there was "not one moment that you can just relax, or let it happen."[63]

Duo dancers saw Forsythe's strong influence upon their colleagues—how, through a couple of words or movements, he could change the way that they move. They noted that it was not always what he said exactly, but something else—that he enabled people to change and to move in ways that surprised even themselves. Francesca Harper recounts:

> Being in a studio, Bill was so free. Taking all these different people into the company—we were all so different—but letting us move so naturally. I knew that what we were creating was original. I also watched [choreographer] Alvin Ailey in the studio. I see parallels, both are Capricorns—the freedom they instilled in their dancers, celebrating their individuality, and using their individuality as a source for the work. We were inspiring his vision, not the other way around. It was embedded in humanism.[64]

As Harper's testimony above indicates, Forsythe could facilitate people to take agency and move freely, even to surpass expectations and limits. Most found these new capacities to be exceptional and thrilling—this sustained and supported their choreographic work.

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This chapter has contextualized the present study within a review of the discourse on William Forsythe's work and his biography. Section 1.1 raised two overarching concerns: first, the question of how dancers are produced as subjects by an inherited history of aesthetic practice such as ballet; and second, the means and extent to which Forsythe and the dancers may exert agency when working together on choreographic projects. I have explored how Forsythe decentralized his authority by inviting his dancers to cooperate with him and one another, a relational work that is epitomized in *Duo*. Section 1.2 situated Forsythe's role within an examination of the constellation of teamwork in Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company. I have analyzed *Duo* dancers' accounts of working with Forsythe, describing their enmeshment and complicity in Forsythe's authorship and varied perception of his leadership style and methods. The terms *relational* and *social* are advanced to show how the dancers invest trifold: in one another, in their relationship with Forsythe and in the choreographic pieces that they produce.

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62 Cora Bos-Kroese, phone interview with the author, September 19, 2018.

63 Cyril Baldy, interview with the author, Bern, January 24, 2017.

64 Francesca Harper, phone interview with the author, September 20, 2018.