

IAN SPENCER BELL

November 13, 2013

Notes on Wallkill

I've been rehearsing with my group at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in the evenings. During short panting pauses, I look at the Shirley Jaffe paintings on the walls in the main gallery. Look carefully, I tell my dancers about their own dancing, during these breaks. Find all the lines of energy you create in a room. Dancers, I tell them, are like all artists: We are lookers. I tell them, too, we must work with precision and we talk about where we direct our energy. Dance is as much about the exchange of energy in a particular place as it is about looking—listening, also. Reach farther and let yourself fall, I tell them, when we begin again. (This might be the only useful advice I give them.) Then we repeat movements at different speeds and in various levels of space so that we might begin to understand all that a movement can do. This requires great patience and stillness of the mind.

On the way home along Fifth Avenue, I watch the black and grey buildings change color with the bright white city lights. I want the dance to glow, I think. And then, The dancers must be the space where they are. I quote Noël Arnaud in the next rehearsal: I am the space where I am. And we continue to work, finding all of the corners and diagonals in our rooms, making our bodies and gazes rhyme with the space around us. I make three four-minute dance phrases, one for each dominant area of space. While making the floor phrase, I ask my dancers to direct their gaze out as if looking out a window from bed. I make also a phrase for the highest level of space, the jumping level. This is a difficult phrase to set. I want the dancers to be still in the air as much as possible and to look up. We keep changing the time. Hanging out in the air and jumping slowly is hard. The dancers make faces when I ask them to go slower. This is good. We must address fear. Dance is about being gutsy.

It's during one of these late-evening, long-faced rehearsals that I decide I want each dancer to experience each phrase in performance. I want the audience to see and feel the subtle differences they bring to the work. If I know anything about dance, it's that the experience of the audience is dependent on the experience of the dancers. Dancer and choreographer Sara Rudner once told me that choreographers control. Dancers must also.

I make material for the middle level, the walking level. The dancers neither leave the floor nor fall into it. I ask them to gaze down and observe the space at their feet. I realize then I'm making a kind of landscape. (I often walk in the southern Hudson Valley, at the base of Mohonk Mountain, by the Wallkill River, and admire the exquisite shifts of color and scale.) I start writing about what I see and end up with a poem about things I don't understand. This makes me want to know about sight and truth. Artists are truth-givers. I think of Ad Reinhardt. His black paintings demand virtuosity from the viewer: The viewer must be patient and still. This is the path to truth. This is the experience I want for my audience.

I make a solo for myself to go with the poem and let the content of the poem score the composition. I let in the sound of my talking and the noise of the dancers' movements. We've been working in silence until now. It feels like opening a window. Before we dance a version of the piece in jeans and sneakers at TEMP Art Space, in Tribeca, I think, Dance is action and action is truth. Everything else is memory.

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WALLKILL

I look out the windows with their silver cranks at the golden preserve
across the way. That Sweet Gum grown out of Wallkill
out of that chocolate milk water holds his arms out wide but can't cover
the hunk that looks like it's been cut out of Mohonk—

the sound I heard my ex-husband's best friend make the night his partner died.
It was the desperate cry Martha Graham talked about.
I was in bed. He was in the living room on the worn blue couch. (How could he have slept?
Why didn't we give him our bed? Why didn't we all sleep on the floor together?)

When I got up to check on him, for the sound continued—Mohonk, Mohonk, Mohonk—
I saw what I must have looked like the night the doctors told me my ex-boyfriend would be dead
in two weeks. I cried Mohonk then, curved my body into the letter C.
(It has always seemed the skinniest letter to me.)

I made fists too and a face like I was going to scream. But after Mohonk no sound came.
All that came was wet and salty, that ocean. It was like that for years
except in the middle of the night when I'd sleepwalk to the living room
and stand by the windows and make the letter C and cry Mohonk.

Now I stand at the windows in New Paltz and know I'll never know the difference between
a man and a mountain and a sound and a body or a body and a mountain and a man and his sound.