

Space Flights

Two imaginative young choreographers test boundaries

by **Deborah Jowitt**

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You could say that dance is about time, space, and motion, but few works make us aware in any profound way of the first two elements; movement simply fills space and takes up time. In their shared program, Beth Gill and Daniel Linehan force us to experience space—its emptiness, its fullness—both visually and sensually, and to feel the weight and passage of time. Both have been choreographing for only a few years, but the intelligence and daring with which they explore their ideas make a lot of the dances that we see today look unconsidered.

Gill is fastidious about the architecture of human figures within particular settings, and her dances contain long pauses that allow us to contemplate that vision. At one point in her new *Eleanor and Eleanor*, Eleanor Hullihan stands gazing toward a corner of the empty stage, her head slightly cocked, her body relaxed. We may briefly wonder what she sees. Instead, we witness a very gradual draining away of attentiveness and equilibrium. Her eyes become veiled, and the weight of her head pulls her to one side until she's falling slowly toward the floor. At the last minute, she puts out a foot to stop the trajectory.

Watching *Eleanor and Eleanor*, I'm reminded of works like Lucinda Childs's *Reclining Rondo*—works that, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, mated Judson Dance Theater's earlier rambunctious political statements about everyday motion and everyday bodies with rigorous minimalist structures. Gill once told an interviewer that she "could easily geek out on the Judson movement," but what she's building on so astutely is also post-Judson formalism, clarity, and deceptive simplicity.

Dance Theater Workshop's Bessie Schönberg Theater combines a proscenium-stage perspective with that of an arena; the audience looks down on the performing area. Jeff Larson's set design for Gill plays against the closed-in obdurateness of the rear black wall; a line of unbroken white piping creates two-and-a-half arches that are connected by an angling skeletal "ground." These gateways to nowhere, however, travel in themselves. That half-arch draws the eye onward.

In this space, lit austere but finely by Joe Levasseur with mostly white light, Gill deploys ideas about duplication and symmetry. Our first sight is of Hullihan and Danielle Goldman standing in profile to us, separated by some distance. After while, they lower themselves to the floor, lie on their right sides, and, in unison, execute a series of slow, precise moves with their legs and left arms. At first all the shapes they make are straight or angled, echoing the space of the room. It's almost shocking when they begin rolling onto their backs and returning to their original positions; the successive curves read as powerfully sensual in contrast to the previous deliberate angularity. The first soft, continuous sounds of Jan Maniaci's music (*To co daf nam swiat* by Krzysztof Krawczyk) seep in, but don't provide rhythmic guidelines. Throughout the sequence, the two women slip subtly in and out of synch, enticing our eyes to keep joining them as a unit and then splitting them into individuals.



Daniel Linehan in his *Not About Everything*.

Julieta Cervantes

Beth Gill

Daniel Linehan

Dance Theater Workshop

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Hulliham and Goldman lie prone while Julie Alexander and Kayvon Pourazar enter from opposite sides and establish inkblot symmetry by pacing out individual paths that briefly ring the two separate halves of the stage. Then they work their way toward each other by repeating a relaxed, plain-Jane phrase consisting of a jump, a lunge, a swing of the leg front, a backward kick, and so on. For a few heady seconds, while they're still dancing and Hulliham and Goldman are crawling backward, we get can enjoy the distinction between right-left unison and that inkblot effect. Also, after all the doubling, Gill twists our eyes by having Goldman, Alexander, and Pourazar, clustered in a corner, perform loose, understated, channeled dancing—never doing the same thing at the same time.

The sounds—a light crackling, the electronic twitter of birds, sustained musical tones—are never intrusive but offer another kind of gateway between the actual and virtual spaces of Gill's elegant construction.

Linehan reconfigures the performer-spectator relationship. Many of us sit on folding chairs set in a semi-circle onstage; under each seat is a small piece of paper bearing scribbled notes. The rest of the audience is urged to move down into the front rows. The choreographer-performer (who looks like a lanky teenager) occupies a smallish circle marked by a pool of light and the ends of eight white tapes, which are anchored by books, magazines, and newspapers. Seven of these strips ray diagonally upward to the edges of the room, while the eighth lies crumpled. For well over a half hour, Linehan spins to the right—slowly, rapidly, smoothly, jerkily, calmly, recklessly—treading a small circuit within the circle or turning on one spot. At various points, he adds a scissoring slash of his arms or spreads them wide. He doesn't stop when he unzips and sheds his jacket. He doesn't stop when he drinks water. He doesn't stop when he writes a check, puts it in an envelope, and hands it to an audience member to mail. Among the many things he tells us that Not About Everything is not about are whirling dervishes, Sufism, endurance, or staying the course. As he speaks, he drifts in and out of synch with his recorded voice, creating slippery rhythms against the relative evenness of his footfalls and the continuum of his spinning.

Like Gill, Linehan is extremely smart about what he's doing, and he's mesmerizing to watch in what seems like an ordeal of discovery. His opening words, many times repeated with slightly varying accentuation, is "This is not about everything." The litany of negatives and denials stall temporarily while he pulls a paper from his pocket and reads his thoughts about the piece and the act of performing it. In the background, we hear sounds of a truck revving, its door opening and closing, the engine humming down the highway. His own trip is more obviously circuitous, more fraught with the tension between success and failure.

Almost gabbling, he says that the piece is "not about me" yet "is about me." Toward the end, he dismantles the sentence backward from "mmm," until humming is all that's left. He wonders what he wants us to think while he's spinning. The task, which he once feared might be difficult to sustain, now strikes him as too easy. And if his performance is "an act of love," mightn't he better "help others in worse predicaments?" Having written a check to an organization for the defense of the environment (a different beneficiary gets his money each night), he wonders if sending money to worthy causes is itself self-aggrandizing.

No, he tells us, the piece is not about Iraq, Darfur, George Bush, Abu Ghraib, not about, not about, not about. . . . As Linehan reels off sites and perpetrators of horror, cruelty, corruption, and mendacity, Levasseur makes the lights repeatedly dim and then pop into extreme glare. And just before Linehan says "You are free of this dance," wheels of light rise like big, bright smoke rings and float away (amazing!). "This is spinning," Linehan announces, and, finally, "This is everything."

Jacket and trousers discarded, he stops caressing his body as the recorded truck door closes after what might have been a ride (in several senses). Finally he stops spinning, pulls down the tapes, and steps out of the cage they've defined. When the lights go out he's slowly folding himself down to the floor, rising, sinking, rising, sinking. I'm almost surprised that this is the end. I'd begun to think he might never stop—that we'd leave and he'd still be turning in the wind of his own making.