

Talk to Me



At left, Rowena Richie and Christopher W. White in *A Hand in Desire*, choreographed and co-directed by Erin Mei-Ling Stuart (photo by Jeff Crook); top right, Matthew Wickett, Sean Grimm and Jodi Lamask in *The Monkey and Devil*, choreographed by Joanna Haigood (photo by Walter Klundt); bottom right, Nol Simonsa, Brian Fisher, Sean Dorsey and Juan de la Rosa in *Uncovered: The Diary Project*, created by Dorsey and currently touring (photo by Lydia Daniller).

Dancers shouldn't talk
 Dancers should never talk
 They shouldn't talk while they're dancing
 They shouldn't talk before they dance
 They shouldn't talk after they dance
 They should never talk
 Don't talk dancers
 Don't talk

—Joe Goode, *The Rambler* (2011)

Given the amount of talking that takes place in San Francisco Bay Area dance venues, Joe Goode, one of the country's most eloquent choreographers, sounds like he's donned an 18th-century frock coat. That's because this "poem," as he calls it, is a backward glance to the beginning of his career (2011 is his company's 25th-anniversary season), when it was for the most part inconceivable to talk and dance at the same time. That narrow view—shut up and dance!—is one of the reasons that Goode settled in the Bay Area. In terms of dance, the region was still pretty sleepy in the 1980s, but it had the reputation for being wide open to just about anything.

Goode's "poem," which he delivered in person during the opening passages of his latest work, *The Rambler*, also reflects the dance world's ongoing ambivalence about words being used in connection with movement. In *Rambler* Goode explores a favorite theme—the loneliness and restlessness that comes with not fitting in. In pristinely designed vignettes and choreography of interlocking and high-flying duets that forever split apart, audiences meet, among others, the ambling cowboy, the success-seeker, the surviving flood victim and the tired nymphomaniac. (*Rambler* will open a national tour at New York City's Joyce Theater Jan. 5 and 7, then travel to Atlanta on Feb. 3; Athens, Ga., Feb. 4-5; the University of California-Riverside Feb. 15; Kirkland, Wash., Feb. 17-18; and Salt Lake City Feb. 20-25.)

Language references reality, a sense of the everyday to which dance alone can rarely aspire. At the same time, movement can lend depth and emotional resonance to performance that the specificity of words does not. Some artists want to have both; hence we have this sometimes unwieldy beast called dance-theatre. Though dance has always used the trappings of theatre—music, design, live performance—words have in recent decades opened a new perspective on what long had been considered "the silent art."

And silence, for many, is still golden. One of the objections to the simultaneous use of language and movement relates to the difficulties of performing both well. Dancers spend untold hours in the studio getting muscles and limbs honed into the finely tuned, strong-but-fragile instrument that can communicate on its own. If these artists were taught that the human throat is also part of their physical equipment, many a misstep could be avoided.

Another frequently expressed reservation is that language becomes a crutch when choreographers have neither the skill nor the patience to say through movement what they can more easily communicate with words. Fair enough. It happens. Again and again, Goode, a master in both mediums, tells his students to develop "the physical instrument of your voice" and not to use language "if it is just superimposed."

Does movement tend to take a back seat to language when dancers opt to use both? Sometimes it does, perhaps inevitably, since our primary means of communication is verbal—even though we talk gesturally long before we have said our first words. There also may be physiological reasons: We can easily avert our eyes, but we cannot shut off our ears. Still, anchoring specific, immediately accessible information within a deeper context can offer the best of two worlds. "Bilingualism"—if we can stretch the term to encompass a meld of language and movement—offers a perspective that single-language users don't have.

The prejudice against the simultaneous employment of two different languages—verbal and kinesthetic—has diminished since the mid-1970s. Yet it is good to remember that dance-theatre had a difficult birthing process. Audiences asked whether this was still dance. Presenters wondered how to market it, and editors didn't know whether to assign it to the drama or the dance critic. Often, neither writer wanted the job.

In San Francisco, John LeFan, a student of dance pioneer Anna Halprin and the co-founder in 1975 of the all-male Mangrove ensemble, recently reminisced about the period when words still gave dance critics headaches. From its beginnings, LeFan says, Mangrove freely danced and talked at the same time. Members of the company were "trained in theatre improv and in dramatic speech." Audiences seemed to catch on, he remembers, but "the critics were merciless."

By now the Bay Area has become the largest (or second largest after New York, depending on whom you talk to) per capita dance community in the country. It is a mecca for performance by choreographers who dance with words. They are riding the waves that artists like Halprin, Sarah Shelton Mann, Krissy Keefer and Margaret Jenkins stirred up in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, when their work found audiences who were no longer satisfied with ballet ("it's all about virtuosity and technique") or modern dance ("I can't understand it, it's too obscure").

One of this second generation of dance-theatre makers is Erika Chong Shuch, who, for the past 10 years, has created intricately structured, collaboratively arrived-at dance-theatre works for her *Erika Shuch Performance Project*. Into the core of her investigations she places intriguing conundrums—some odd, some philosophical, some far-fetched: What is the effect of incarceration on those who are part of a prisoner's life (*51802*)? What would make a man become a cannibal (*All You Need*)? Why do people believe in extra-terrestrials (*Orbit, notes from the edge of forever*)? Why do we have or need memory (*After All*)?

These and ancillary questions offer Shuch the seeds that set her theatrical processes in motion. Thinking, researching and writing, she probes these ideas for verbal, kinetic and visual images that are then shaped, juxtaposed and segued into a collage structure; the result can be whimsical one moment and heart-wrenching the next.

"To me, language provides clues or creates the roadmaps that give context to more imagistic moments," says Shuch. "Language tells us how you might look at an abstract painting, for instance. You say the word 'red' and your brain does something that builds a relationship with that color."

It helps that her performers know how to communicate verbally as well as physically. If she senses that using spoken language might hamper a dance artist from looking his or her best, "We simply adapt. You have to work with the material that you have. We are collaborators, and we are beautifully free."

On stage, Shuch often assumes the persona of a faux-naïf with simple language, direct addresses and a lively sense of wonder about the complexity of the universe. You want to follow her down the rabbit hole. Shuch is verbally nimble, but she will enlist other writers when she feels it necessary. In *After All*, she wanted a kind of platonic conversation among a goldfish, an old man at the beach and a down-on-his-luck Santa—so she commissioned texts from playwrights Michelle Carter, Octavio Solis and Philip Kan Gotanda. The integration of their contributions flowed like honey.

For the exuberant *Love Everywhere*, performed at San Francisco's City Hall on Valentine's Day 2010—the anniversary of the legalization of same-sex marriage in San Francisco—Shuch went to the Internet to solicit individualized wedding vows. Some 50 community performers made a joyous noise, calling their vows out to each other across the vast space of the City Hall Rotunda.

The biggest challenge to Shuch's *modus operandi* may come at the 2013 **San Francisco International Arts Festival**, which has commissioned her troupe to collaborate with a number of Korean artists, including the Chang Mu Dance Company from South Korea. In the piece now in process, Shuch wants to explore the fractured pieces of information regularly smuggled out of North Korea by a group of citizen journalists. In an initial encounter with the Chang Mu dancers, Shuch gave one of them some text that had been translated into Korean. "He was so powerful" both vocally and as a dancer, Shuch testifies with a smile, "I understood what he said."

Erin Mei-Ling Stuart returned to dance when an injury kept her from pursuing a professional career as a viola player. In addition to choreographing for her *EmSpace Dance* company, she has also become one of the region's busiest performers, appearing with a veritable who's-who of Bay Area dance organizations. She sings, acts, dances—and, on and off, plays the viola. For her own dancers, she often chooses the vignette form, small, sharply chiseled portraits whose characters become alive the minute they step on stage. "I love to work with characters and relationships," she explains, though she goes on to admit to feeling hesitant about language: "I am not a writer."

Stuart's elevator pieces, *Between Floors* (for which she crammed performers into a pretend elevator) and *Continuing Education* (which evoked chaos in a classroom), worked marvelously as pure dance. But when she feels it necessary, Stuart borrows words. For *My First Lady*, she collaged presidential platitudes for a piece in which White House wives finally broke out of their bondage. In *Songs for You*, a four-section octet about alienated and probably stoned youths, she admits to having relied on the sardonic lyrics of her favorite band, the *Mountain Goats*. It was "their lyrics more than anything that created the seeds of the characters and the setting in the piece," Stuart avows. As a choreographer, Stuart draws her material from everyday, pedestrian movement and a refined sense of gestural vocabulary.

For a time Stuart considered quitting choreography. As she became better known, she found that touring always involved teaching, and, she says, "I don't like to teach." So she widened her performance practice to working with theatre companies, for whom she has choreographed a number of musicals. In 2008 she played Joey, the lobotomized young man in David Szlaza and Sara Shelton Mann's *My Hot Lobotomy*. For a major portion of that work, Stuart had to focus the audience's attention on absolute stillness. Staring straight ahead without blinking, her Joey seemed catatonic and only gradually awakened to minimal awareness.

Two years later Stuart joined *Mugwumpin*, a physical theatre company, for *This Is All I Need*, a playful spoof about the obsession of hanging on to stuff we don't need. Integrating dancing, acting and talking, among other tasks, Stuart made an impact when she partnered a pair of red shoes supposedly once owned by Leona Helmsley.

Stuart found that she liked working with theatre people. "Actors are inclined to really take responsibility for their own roles," she observes. "As dancers, we are great imitators, and we are very eager to please—we'll ask, 'What do you want me to do?' while an actor is much more likely to say, 'Hey, this doesn't make sense.'"

Out of Stuart's acting experiences came *EmSpace Dance*'s most ambitious and widely acclaimed project, *A Hand in Desire*, choreographed by Stuart and co-directed by Wolfgang Lancelot Wachalovsky. *Hand* is a fractured yet cohesive rethinking of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in which language and dance smoothly play off each other. Consisting of 43 sections, their sequence determined by a game of hearts played on stage, *Hand* includes the Tennessee Williams play's essential elements even as it contextualizes the drama's iconic status. Performers discuss their roles; Truman Capote interviews the playwright; Jessica Tandy writes a letter to Williams. With a help of a good musical score and a stage manager/narrator, this fluid dance-theatre work locks its parts in place like a Rubik's Cube. *Hand* will be reprised at San Francisco's *Intersection for the Arts* in September 2012.

It remains to be seen whether Stuart will continue exploring the fertile co-existence of language and dance. Her latest work, a sketch developed this past summer during a residency at the *Djerassi Foundation* in Woodside, Calif., is *What's on Your Mind?*, a dreamy solo for herself which she set to a staccato recording of a day's yield from her Facebook page. "It's the piece I like best," she says with a modest shrug.

For Sean Dorsey, who moved to the Bay Area from Vancouver not quite a decade ago, language is the springboard from which to launch his sometimes poignant, sometimes hilarious dance-theatre works. In his pieces, the dancing is directly inspired by a script that he mostly writes himself. Sometimes Dorsey adds music, either something of his choice or a commissioned piece. This gives him what he calls "a stable score," which he then takes to his work of male dancers, including Dorsey himself. "The group collaborates on the choreography. 'We quartet not just with the meaning of the words but with the cadences of speech, the pauses, the implications that might suggest a partnering move or go against the score's natural draw,'" Dorsey notes. The group's movement vocabulary is rich in minutely detailed gestures and includes weighty moves often performed in shifting and overlapping unisons.

Dorsey is a female-to-male transgendered artist, but his creations resonate beyond the queer community. Though he speaks from the vantage point of people whose voices have been shut out, he wants to address a larger audience with what he sees as universal human stories. "Language can do that," he says, "because it can show shared experience." Dorsey's pieces often employ direct address or refer to the communal "we," and frequently infuse his accounting of human foibles and longings with an elegiac tone.

The choreographer's early work *The Outsider Chronicle* consists of a collection of small-scale solos and duets that are tender, painful and hilarious. In *6 Hours*, a gay man talks to a recent lover about a road trip they have taken to see an alienated parent. In *Second Kiss*, he remembers a young tomboy falling in love with the class queen. *Untitled* is a sly tale of resistance against recollection. Dorsey's tone is rarely if ever strident. The rawest he may ever have gotten is in *Red Tie, Red Lipstick*, a gentle tango for a butch and a femme performed against a hip-hop writer's poem about police brutalization.

Lou—part of Dorsey's largest scale work to date, a series of dances called *Uncovered: The Diary Project*—is about Lou Sullivan, a transgendered female-to-male artist who had to fight "to look like what I am." When he died in 1981 of AIDS, Sullivan left behind a large archive of diaries, letters and essays; these became the raw material for Dorsey's tribute. It's a theatrically savvy mix of personal confession and anecdotal social history as well as a celebration of love and a contemplation of what is left once we are gone. With *Lou*, Dorsey's dancers stepped fully into talking roles. "I sometimes was quite tyrannical about getting the cadences just right," the choreographer admits, "but we are all experienced in working together."

Dorsey's newest work, *The Secret History of Love*, scheduled to premiere in March 2012 at *Dance Mission Theater* in San Francisco, promises to be similar in scope. In its first part, shown this past spring, Dorsey and his cohorts tracked their elusive titular subject through the terrain of vague physical sensations, the Internet and honky-tonk nightclubs.

Joanna Haigood probably was never meant to be a conventional dancer. As a child in New York, she endured the experiments of a favorite teacher who tap-danced while balanced on her head with a board attached to her feet. While at the *London Contemporary Dance School*, Haigood found herself far more interested in the work of circus artists than in her classes. The air, she decided, was going to be her domain, and in 1980 (roughly the same time as Goode), Haigood moved to San Francisco.

With her *Zaccho Dance Theatre Company*, Haigood became a pioneer of aerial dance, performing on ladders (*The Voyager*), negotiating museum rafters (*Open Systems*) and swinging from San Francisco's iconic Ferry Building Tower (*Noon*). There is a dreamlike quality to her choreography that evokes the feeling of what it might be like to move had we been born with wings in addition to feet.

Haigood also developed a keen sense for how history leaves its traces in now-repurposed spaces. In the early *Dances for Bldg. 952*, performed in a former gym on an army base, young soldiers about to ship out to the Pacific and their girlfriends came to life. In *Steel's Shadow*, Haigood's first major site-specific piece, showcased choreography that grew directly from her response to the history of what is now the performance venue *Z Space*, originally built as the home for American Can Company.

But as her fascination with the history of particular places increased, so did her desire to bring specificity to the people who had been part of those locations. One way to make their voices heard was to publish a broadsheet that served as a program in which their stories were told. *Ghost Architecture*, which evoked the SRO hotels whose residents were evicted when the South of Market area was redeveloped, utilized interviews with former inhabitants. *Sailing Away* traced the exodus of a group of middle-class African-American San Franciscans.

Returning to the East Coast for *Picture Red Hook*, a site-specific installation in abandoned grain silos in Brooklyn, Haigood made video projections of interviews with local residents—about their memories of the place and their dreams for it—as part of the performance. "I wanted them to have stake in the piece; this is their neighborhood," she explains. For *Invisible Wings*, a favorite work in which she brought the Underground Railroad back to life, Haigood augmented the show's wonderful broadsheet with a narrator who filled audiences in on historic matters too little known. "Storytelling," she says, "was also an integral part of slave culture." (A section of *Invisible* can be viewed in the recently released *Never Stand Still* documentary on the *Jacobs Pillow Dance Festival*.)

Haigood's most explicit use of language occurs in her most recent work, the hauntingly symmetrical *The Monkey and the Devil*, choreographed for a pair of dancers, one Caucasian and one African-American. To heighten the persistence of racism, Haigood uses what she calls "everyday language"—it starts with a hostile chanting of "I am a man" and "I am a woman" and culminates in the screaming of vicious racial slurs and expressions of ignorance. Haigood is currently at work on a related piece, slated for a February showcase in San Francisco, in which she mines W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness." "For that," she says, "I'll definitely have to use words."

Joe Goode admired the cerebral concerns with formal structures that dominated New York dance in the 1970s, though postmodernists like David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Meredith Monk and the Judson Dance Theater were also treading the boundaries of movement and text. But Goode felt out of place there. The West Coast, he found, was more hospitable for what he wanted to do: "explore the felt experience of life with all the complexities and contradictions in it." Though he was a dancer and actor, he had also been "a closet poet" since the age of 13. Already, in early small-scaled works of the 1980s, he enjoyed "the friction between language and movement. You say one thing and the body language tells you something else."

Goode continues to find new ways to circle around his big themes of love, identity, loneliness, and life and death. His persona as a writer/narrator is often that of a wide-eyed, slightly perplexed trekker musing at the oddities of folks he encounters. While all the material for his pieces, movement included, is collaboratively explored, Goode shapes the language into a style that is conversational and inviting. The vocal cadences, pauses and repetitions are carefully timed, and include winking asides to the audience. He trains his dancers to use musically appealing speech patterns, even replicating the slight twang of the Virginia-born choreographer's accent.

Two recent Goode works, *Humansville* and *Traveling Light*, were conceived as installations in which the audience chose the sequence of the episodes they wanted to see. The former took place in a series of connected "rooms" within a built structure; actual rooms in San Francisco's Old Mint building were the setting for the latter. In both works, language and movement played off each other in unexpected ways: In *Humansville*, you could watch two desperate prisoners crash their bodies against blank walls while overhearing a society dame in another room screaming about not getting a desired dinner reservation; in *Traveling Light*, as a proper young lady lamented an almost-affair with a present but silent gardener, from the Old Mint's courtyard came fragmentary sounds of a shopkeeper counting his wealth in cabbages.

Dance and language, apparently, can fruitfully feed off each other in ways we have yet to fully explore.

Rita Felciano is a recipient of American Theatre's Bay Area Commissioning Fund, supported by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. She has been the dance critic for the San Francisco Bay Guardian since 1988.