

## Textual Matters: Making Narrative and Kinesthetic Sense of Crystal Pite's Dance-Theater

Peter Dickinson

According to Vancouver-based choreographer Crystal Pite, “A pivot . . . allows for another point of view. It is a turning point, something of crucial importance. It is a repeatable, refinable action that extends our perspective of the possible. The accuracy and focus, in combination with the instinctual, chaotic, and risky nature of improvisation, define both the process and the result” (quoted in Shaw 2006, 14). As scholars attuned to the institutional and ideological genealogies of our respective disciplines, we have become increasingly adept at the discourse of “turns”: we have learned to talk, for example, of the “turn to performance” in theater studies, or the “turn to critical theory” in dance studies, or the “turn to affect and the senses” in both. But we do not spend much time talking about our own individual research and teaching pivots—the small, accretive changes in direction we have made either in sympathetic (perhaps even fatalistic) response to those bigger disciplinary turns or, more provocatively, that collectively may have enabled them in the first place. Nor do we, as critics sensitive to charges of dilettantism when we risk venturing outside our fields of specialty, often discuss the role played by instinct, improvisation, and sheer pleasure in prompting such pivots.

This is all by way of explaining how it is that I, a literary critic by training, should come to find myself presently researching dance-theater. The short answer to that question is that the trajectory of my scholarly career—which has always pivoted around the theater—has tended to mirror my progressive immersion in the performance scene in Vancouver, and the local dance scene in particular. Then, too, it seems important to acknowledge the very strong, almost instinctually, kinesthetic response I have always felt, as a spectator, toward dance-theater as a form, one whose various elements and sensory stimuli come closest, for me, to an Artaudian total theatrical experience. But old habits die hard, and while my own aesthetic tastes skew far more towards contemporary dance than classical story ballet, I find that I am unable—and perhaps also unwilling—to resist reading much of this work within an expressive, and overtly narrative, representational frame. Prompted, in turn, by a renewed attention to language, text, and storytelling in theater, including physical and dance-theater, this has led me to rethink some of the scholarly criticism on the intertwined histories of post-dramatic theater and postmodern dance. As Maiya Murphy (2012) has recently noted, physical theater and postmodern dance in North America, Western Europe, and Australia have evolved in response to many shared points of reference from the mid-twentieth century

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onward. One of those shared points is an apparent rejection of the central importance of narrative and story to traditional scripted drama and classical ballet, with the devised theater and improvised dance training that flourished from the 1960s instead emphasizing the role of the performer as co-creator of the work (Murphy 2012; see also Baner 1993; Murray and Keefe 2007). And yet, while physical theater and postmodern dance might in this respect seem to constitute a single unified field of performance via their *separate* body-based disavowals of the hegemony of language, parallel to these disciplinary experiments there evolved a hybrid genre of dance-theater that distinguished itself precisely through its combining of text and movement, speaking and dancing.

By now, audiences are fairly used to dancers talking on stage. But—and this is no doubt the residual literary critic in me speaking—it seems to me that dance and theater scholars have yet to adequately explain the central historical, political, and affective importance of text as one of the indicative signs of dance-theater as a form. Nor is there much discussion across both disciplines of why, as dramatic text generation came to be regarded as antithetical to the devising practices and communicative goals of theater post-Artaud, scripted and improvised speech became increasingly integrated with movement and dramaturgy in the rehearsal, performance, and documentation processes of many contemporary dance artists. Among the most influential of these artists is, of course, Pina Bausch; however, as Ramsay Burt has usefully reminded us, the “discursivity” of the Judson Church performer-choreographers was just one of the “theatrical” affinities they shared with their European contemporaries (2006, 18–21).<sup>1</sup> In the larger project of which this essay is a part, my aim is to examine text development, adaptation, and incorporation in the movement work of a generation of artists working in the wake of both Judson Church and Bausch and who, in the words of Meg Stuart, have not felt compelled to choose between the “conceptual ideas” or the “theatrical concerns” of either (2010, 174). In so doing, I wish to contest some of the received disciplinary accounts of post-dramatic theater’s *non-representational* debts to postmodern dance (see Bogart and Landau 2005; Overlie 2006), suggesting instead that contemporary dance artists have long borrowed from the *representational* conventions of the theater—not least those surrounding language—often to produce a discourse on the very institution of dance itself.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in overcoming her own initial suspicion of language—in part via the collaborations between her company, Damaged Goods, and Forced Entertainment’s Tim Etchells—Stuart has steadily expanded the list of words she “is not afraid of when [thinking] about dance,” including “emotions, excess and narrative” (2010, 193, 175).

Though their choreography could not be more different, such descriptors apply equally well to the dance creations of Crystal Pite, who has always been as concerned with—and “challenged by”—the “theatrical side of making work” as with “the actual making of the movement” (2012b), and who has consistently pushed against what she has called the “taboo around narrative” in contemporary dance (2012a). In seeking to account for my own emotionally excessive responses to the pieces Pite has made with her company Kidd Pivot over the past ten years, I find that on both proprioceptive and cognitive levels, I am unable to disjoin the ways I have learned to anticipate, in performance, her signature movement patterns from my perceptual processing and interpretation, post-performance, of her source texts. If, as Teresa Brennan has written, feelings are “sensations that have found the right match in words” (2004, 5), then to what extent do words, when linked to choreographed dance, facilitate—or even govern—the conditions under which social empathy might take place, our bodily claims, as Susan Leigh Foster has so compellingly put it, “to feel what another body is feeling” (2011, 174–5)? How do textual address and theatricality in dance, more generally, help to hail audience members whose engagements with dance are deeply felt, but who may not be able to articulate precisely what about the movement they have watched has so transported (or alienated) them? In posing these questions, I am suggesting that words, in dance-theater, function as a medium of communication, but in ways that sometimes exceed “the lexical confines of [their] enunciation as text” (Welton 2007, 153). Indeed, when considered as but one element within the total sensory environment of the performance, rather than as that which exists externally and *a priori* to make sense of this environment, then text starts to take

on added texture; it begins to matter not just indexically or symbolically, but also acoustically, visually, somatically. “Textscape” is the term that Hans-Thies Lehmann uses to describe this characteristic feature of post-dramatic theater-making, with an emphasis on the text’s phonetic materiality, auditory decomposition, temporal diffusion, and spatial dispersion signaling a move “[f]rom sense to sensuality” (2006, 148, emphasis in original). I am suggesting that, as mutually constitutive elements of the textscape of dance-theater, speech and movement become sensorially interpolated and, in fighting for our perceptual attention, mutually interpellating of the spectating subject, each working to influence how we apprehend a given performance work, how, in the words of Martin Welton, we “get a feel for how it goes” (2012, 3).

Recent cognitive approaches to theater spectatorship confirm Foster’s neuro-physiological investigations into the kinesthetic responses of dance audiences, suggesting that “when they pay attention to intentional human action (in a performance or anywhere else), spectators mirror the actions of social others,” and that this “interactional simulation” precedes, and is even primary to, the interpretation of spoken language (McConachie 2008, 79). Yet, most spectators have more training in the semiological interpretation of words. Moreover, that training has usually come at the expense of refining our ability to register and synthesize what Patrice Pavis has identified as performance’s myriad other, mostly non-representable, “‘body-to-body’ . . . sensory-motor perceptions” (2003, 24). As such, words may be what resonate with us most after a performance is over, or what we first recall when thinking about that performance days later. In this regard, I find particularly useful Carl Lavery’s understanding of the dramatic text less as a blueprint to be actualized on stage than as what he calls a “postscript” of the performance—a spectral artifact that allows for multiple re-readings and re-experiencings of a performance that has passed, what he calls a “post-evental” “critical phenomenology” (Lavery 2009, 40). Focusing on his experience of Lone Theatre’s 2005 devised theater piece, *Alice Bell*, Lavery notes that in his reading of the rough and unpublished script provided to him by company members a year later, what was initially triggered was an aural rather than a visual memory—in particular the voice of lead actress Molly Haslund during her opening poetic speech. The “grain” of Haslund’s voice animates, in turn, the printed text’s graphic signs, enabling a post-evental aesthetic encounter that seeks neither to supersede in authenticity the subjective experience of the original performance, nor to “impose a fixed [literary] meaning that would disavow the ontological contingency and partiality” of the rest of the performance’s *mise-en-scène* (Lavery 2009, 44). Rather, the text, for Lavery, is a “fleshy ghost”: it at once haunts and provides an additional means through which to analyze “the lived phenomenology of the work itself” (45).

I am similarly interested in how text re-embodies, and theatrically remediates, movement (and vice-versa), how it might linger as a ghostly reminder and affective remainder in an audience member’s consciousness and a company member’s repertoire—the line of remembered prose, or the page of reread poetry, that might trigger a felt, kinesthetic response in either’s body. As Deidre Sklar has persuasively argued, in making a case for kinesthesia’s inclusion in the wider sensorium, “Words in the intimate space of sensual aliveness reverberate with somatic memory. One feels their meaning as rhythm, texture, shape, and vitality as well as symbol” (2007, 44). And so it is for me that as I sit at my desk and type into the computer the words “fate” and “fake,” “falling” and “flying,” I cannot help shifting slightly in my chair, responding to their alliterative sonorosity, their balanced syllabic meter, but also accommodating their material substance, their directional weight, in relation to my cumulative sense memories of the works by Pite that I examine here. Each of these words I experienced—and continue to re-experience—twice: once at the level of linguistic sign, whether the words were narrated in voice-over, written on a sign, projected on a screen, or spoken orally; the other as a danced enunciation, the movement-based activation of an additional haptic register to these words prompting, in the influential framework outlined by perceptual psychologist James Gibson, a bodily experience of the sensory environment adjacent my own body (1983, 97). That I cannot any longer disentangle the message consciously received in the first instance from my non-conscious, affective response to the bodily source of that message in the second is part of what I wish to explore in what follows. In pivoting between Pite’s use of text and movement, I mean to

make each matter equally—to take on substance in both a physical and an ideational sense. In this way I am following from Rebecca Schneider in suggesting that Pite’s textual post-scripts “remain” not just as constitutive repertory elements in her company’s subsequent live performances, but also as an archival record of those performances that can prompt additional “flesh memories” at odds neither with performance’s disappearance, nor its re-citation (Schneider 2011, 104).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as a dance artist who is keenly interested in engaging with storytelling as a live—and living—event, it would seem that the textual document becomes a way for Pite of extending (backward and forward) the temporal and narrative duration of that event: backward to the literary sources that figure so prominently as part of Pite’s composition process, and forward to the embodied artifacts those sources inevitably become.

## ***Dark Matters***

Born in Victoria, British Columbia, Crystal Pite began her career as a classically trained dancer with Vancouver’s Ballet BC, before going on to join Ballett Frankfurt. There she assimilated William Forsythe’s approach to structured improvisation (she is a featured performer in the DVD accompanying his *Improvisation Technologies*), collaborative choreography, and deconstructive theatricality. Having debuted as a choreographer in 1990, while still a company member at Ballet BC, Pite has gone on to create works for such acclaimed international companies as Nederlands Dans Theater (where she is an associate choreographer), Cullberg Ballet, Ballett Frankfurt, The National Ballet of Canada, Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal (where she was choreographer-in-residence from 2001–2004), Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, and Ballet Jorgen. The winner of numerous choreographic prizes in Canada, in 2011 Pite was also awarded the fifth annual Jacob’s Pillow Dance Award. In 2002 she formed her own company, Kidd Pivot, as a way of creating her signature performance work, which, in the words of her Web site, integrates “movement, original music, text, and rich visual design,” and which “is marked by a strong theatrical sensibility and a keen sense of wit and invention” (Kidd Pivot 2012). From 2010–2012, Kidd Pivot was resident company at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt, which provided Pite with the means to employ her dancers full-time as they created and toured new work.

Most of that work is self-consciously, even obsessively, concerned with the creative process, and as a dance artist, Pite has repeatedly turned to literature and the theater as pivot points through which to explore some of the paradoxes of choreographic inspiration. Thus, in the first part of the evening-length *Uncollected Work* (2003), “Farther Out,” Pite explicitly references the genre of science fiction as a way to thematize the “uncharted territory” (both the limitless possibilities and the potential black holes) that marks the threshold of artistic invention. In the second part, “Field: Fiction,” she finds herself on the other side of this threshold, using the writings of Annie Dillard to explore what it means to edit, and even destroy, one’s own work. In *Dark Matters* (2009), Pite returns to science for her point of departure, in this case the strange astronomical energy that, though undetectable to the human eye and emitting no electromagnetic radiation, still somehow exerts a gravitational pull on visible matter and that, according to experts on the Big Bang, is believed to make up the vast majority of our universe. In Pite’s hands, dark matter becomes a metaphor both for the unconscious and for the wellsprings—and the recesses—of the imagination. As Pite and her dancers demonstrate in this piece—and as she herself has talked about in print in relation to her own uncertainty about where and when ideas will come to her for new work (Smith 2010)—bursts of inspirational energy can just as quickly turn to a paralyzing abyss. Creation is often followed (sometimes inexplicably and tragically, sometimes necessarily) by destruction. And once again it is text that provides our entrée into this paradox.

*Dark Matters* is structured in two parts, with the first operating as a quasi-theatrical dumb show (and, in fact, a stage dummy does make a crucial appearance) to the more “pure dance” explorations of the second. To this end, in the opening minutes a single follow-spot moves restlessly about

the stage, revealing glimpses of a clearly makeshift set (designed by Pite’s partner, Jay Gower Taylor, himself a former dancer); we see flimsy paper walls, a table filled with cardboard and various out-sized props, a cheap tin ceiling lamp. An amplified male voice (Vancouver actor and director Christopher Gaze), rich and sonorous, starts to intone with oracular emphasis excerpts from Voltaire’s “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster,” which is subtitled “Or an Examination of the Axiom, ‘All is Well,’” and which, needless to say, does not portend at all well for our own story:

What is the verdict of the vastest mind?  
Silence: the book of fate is closed to us.  
Man is a stranger to his own research;  
He knows not whence he comes, nor whither goes.  
Tormented atoms in a bed of mud,  
Devoured by death, a mockery of fate.  
But thinking atoms, whose far-seeing eyes,  
Guided by thought, have measured the faint stars,  
Our being mingles with the infinite;  
Ourselves we never see, or come to know.  
This world, this theatre of pride and wrong,  
...  
This frail construction of quick nerves and bones  
Cannot sustain the shock of elements;  
This temporary blend of blood and dust  
Was put together only to dissolve. (1912 [1755], 261–2)<sup>4</sup>

Thus cognitively cued by the words being spoken, and affectively cued by the tone in which they are spoken, we are primed for something bad to happen. What we do not yet know is the way in which movement figures into the equation. Retrospectively, Voltaire’s poem offers some clues.

A reflection on the massive 1755 earthquake and resulting tsunami and fires that devastated the Portuguese capital (a subject the writer would later explore at greater length in *Candide*), “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster” is also a philosophical treatise on the nature of evil and the existence and providential power of God. Taking on both Leibniz and Alexander Pope (the axiom in the poem’s subtitle refers to Pope’s *Essay on Man*), Voltaire desists from their view that, “in the best of all possible worlds” (wherein human suffering is unavoidable), we should place both our reason and our faith in a mostly benevolent God—summed up most famously in Pope’s line “All partial evil, universal good” (2009 [1733–34], 280; see also Leibniz 1952 [1709]). If this were true, Voltaire argues in his preface to the poem, then it “follows that human nature is not fallen” and not in need of salvation (2000 [1756], 97). Moreover, according to Voltaire, the idea of an all-powerful God looking after the best interests of human beings is not just impossible to defend rationally, but—in the face of a calamity such as the Lisbon earthquake—also morally, requiring one to resort to a sordid cultural relativism: “Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice, / Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?” (1912, 256). With human existence all that is verifiable, and much of that existence bleak and painful, the best we can do is accept our lot and muddle on with our lives—a sentiment that would earn Voltaire the ire of his compatriot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Upon reading this text post-performance, one notices several interesting aspects to Pite’s use of it in *Dark Matters*: that she has been drawn more to Voltaire’s empiricist than his anti-theodic argument; that in the temporal illusion through which Voltaire sees us navigating our empirical world (the impossible distance between its mud and its stars, summed up in his later maxim “All will be well one day—so runs our hope. / All *now* is well, is but an idle dream” [1912, 262]), she sees a synecdoche of performance; that of the fifteen lines Pite quotes from the 244-line poem, the last four of them have been transposed from an earlier part of the stanza; that those lines are given

sinewy substance via fleshly nouns like “nerves and bones,” the organic matter of “blood and dust.” Indeed, hearing those words repeated in the dark as the voice-over loops and the follow spot sweeps across the stage is to begin the process of embodying and animating what we have assumed to be an empty and unpersoned space. Martin Welton has argued that words, when spoken in the dark, shift “participants’ focus from interpretation to the immediacy of sensation” (2007, 153). Likewise, Lehmann claims that post-dramatic theater’s “decomposition” of the voice from the presence of the speaking actor “recomposes” itself in new perceptual modes of “sono-analysis” (2006, 149). I would argue that it allows for a new kind of soma-analysis as well—one that in the case of *Dark Matters* originates in the audience. Stimulated and made nervous (as in synaptically alive to) by the sound and tone and rhythm of the voice-over, and by the anxiously roving follow spot, we respond with a kind of kinesthetic anticipation of what’s coming next—that is, we begin to move before we see any movement on stage.

To be sure, as the opening voice-over begins to fade, the follow spot does eventually come to rest on a man (Peter Chu), who is now sitting at the table filled with paper, cloth, scissors, thread; he seems to be experiencing some sort of blockage. Out of this pile, he pulls two marionette legs, and crafts a little dance with them center stage. Suddenly the creative juices are flowing again, and over the course of a few quick blackouts (which are used most effectively throughout the first half), we are eventually introduced to his creation: a benign-looking puppet attached to wires manipulated by the rest of the Kidd Pivot company, clad all in black like the traditional puppeteers in Bunraku theater (see [Photo 1](#)). However, in *Dark Matters*, it turns out our puppet is very far from benign, and combining verbally unspoken but clearly recognizable intertextual references to *Frankenstein*, *Pinocchio*, *Pétrouchka*, *Coppélia* (the story by Hoffman and the ballet by Saint-Léon), *The Wizard of Oz*, and Freud’s *Ego and the Id*, among other texts (including B-grade movies such as *Chucky* and its sequels/imitators), Pite tells the familiar story of creature rising up against creator (as in the best of Chekhov’s plays, those scissors are on stage for a reason).

Except, wily creative artist that she is, Pite renders the familiar strange once the inevitable climax has occurred and the puppet, having stabbed his creator/amanuensis, and with nowhere left to channel his energy, himself expires. It is at this point that the black-clad supernumeraries—the

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Photo 1. Peter Chu (left) and company in *Dark Matters* (2009). Photographer: Dean Buscher. Photograph © Dean Buscher.



literal dark matter in this show—take center stage. Their previously discrete, yet no less precise, manipulations of the restless puppet (and it is revelatory to see how Pite transposes her choreographic vocabulary onto the startlingly life-like movements of the puppet) are now unleashed in a riot of acrobatic and martial-arts-like movements as they rush about like would-be ninja-assassins, clearly emboldened by the acts they just witnessed *and* abetted. Pite is having fun here, and her cultural touchstones during these sequences are as much *Spider-Man* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as they are the high art works of Shelley and Stravinsky. All of this energy culminates in an inexorable gravitational pull being exerted on the visible matter before us on stage, i.e., the set, and when this comes crashing down—as, of course, it must—Pite literally reveals to us, in the form of the stage’s back safety wall, the “invisible” scaffolding of the theatrical *deus ex machina*: what we take to be *fate* is in fact just *fake*. We have, of course, been primed for all of this via the quoted lines from Voltaire; however, having initially received those lines less as signs for sense-making than as a species of extra-sensory stimulation, we now require an actual sign, held aloft by one of the supernumeraries, to let us in on the ruse (see [Photo 2](#)). But even here there is a productive sense confusion, a kinesthetic tension, between the word and its material referent: in both the choreographic and what, after Julia Kristeva, Lehmann has called the “chora-graphic” spaces of the body-text relationship in performance (2006, 144), the word “fake” refers at once to the entire collapsed *mise-en-scène* and, metonymically, to the swaying dancer brandishing the sign within that space.

Coincidentally, it is at this point that both the follow spot and the voice-over from the opening return, with the former eventually picking out of the detritus the half-buried arm of our protagonist-creator as the latter repeats, in a loop, the same lines from Voltaire. Once again the text, in this instance, functions less as a prophecy to be confirmed through our visual interpretation of the scene before us than as a sonic score. It is the basso-continuo that through its repetition becomes a kind of gestural noise and that, in my post-evental recollection of the performance *and* repeated recitation aloud of the quoted text, provides an additional modal frequency through which to register—to feel—the otherwise noiseless entrance from the wings of one lonely supernumerary. Her hands and feet skirt the edge of the follow spot as she approaches the apparently dead creator. Tugging at his arm, the supernumerary eventually frees his entire body, props him up like a dummy, and begins to help him to walk. And then, because we are still quite clearly in

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*Photo 2. Two of the supernumeraries from the end of the first half of Dark Matters (2009). Photographer: Dean Buscher. Photograph © Dean Buscher.*



the world of the theater—no matter, in Voltaire’s words, that this world is filled with “pride and wrong”—something magical happens: the creator, his feet at first unsteady, his knees occasionally buckling, begins to walk on his own, exiting stage right. Lest we think this trick repeatable, however, the supernumerary is not about to let us forget what we have just learned: that the slippage between fate and fake is but one transposed letter. Having picked up what appears to be another one of her confreres from the wreckage on stage, she walks with the body to center stage and promptly tosses it on the pile of debris in front of us, where it lands with a definitive thud.

The remaindering of this “real” dummy at the end of Act I provides the visual segue to the start of Act II, as the lights come up on the body of our super-supernumerary splayed on the bare stage. Slowly she raises the bottom half of one leg, flexes her foot, and then drops it to the floor. Eventually she lifts her pelvis and raises herself onto her elbows, testing limbs and joints in a rehearsal for ambulation—much like our creator teaching his puppet to walk at the beginning of the first act, and then himself being taught by the character we now see before us at its end. In the production I saw in Vancouver in February 2010, Pite played this latter role herself, at once half-heartedly attempting to disguise *and* make manifestly visible her own creative energies as an artist. That is, in the fifty-five minutes that follow, we witness the rest of the company (Chu, joined by Eric Beauchesne, Yannick Matthon, Cindy Salgado, and Jermaine Spivey), now all in regular street clothes, “animate” her trademark choreography—which tends to burst forth in rippling eddies from the body’s core, limbs buckling or departing in waves in response rather than arriving neatly at an end point of vertical alignment, arms and legs extended as if on strings. But we are also witnessing (although not without careful concentration) the black-clad Pite rushing about the stage moving lights, doing things behind scrims, popping up in unexpected places (including emerging from the orchestra pit at the very lip of the stage). Finally, she inserts herself within the other dancers’ bodily chains to provide them with an added force, or a change of direction. She, quite materially, becomes the “pivot” between their deliberately uncertain movements.

In so doing, she likewise makes manifest another way in which this work pivots, for me, between text and movement, allowing me to “get a feel” for each. By that I mean that as choreographer and as the literal dark matter between her dancers on stage, Pite is in a very real sense making their bodies speak. We saw a version of this at the end of Act I when, having guided Chu’s creator to an unsupported standing position, Pite uses unison movement as a means of modeling actual locomotion. Even more interesting in Act II is the way in which Pite positions her own body as a ballast between the balance and imbalance of her dancers, whose various choreographic structures of support—the weight each bears and transfers, the bodily shape one might perform and offer to view—owes much to release technique generally. More specifically, however, it is of a piece with the contact-improv-inspired partnering and group work that Pite began incorporating into her movement vocabulary beginning with *Lost Action* (2006), and that Nancy Shaw has described, with specific reference to that work, as a “kinesthetics of rescue” (Shaw 2006, 10). As chief rescuer, Pite’s super-supernumerary provides the second half of *Dark Matters* with much of its energy, flow, and momentum, “invisibly” helping Salgado, for example, to walk on and with the upturned palms of Matthon’s outstretched hands, or else steering all five dancers in various massed tableaux across the stage. Read in the context of the first half’s more overtly theatrical exploration of the consequences of training a body to move to a set of authorial conventions or codes, to in effect perform according to a script, I am reminded of Michel de Certeau’s assertion that walking is an enunciative act equivalent to speech (1984, xiii, 91–110). But I am also reminded of Susan Leigh Foster’s claim, in adapting de Certeau to the specific performance tactics of contact improvisation, that non-narrative and “non-message oriented” movement is not so much anti-theatrical as constitutive of an “alternative theatricality,” using the choreographic score in place of the script to alter the sense relationship between body and/as text (2002, 136, 135).

In this regard, it is worth noting that, in my initial post-evental use of Voltaire’s text to re-experience on somatic and kinesthetic levels the live experience of *Dark Matters*, I had forgotten



the final return of the piece's voice-over—a lapse in sense memory that was only remedied by subsequently viewing a video recording of the work. It was then that I rediscovered that the voice-over recurs just prior to the piece's coda, a very moving duet between Chu-as-creator and the now disrobed super-supernumerary (performed by new company member Sandra Marín Garcia in the video), in which they reciprocally exchange the roles of choreographer/dancer, puppeteer/puppet, creator/doll. So effective is this danced postscript to the dialectic of creation and destruction at the heart of the piece as a whole, it is perhaps understandable that I would have dismissed as insignificant the reverbalization of this dialectic via voice-over in the solo by Jermaine Spivey that precedes it. Which is also to say that by then I was no longer attuned to speech solely at the level of linguistic sign. Rather, what de Certeau refers to as the “performance” of speech—including the sound and rhythm and tempo and breath accompanying its enunciation—had been “reappropriated” by Pite's dancing bodies, literally incorporated into the general habit of motion. This perhaps explains why the super-supernumerary, hitherto the invisible animating force behind Spivey's and the other dancers' movement, is now stilled, watching from upstage as the looping voice-over does the work of animation for her (see [Photo 3](#)). And, sticking with the terms supplied by de Certeau, I want to suggest that this in turn posits a new “*contract with the other*” (1984, xiii)—in this case the spectator—one in which the uttering of words like “nerves” and “bones” and “blood” and “dust” alongside their physical manifestation and excitation transforms information into sensation.

### ***The Tempest Replica***

On this last point, it also bears mentioning that the one other thing that dissolved amid the blood and dust of the postscript to *Dark Matters* is Pite's professional identity as a dancer-choreographer. In 2010, pregnant with her first child, she ceded her role in the piece to Marín Garcia. Since then, she has not danced in any of Kidd Pivot's performances, though she has continued to travel with the company. One cannot help but wonder if this move from creator-performer to creator-director influenced the choice of source material and the style of presentation for *The Tempest Replica* (2011), Pite's most explicit exploration to date of narrative in dance, and the result of her first time working so comprehensively with a pre-existing script. The work premiered in Frankfurt in the fall of 2011; however, Pite remained dissatisfied with several aspects of the performance, and

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*Photo 3. Jermaine Spivey (foreground) and Crystal Pite in Dark Matters (2009). Photographer: Dean Buscher. Photograph © Dean Buscher.*



so she continued to fine-tune them with the aid of a residency at Simon Fraser University's Goldcorp Centre for the Arts in Vancouver in the summer of 2012, before sending a retooled version on a four-month North American tour that doubled as a farewell of sorts for the company. Coincidentally, between the 2011 premiere and 2012 remount of Pite's dance-theater take on Shakespeare's *Tempest*, she was approached by the Québec theater and opera director Robert Lepage to choreograph his production of the recent Thomas Adès opera, thus cementing her artistic association with a text she initially felt incapable of adapting (Lepage and Pite, 2012).

Perhaps even more pertinent to the present analysis is the fact that Pite's adaptation actually shares many affinities with Lepage's own theatrical aesthetic. This is most apparent in the production's juxtaposition of bravura and technically sophisticated moments of design magic (described at more length below) with simpler bits of imagistic minimalism. To that end, the action of *The Tempest Replica* begins even before the house lights dim. As audience members file into the theater and begin taking their seats, they glimpse Eric Beauchesne, dressed in street clothes, kneeling downstage right, in front of a large shimmery and billowing silver cloth that stretches the length of the stage. He is intently folding sheet after sheet of white paper into perfect origami sailboats, which he promptly lines up in neat rows (see [Photo 4](#)). Thus are we introduced to Prospero, and to another kind of kinesthetic labor that, precisely because it eschews overt pantomime, approaches the precision and virtuosity of classical ballet. To be sure, the scene does serve to telegraph for those in the audience unfamiliar with Shakespeare's play (or who have not bothered to read Pite's careful synopsis of the action in the program) the famous opening high-seas storm. But in the number and color and scale of the boats' replication, it also recalls one of Pite's explanations for the faceless, all-white fencing-style costumes we will soon see worn by the other dancers in the first part of her work: they are meant to recall the scale human figures used in architectural models (Pite 2012a).

Manipulating one of the boats in the same way that he will soon manipulate the bodily figures occupying his island, Prospero speaks aloud the word "shipwreck," and then promptly calls the spirit Ariel (Marín Garcia)—the real architect of his designs. Ariel, also dressed in street clothes, does not look particularly pleased by the summons, a reminder that she has not chosen to do

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*Photo 4. Eric Beauchesne as Prospero in The Tempest Replica (2011). Photographer: Jörg Baumann. Photograph courtesy of Kidd Pivot.*



Prospero's bidding, which is something captured in two simple movements introduced here that will be repeated by her throughout the work: a fluttering of her hands over her heart, and an elbow thrust akimbo out from her side—a reflex response perhaps to a phantom wing that has been clipped or tamped down by her master. Taking the paper boat from Prospero, Ariel places it in her mouth and starts to chew. This is the signal for the storm to begin. But also condensed in this image is Pite's choreographic challenge in taking on a sacred cultural text like *The Tempest*: how, precisely, to make the words have flesh? In considering this question post-performance, my trusty *Norton Shakespeare* close at hand for reference, I find I am far less concerned with what Pite has left out or telescoped in the story than with how she has translated into movement the smaller, more intimate emotional arcs of select characters—a relationship of scale between bodies and text she in turn maps onto the two mirror halves of the work as a whole.

Thus, in the first half, Pite uses an arsenal of effects to “storyboard” for the audience major plot points in a succession of bodily tableaux; this is a style of physical and gestural exposition that she first started exploring in narrative-based commissions for Nederlands Dans Theater (*Plot Point*, 2010) and Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet (*Grace Engine*, 2010) which were inspired by film production techniques (Pepper 2012). For example, in the storm conjured by Ariel, we witness pre-recorded digital images of a flailing Ferdinand (Jermaine Spivey), in casual rehearsal sweats, projected onto the stage left portion of the billowing curtain; these are then overlain with projected droplets of pelting rain. Behind the curtain, a live “replica” Ferdinand, all in white, his face masked, struggles to maintain his balance in response to the lashings of the storm (see [Photo 5](#))—or is it in response to his “real” digital image? Rolling back and forth on the floor upstage right are the similarly clad bodies of Prospero's sworn enemies, Alonso (Bryan Arias), Sebastian (Jiří Pokorný), and Antonio (Yannick Matthon), chalk outlines at a crime scene but for the fact that they refuse to stay still. In calling for a furious unleashing of thunder and lightning in his opening stage direction, Shakespeare issues a virtually impossible challenge to any director: create an opening sound and light show equivalent to and representationally illustrative of the powerful magic of Prospero. Pite does not shy away from enjoining technology to aid in this task; but in re-reading the poor Boatswain's calls for the masts to be lowered and to lay into the wind as he deals with an interfering Alonso and Sebastian, I was reminded of how Pite simultaneously uses technologies of the body to heighten our kinesthetic response to the storm. Indeed, one of the more surprising things about the projections in *The Tempest Replica* is the sheer amount of movement contained within them, and the extent to which that recorded movement merges with and in effect hypermediates the shadow outline of live movement on stage via lighting effects in front of and behind the piece's two cloth scrims. (The first downstage one is pulled down after the storm by Prospero, to reveal a second upstage one.)

In an essay partially focused on the Toronto company bluemouth inc.'s *Dance Marathon* (2009), a site-specific and durational work of physical theater that doubles as a kind of movement-based study in relational aesthetics, Bruce Barton (2009) argues that intermedial performance technologies frequently produce feelings of “pronounced anxiety” in both spectators and performers. At the same time, he notes, intermediality can heighten the possibilities for “interactive intimacy,” an “openness to physical contact and connection” leading to a “vicarious identification” that is at one and the same time a “self-reflection” (2009, 280, 281). I want to argue that intermediality helps to facilitate a similar kind of intimacy, or kinesthetic empathy, at the outset of *The Tempest Replica*. The digital projections create a visually immersive textscape in which an optical illusion of external movement at once amplifies the otherwise invisible kinetic forces buffeting the dancers on stage and, as result, the uncanny feelings of vertigo we experience in the audience. Which is also to say that Pite, in taking that word shipwreck and planting it so firmly and forcibly inside our own bodies at the very start of this piece, is foregrounding the extent to which any empathetic impulse must first begin with an often painful diagnosis of one's physical limits to feeling what another feels.



Photo 5. Jermaine Spivey as Ferdinand in *The Tempest Replica* (2011). Photographer: Jörg Baumann. Photograph courtesy of Kidd Pivot.

Other projections, such as Prospero's explanation to Miranda (Cindy Salgado) following the shipwreck of how they came to find themselves on the island as a result of Antonio's usurpation of Prospero's dukedom in Milan, or the banquet conjured by Ariel—now dressed head to toe in a shimmery white body suit—for Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, are more clearly cinematic (often expressionistically so). But if, after the philosophers Gilles Deleuze (1986) and Giorgio Agamben (2000, 55, 58–9), we understand the vocabulary of cinema, like that of dance, to be essentially gestural and movement-oriented, then we begin to see how the two forms combine in *The Tempest Replica* to create an intermedial language that does not so much supplant Shakespeare's source text as perceptually enrich and even "enflesh" it. This occurs most successfully in the first half of the work in the sequence when we are first introduced to Caliban (Arias again), who slithers across the stage on all fours, led by Prospero and toward Miranda, seated stage left, as the projections economically telegraph (in the same direction) how the monster came to be enslaved by Prospero. Here, following from Deleuze's troika of movement-images, perception (the unidentified viewpoint of the camera that initially frames our own indeterminate registering of the scene) combines with action (the direction and duration of the interaction between the virtual and live bodies on screen and on stage) and affection (the interval/continuity between received and executed movement, associated by Deleuze with the face and/or, as with Caliban and Miranda, its obliteration) to produce a multi-sensory experience of kinesthesia (1986, 64–6).<sup>5</sup>

This is just one example of how the “plotting” of the first half of *The Tempest Replica* is not all in service of exposition. Indeed, to the extent that Pite employs her storyboard tableaux to distill the action of Shakespeare’s play to its essence, she does so by locating that essence over and over again in gesture and movement: the fluttering of Ariel’s hand over her heart, or the wild, apparently hip-less careening and spinning of Ferdinand. Once again, Lehmann is instructive here; he notes that the “*principle of exposition*,” when “applied to body, gesture and voice,” foregrounds the materiality of language at the expense of its representational function. He writes: “Instead of a linguistic re-presentation of facts, there is a ‘position’ of tones, words, sentences, sounds that are hardly controlled by a ‘meaning’ but instead by the scenic composition” (2006, 146; emphasis in original). In the scenic compositions that make up the first half of Pite’s work, the positions of bodies, and the different tonal phrases they enact, are mostly controlled by Prospero. This is made clear via our introduction to Miranda, who first appears lying prone on the floor after her father tears down the front curtain following the storm. At first I was confused by this image, and its suggestion that, in terms of the play’s narrative, Miranda is the shipwreck’s first victim. However, it made much more somatic sense when I returned to the text-as-postscript and recalled that in Shakespeare’s play, Miranda is the character who is distinguished by the depth of her feelings, and by a surfeit of empathy, in particular:

O, I have sufferèd  
 With those that I saw suffer! A brave vessel,  
 Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her,  
 Dashed all to pieces! O, the cry did knock  
 Against my very heart! (Shakespeare I.ii.5–9)

In Pite’s staging, this ghosted textual apostrophe (later to appear lexically as a projection in the piece’s second half) is juxtaposed not just with Miranda’s mannequin-like appearance, but also with her father’s manipulations of her movements, pulling her up from the stage and then, as with the supernumerary’s maneuvering of Salgado across the body of Matthon in Act II of *Dark Matters*, directing her to walk—and to look at the equally dark magic he has wrought. By contrast, when, later in the first half, Prospero finally releases Ferdinand from his Sisyphean labor of moving rocks and consents to let he and Miranda wed, the young lovers break into an exuberant jive. What might at first appear to be another jarring misquotation, in this case of a social dance with roots in Jazz Age Harlem, takes on added resonance when we learn in the second half of the piece (or if we recall the projected images of him) that the dancer playing Ferdinand is African-American. Read against an expressly postcolonial interpretation of the textual postscript, in which Prospero’s enslavement of Caliban (here played by another dancer of color) can be viewed in part as a defense against the possibility of miscegenation, Pite’s choice of phrasing in this instance draws our kinesi-  
 thetic attention to the historically situated social and cultural forces Foster (2011, 11) sees framing all empathetic responses—and the choreographed movement that may have prompted them. In this scenario, as Sara Ahmed has persuasively argued, the experience of intersubjective feeling, of “being moved” by another, might actually work to fix and reify that other as an object of feeling “‘having’ certain characteristics” (2004, 11)—including a “recognizable” or idiomatic style of dancing.

And on the subject of fixing meaning, I should be clear: there are certainly ways in which text operates logocentrically in *The Tempest Replica*. For example, in the first half, surtitles provide act and scene numbers, and a brief, one-line synopsis of the corresponding action in Shakespeare’s play. And in the second half, actual lines from the play are projected on the screen, which are clearly meant to explicate the movement sequences we see taking shape before us. However, those lines also merge with the densely layered soundscape designed by Meg Roe and Alessandro Juliani to complement Owen Belton’s electronic score, in which disembodied male and female voices fade in and out, whispering passages from the text, but often too rapidly and breathlessly to make any of it intelligible. Instead word, voice, and body work discordantly to produce a new, environmental sense-logic out of the very incommensurability of each as an individual and self-contained

sign system. Likewise, in the first part of the piece, key words are projected onto unexpected surfaces, in the process giving otherwise abstract signifiers material weight and physical substance: “daughter” appears on Miranda’s raised skirt, for example, and “doubt” on one of Prospero’s unfurled paper boats that is held up by an unidentified, white-cloaked avatar in the first half’s final sequence. The latter word carries with it intertextual associations that extend beyond Shakespeare’s play, as Pite had previously employed as an epigraph to her program notes for *Dark Matters* an excerpt from John Patrick Shanley’s introduction to his award-winning play *Doubt*.<sup>6</sup> In the void of belief, however, there is also the make-believe of theater. Coincidentally, there is no textual synopsis to accompany the projected Act Five marker in this sequence, which also displaces the play’s epilogue, cuing the transition into the second half of Pite’s piece as Prospero, clearly in need of new magic, calls aloud for Ariel once again.

Her arrival, dressed in the clothes she was wearing at the piece’s outset, begins the process of replaying in a more formally abstract way key scenes that were storyboarded for us in the first half. Now that we know who everyone is, and the nature of their relationships to one another, we can concentrate on how the movement intensifies the emotions behind those relationships. Although all the dancers get brief solo moments during these sequences—and none more stunning than Spivey’s live recreation of the bodily shipwreck that we had previously witnessed digitally—Pite’s basic architecture during the second half is the duet: between Prospero and Ariel, Prospero and Miranda, Antonio and Sebastian, Prospero and Caliban, and Miranda and Ferdinand. This is some of Pite’s most complex and original partnering, giving a physical form to the degrees of indebtedness and obligation, choice and constraint, power and reciprocity that mark both the connection and the distance between different characters. Thus, for example, the opening duet between Prospero and Ariel is notable for its gorgeous lifts; but the striving for flight that we intuit in Ariel’s impossibly fluid leg extensions especially is counterbalanced by arms that, though neither locked with nor pinned down by Prospero’s, cannot seem to release her. Similarly, Caliban’s head remains in a vice-grip for much of his duet with Prospero, and even when he does break free and stands up straight and smooths down the suit jacket he is wearing as a sop to his wounded dignity and pride, he is just as quickly forced back down to the ground by the unrelenting Prospero, and must propel himself about the stage via his sits bones and knees. Caliban is the only dancer other than Prospero who speaks while moving, which is appropriate for the character who, having been taught Prospero’s language, knows only “how to curse.” The irony is that Shakespeare gives Caliban some of the most beautiful poetry in the play, a portion of which we hear in whispered voice-over. However, Pite largely confines Caliban’s live enunciated speech—which Prospero seeks to stifle—to a single repeated utterance: “This island’s mine” (I.ii.334). Here we have the flip-side of the scalar relationship between text and movement on offer in the first half of the piece; in this case, the simple linguistic declarative distills the intense, physical muscularity of Caliban’s danced resistance to Prospero’s dominance over him.

*The Tempest Replica* ends with the epilogue that was forestalled in the first half; Prospero, having given up magic, is shadowed and eventually overwhelmed by the four other male dancers, now back in their all-white costumes. In the final tableau, Prospero is placed prone on the floor in a position akin to the one in which we first encounter Miranda at the start of the work; the other dancers stand over the stilled creator, silently clapping as the lights fade to black (see [Photo 6](#)). The image alludes, of course, to Prospero’s concluding speech, in which he asks to be released from his own creative bondage via the audience’s applause, and which most critics read as a self-reflexive comment, in this his last major play, on Shakespeare’s setting aside of his writing quill. As a postscript to Pite’s work, this scene has likewise come to overdetermine my post-evental experience of *The Tempest Replica*. That is, given Pite’s own longstanding concerns with the dialectic of creation and destruction, and taken together with her announcement at a pre-show artist’s talk that following the conclusion of the 2012 tour of the piece she would be putting Kidd Pivot on hiatus to take a year’s sabbatical (Pite [2012a](#)), I have on a very real and somatic level registered the



Photo 6. Eric Beauchesne (on floor) and company in *The Tempest Replica* (2011). Photographer: Jörg Baumann. Photograph courtesy of Kidd Pivot.

performance as a wistful farewell from a choreographer who at the time did not know in what form, for how long, or even if her company would reconstitute itself.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The You Show***

That, in retrospect, I felt so keenly this perceived double ending to *The Tempest Replica* has much to do with the extended textual dialogue I have imagined myself to be conducting with the choreographer in this essay. Pite is herself exceedingly generous in talking about the work she creates: at open rehearsals, in public talks and pre- and post-performance conversations with audiences, and in print and video interviews. Indeed, as my own consistent quotation of her words in these pages attests, the *matter* of dance's real and imagined interlocutors is clearly important to Pite. And it is one she addresses expressly in *The You Show* (2010), an evening of four shorter pieces whose genesis, again in her words, came from the idea of composing works of dance "in the second person." How might this in turn enable audience members to locate themselves in a dancer's movements, and see their own stories and conflicts and losses reflected in the physically embodied language on stage? As Pite explained at a talkback following the performance I saw in May 2011, when her dancers reach their arms behind them, or torque their bodies backward, or fall onto the floor, she is hypothesizing that, in witnessing those actions, we will feel something similar in our own bodies, whether as a result of our own storehouse of corporeal memories that the dancers' movements trigger, or by virtue of imaginatively simulating, in direct motor response, those movements ourselves (Pite 2011). Pite thus frames her impetus for the work in terms remarkably similar to Foster's and McConachie's applications of scientific theories of "mirror neurons" to their respective conceptions of "kinesthetic empathy" and "social cognition" in dance and theater performance (see Foster 2011, 165–73; McConachie 2008, 70–79).<sup>8</sup>

However, what I find most interesting, and what I want to conclude by discussing very briefly, is that in the first and last pieces, an active engine of Pite's experiments in second person sensory-motor response is textual address. At the same time, I must acknowledge that, unlike in my post-

eventual phenomenological reflections on *Dark Matters* and *The Tempest Replica*, in this instance I am somewhat impoverished in terms of actual postscripts. The texts that accompany the opening and closing sections of *The You Show* were both written by Pite and have not, to my knowledge, been published. Indeed, as verbal prompts to my somatic memories of these works I have only their titles, a few lines from the former that I jotted down on my program in the dark, and a very hazy purchase on the broad parameters of the story that takes shape from the words spoken in the latter. Supplementing this, however, is a much more acute sense of the *sound* of the recorded narration in the first piece and both the *sight* and *site* of its live enunciation in the second—a perceptual equivalence in the registering of and response to body, voice, and text that has been my focus throughout this essay.

Created between *Dark Matters* and *The Tempest Replica*, *The You Show* both draws from the movement vocabulary of the former and anticipates the partnering patterns of the latter. The work is made up of four duets, the first of which, “A Picture of You Falling,” was originally created as a one-off piece in 2008 for Chu and Anne Plamondon, roughly coincident with Pite’s preliminary work on *Dark Matters*. This helps to explain both works’ shared fascination with the body’s marionette-like qualities, the collapsings and strivings of which we are not always the agent (see [Photo 7](#)). Indeed, the voice-over text (spoken by the actress Kate Strong) explicitly locates the impulse to move *outside* one’s body, that is, in simultaneously fascinated and incredulous response to a *representation* of one’s body moving: “Is this your hand? Is this your back? Is this your hand *reaching* back?” Here, and elsewhere, the text at once describes and precipitates the movement. “This is a picture of you *falling*—knees, hip, hands, elbows, head. This is the sound of your heart *hitting* the floor”: as we hear these words intoned, with emphasis placed on the action verbs, Chu’s liquid limbs begin to fold in turn as he crumples to the stage joint by joint. However, the effect is not purely mimetic. For one, there is Plamondon’s own response to Chu’s response to the text, which is primarily to seek to forestall the movement toward immobility, doubly represented in the live image of Chu’s prone body on stage, and in the word-image being painted for us via the text. Then there is our own response, which I would argue is also double—textually and kinesthetically. That is, to the extent that it might additionally feel like we are falling in response to or along with Chu falling, we cannot affectively and imitatively disjoin either response from the ambiguity of address embedded in that second person pronoun.

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Photo 7. Peter Chu and Anne Plamondon in “A Picture of You Falling,” *The You Show* (2010).  
Photographer: Michael Slobodian. Photograph courtesy of Kidd Pivot.





Who, in other words, is the “you” who is falling? Answering this question in the context of Pite’s stated aim of engaging feelings of kinesthetic response in her audience requires shifting entrenched theories of mimeticism from the idea of performers imitating actions on stage to spectators mirroring those actions in the audience (see McConachie 2008, 71). What McConachie refers to as “visuo-motor observation” is, of course, the basis for training in all movement: from an infant learning to walk to the dancer learning new steps. But critics have not until recently paid close enough attention to how this principle operates for audiences watching movement-based work, despite the frequency with which we might find ourselves consciously or unconsciously mimicking that movement post-performance. The voice-over in “A Picture of You Falling” commands us to pay attention. It opens with a deictic, “this,” which in my recollection of the stress placed upon it and the slight pause that followed it, reads as the verbal equivalent of an extended index finger, locating us firmly inside the piece’s scenic frame. Moreover, the rhythmic repetition of the two key phrases attached to “this,” and the play with pacing, tempo, and emphasis therein, functions as a kind of aural entrainment, arguably helping to synchronize our internal sense of proprioception to the trajectory of downward movement we see represented externally in Chu’s slowly buckling body: knees, hip, hands, elbows, head. Finally, there is what I can only describe as the sonic boom that accompanies Strong’s richly textured and immensely seductive voice—one that, in concert with the movement, sets off a kind of haptic echo in our own bodies.

That echo reverberates with different degrees of intensity over the course of the next two pieces in the program. Both use physical action and emotional reaction as structuring motifs. In “The Other You,” Pite pairs Beauchesne and Pokorný, dancers of similar height and build, and each sporting a shaved head and similar dark jacket. A study in increasingly high stakes brinkmanship and animal aggression, with each man’s physical attempts at connection or dominance met by an equal and opposing force, the piece culminates in a surprisingly tender *pas de deux* to *Moonlight Sonata*. Here, in a consciously literary move, Pite uses a deliberately clichéd musical citation to throw into relief the darker archetypes explored in the first half of the piece, which, by virtue of its contiguous relationship to the voice-over from the opening duet that lingers in our brains, can certainly be read as taking up and extending the “bad feelings” that underpin that text’s images of romantic regret. By contrast, “Das Glashaus,” danced by Salgado and Matthon, and featuring a score by long-time collaborator Owen Belton that is composed of sounds of shattering glass, lacks similar dramatic tension. Arguably this has less to do with any inherent flaws in the movement’s conceptual expression than with the distance of the piece—which follows an intermission—from the overall perceptual impression initially created by Strong’s narration. Having been cued to listen, as well as to watch, the fact that we do not get any new textual input in this piece affects the way we process, store, and respond to its physical language.

However, text returns in *The You Show*’s final piece, “A Picture of You Flying,” which in its title is quite clearly meant as a bookend to the opening number. But, unlike in that piece, or any of the other works discussed in this essay, here Pite employs a new mode of narration: live speech. It begins with Spivey emerging from the wings and taking a seat on simple wooden chair positioned downstage left. He begins to address the audience quietly, almost shyly. Notwithstanding the bold physical and scenographic uses to which chairs have been put in much contemporary dance—including now iconic works by Bausch (*Café Müller*) and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (*Rosas Danst Rosas*)—the image of Spivey sitting still on a chair, talking so conversationally, at first strikes me as completely incongruous. This undoubtedly has much to do with the fact that I have always identified with Spivey as among the most physically “active” of Kidd Pivot’s dancers when on stage. To see him suddenly not moving is strange. Contributing to one’s sense of defamiliarization in this respect are the words coming out of Spivey’s mouth, which actually draw added attention to his sedentariness by referencing things like sacrifice, strength, endurance, the body’s armor, and the physical and mental toll exacted by his line of work.

At first we are wont to think this is a bit of self-reflexive commentary on Spivey's profession as a dancer, especially when he mentions the drawbacks of wearing tights, lifting his pant leg to reveal a bit of red Lycra underneath. But before Spivey can continue further, he is interrupted by Marín Garcia, who enters speaking animatedly in Spanish—to our and Spivey's mutual confusion. At a workshop presentation of the piece in October 2010, Pite told the audience that she had not yet written the monologue planned for Marín Garcia, and so she had simply asked her to improvise for the time being in her native language (Pite 2010). However, in the staged performance I saw the following spring, Marín Garcia's speech remained untranslated.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, we are able to discern from the intensely expressive delivery of her text, and via the hand waving and pacing that accompanies her speech, that the dancer is upset, and that the cause of this upset appears to be Spivey, who has arisen from his chair and now trails Marín Garcia, struggling like the non-Spanish speakers in the audience for an explanation of what's being said. However, taking Pite's own talk about what she had originally intended for this verbal exchange as one of the possible postscripts through which to re-experience the piece, I read her decision to leave Marín Garcia's speech untranslated, and thus its referential function inaccessible to many in the audience, as transferring emphasis not just to its expressive function, but also to its phatic function. That is, talk in this instance is at once task-oriented, in the sense that Bronislaw Malinowski originally gave to phatic as a term, and is being deployed, in Roman Jakobson's subsequent typology of speech functions, for interactive purposes, as a way of maintaining contact.<sup>10</sup> In this way, phatic speech more closely approximates the purely gestural, not least in how it draws attention to itself as a medium of (mis)communication—Spivey's own phatic declaration of "I can't understand what you're saying" finding its gestural corollary in his upturned hands and shrugged shoulders. What I am trying to suggest, in other words, is that speech in this instance is operating like a movement phrase, which is why it should come as no surprise that Marín Garcia's explosive entrance and her plosive speech succeed not only in getting Spivey up off his chair, but also in propelling him across the stage, whereupon we notice what has perhaps escaped our attention until now: a red towel lying on the floor. Marín Garcia picks it up and wraps it around Spivey's neck, like a cape (see [Photo 8](#)). When Spivey mentions flying, the meaning of his earlier conversation to us from the chair becomes moderately more clear: that is, we are able to surmise that he was speaking to us not simply from his professional identity as a dancer, but also from the adopted theatrical persona of a superhero character. But then, as the movement-based elaboration of this text goes on to reveal, what precisely is the difference?

In this thirty-five-minute work, Pite quotes from some of the comic book and action movie imagery she played with in the supernumerary sequences of *Dark Matters*. This time, however, she deliberately slows down the motion, and the highlight is a Transformers-esque duet between Spivey and Marín Garcia, these two friend-foes and possible lovers raised aloft, their arms and legs and heads shielded and manipulated by other company members as they dance/fight to the death—or sheer exhaustion. As I have shown, Pite is a choreographer who is as obsessed with how the body is danced as with dancing bodies. The group scenes in "A Picture of You Flying" operate in a manner equivalent to stop-motion animation, with Pite showing us frame-by-frame, or limb-by-limb, how these bodies can be made to soar through the air in the way that they do (see [Photo 9](#)). Observing the preparation alongside the execution, we are able to intuit if not the actual sensation of flying in our own bodies, then at least the combined muscular effort that would be required to do so. And it is worth remembering, in this respect, that Spivey's talk has mostly been about the toil of and the toll on his body—and that he has delivered much of it while sitting in a chair, just like us. At the end of the evening, we, in the audience, certainly have not done as much work as Pite's dancers. But the making human of what for most of us appears decidedly superhuman is one of the conceits of Spivey's opening conversation, which is as much about affective labor as it is about physical labor, and which acknowledges the work we in the audience are doing on both fronts via its second person address.



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Photo 8. Jermaine Spivey and cape in “A Picture of You Flying,” *The You Show* (2010). Photographer: Michael Slobodian. Photograph courtesy of Kidd Pivot.

It is this intimate exchange of *e*-motional energy between performer and spectator that distinguishes Pite’s dance-theater as “feeling” in the sense that Martin Welton employs the term to describe the perceptual ecology of performance more generally. That is, the works I have discussed in this essay do not just transmit sensations or sense impressions to us, stimulating us aurally or visually or kinesthetically; they also give us, as Welton states, “the feel of feeling,” providing instruction in how to attend or become newly attuned to a particular moment, or quality of feeling—to be more consciously open and receptive to a practice of spectating that for Welton per force also “includes haptic and locomotive capacities” (2012, 155). It is my argument that text is one of the pivotal means by which Pite helps us to experience her work more feelingly. On the one hand, it functions as a reassuring narrative anchor, helping to plant one cognitive foot firmly in the realm of the referential; at the same time, much of that text is often delivered by sensuous and often deeply kinesthetic means: via bodies and voices and images moving through space. This suggests that our active response not just to a given work’s message but also to its (inter)mediality requires some improvisatory flexibility in shifting between what something might mean and how it actually works—including how it works *on* us, subjecting us to *being moved* (physically and affectively) in ways over which we do not always have individual control. In this respect, the text-as-postscript functions as an additional important pivot point. It extends our perspective, as



Photo 9. Sandra Marín García (foreground) with, from left to right, Ariel Freedman, Cindy Salgado, and Anne Plamondon in “A Picture of You Flying,” *The You Show* (2010). Photographer: Michael Slobodian. Photograph courtesy of Kidd Pivot.

I hope I have suggested, on who (body) or what (text) is possibly remembering a past performance event. But it also extends our perspective—temporally and conceptually—on what remains of that event. As such, the text of this essay joins the text deployed in Pite’s dances, *and* the texts employed (from literary sources to rehearsal studio conversations) to conceive and give shape to those dances, in the never fully knowable or explainable matter of how we narrate the experience of movement.

## Notes

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1. Burt is responding here to the dominant account of Judson Church provided by Sally Banes. Ironically, in *Democracy’s Body*, first published in 1983, Banes documents at length the different forms of textual address employed in several of the dances at the first Judson concert in 1962, including the dramatic impact of Yvonne Rainer’s penultimate recitation of “poetic autobiography” in *Ordinary Dance*, and the ways in which this “heighten[ed] the difficulty of the dancer’s action by engaging the memory in simultaneously recalling the text and the complicated movement phrases” (1993, 66, 67). However, in the introduction to the 1987 edition of *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, she associates the “rekindling of interest in narrative structures,” and “an emphasis on the genre of autobiography,” in particular, with a late, 1980s shift—and, clearly to her, betrayal—of the early principles of “analytic” postmodern dance (Banes 1987, xxix, xxx).

2. Exemplary in this regard is the work of Jérôme Bel. See Lepecki (2006, 45–64) and Dickinson (2014).

3. Here, Schneider is responding to the privileging of live art’s ephemerality in much performance studies criticism, with her work serving as a rejoinder especially to the influential theories of

Peggy Phelan (1993) and Diana Taylor (2003). Lavery, in his article, notes the overlaps between an earlier formulation of Schneider's argument and his own (2009, 45).

4. Pite uses as her translation of Voltaire's poem the one done by Joseph McCabe, a former English priest who became a committed atheist and rationalist.

5. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Deleuze introduces his concept of the movement-image by referencing the "action dance" of Fred Astaire and the "action mime" of Charlie Chaplin; see Deleuze (1986, 6–7).

6. "Doubt requires more courage than conviction does, and more energy; because conviction is a resting place and doubt it is infinite; it is a passionate exercise. We've got to learn to live with a full measure of uncertainty. There is no last word. That's the silence under the chatter of our time" (Shanley 2005, 7).

7. At this writing, the company has in fact relaunched—and with a planned world tour of *The Tempest Replica*. However, not all the original company members have returned. And while Pite has committed to remaining in Vancouver to create new work for Kidd Pivot (despite multiple offers to take over the directorships of several prestigious companies), she is candid about the funding vacuum she now faces; see Smith (2014).

8. In their discussions of mirror neurons, Foster and McConachie both draw from the pioneering research of Vittorio Gallese (2008).

9. This is not the first time Pite, an Anglophone, has used non-English speech in her dance works; at one point in *Lost Action*, Eric Beauchesne addresses the audience in French.

10. On the phatic function in speech, see Malinowski (1923) and Jakobson (1960, 355–6). My thanks are due to Sima Belmar for reminding me of the phatic possibilities of speech in dance.

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