

Ricordiamo

The Choreography of Memory

MATTHEW BURGESS

DAVID HAD BEEN HIRED TO TEACH Martha Graham technique at summer dance festivals in Italy, so the obvious question was, Can I come? My oral exams were on the horizon, but why not read in shady corners of piazzas instead of sweaty Brooklyn? David promptly e-mailed his agent for permission, and she replied with a surprising offer: could I teach poetry workshops to dancers in exchange for room, board, and round-trip airfare? Having worked as a freelance teaching artist for nearly a decade, I knew how to respond to such propositions: you say yes immediately and figure out the details later.

Then reality set in: I didn't speak a lick of Italian. David, who had toured Italy for five months with a dance company, knew basic survival Italian, and as a teacher who speaks primarily with the body anyway, he could get by. But how would I teach poetry to non-English-speaking Italians? I relayed my concern to his agent, Gisella Zilembo of EventiDanza, but she dismissed it as a minor detail. She would translate, if nec-

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essary: Not a problem! So David and I began brainstorming the possibilities.

Instinctively I reached for a personal "old faithful" exercise, based on Joe Brainard's book-length poem *I Remember*. What if we asked the Italian dancers to free-write a list of memories? What if they selected one memory from their list and transformed it into a short solo? What if David incorporated their individual solos into a longer piece? One obvious parallel between poetry and dance surfaced in conversation: the intuitive, learn-as-you-go processes of written and choreographic composition—free-writing as improvisation. Then Gertrude Stein piped in: "Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea. / Susie Asado."

One of Stein's well-known "Cubist portrait" poems, "Susie Asado" was inspired by an encounter with a flamenco dancer during a trip to Spain. Rather than writing visual descriptions, Stein emphasizes the aural aspects of the performance. Reading the poem with this in mind, one can detect the echoes of clapping hands ("Sweet sweet sweet sweet tea"), the thick, thumping heels ("A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers"), the insistent, percussive castanets ("Drink pups drink pups"), and the swishing of the dress ("leash a sash hold"). These seemingly nonsensical lines evoke flamenco's sonic assault while remaining more or less abstract: "Trees tremble, the old vats are

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in bobbles, bobbles which shade and shove and render clean, render clean must”).

“Susie Asado” is one of my favorite poems to teach. Though many students may be perplexed by its strangeness, they are also attracted to its tongue-twisting repetitions and dizzying wordplay, which inevitably remind someone of Dr. Seuss. I begin by reading the poem aloud and asking for observations: What might this poem be doing? What is it not doing? What literary techniques can you identify? Sometimes I’ll play a piece of flamenco music or pass around a portrait by Braque or Picasso and invite comparisons. Eventually I introduce the illuminating backstory and watch the flickers of recognition in the eyes of some, while others remain cautiously skeptical.

“Susie Asado” is especially useful to introduce a lesson on ekphrasis, writing that takes its inspiration from visual art, and Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Spanish Dancer” is an excellent companion poem. Rilke demonstrates the power of metaphor to paint a vivid picture: “One upward glance and she ignites her hair / and, whirling faster and faster, fans her dress / into passionate flames, till it becomes a furnace / from which, like startled rattlesnakes, the long / naked arms uncoil, aroused and clicking.” By teaching the poems together, students can contrast the two modes and experiment with one or both. Interestingly, many of the initial naysayers end up imitating Stein.

Our Italian collaboration, then, was conceived as a kind of reverse-ekphrasis. The dancers would begin by free-writing “I remember” poems and then improvise short choreographic “phrases” inspired by a particular line on the page—one personal memory. In the second lesson, we would compare Stein and Rilke’s dancer “portraits” and discuss analogues in modern dance. While showing clips of Pina Baush and Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham and Anna Teresa De

Keersmaecker, we would invite students to compare more literal, narrative-centered movement with choreography that is increasingly innovative and abstract. Next, as they devel-

oped and refined their solos in response to both the writing and dance, they would expand one memory into a longer poem. Finally, David would set a longer piece that we would call *Ricordiamo*, or “We Remember.” That was the plan—now if I only spoke more Italian.

The first festival was in Sardinia in July. A dance studio in Rome had been chosen to participate in the project, and the studio’s twenty-three teenagers and their teacher joined us at a resort for a five-day intensive. David and I had our curriculum in place, but as we approached the studio on day one, we harbored separate anxieties. Mine: would the poetry lessons be lost in translation? His: how to assemble so many individual solos into a coherent, fifteen-minute piece? But then we caught sight of the wide-eyed dancers with their tidy hairdos and tights, eighteen-year-old divas towering over petite twelve-year-old ballerinas, punctuated by one brave boy named Tiziano. I sidled up to Gisella, our plucky agent-translator, and we kicked off the first writing workshop.

The dancers sat in a large circle on the floor of the studio where they would soon warm up. I explained the concept of free-writing, compared it to dance improvisation, and as Gisella translated, I watched them nod their understanding. Then we read an Italian translation of selected lines from Brainard’s book, and judging from the bright expressions and twitters of laughter, I sensed we were home free. When I finally asked them to pick up their pencils and free-write their own lists, the circle opened out and they sprawled into writing position. For the next eight to ten minutes, our pencils skipped across the page with the same quality of dreamy attention that “I remembers” induce in the third-graders I teach in Harlem or my composition students at Brooklyn College.

The read-around following the free-write is usually my favorite part of the exercise, but what to do when you don't speak the language? Though I didn't understand much (my college-level Spanish allowed me flickers of comprehension), I still loved listening to them. Maybe my awareness of the shifting tones of voice was heightened, the quivers of nerves and the rising courage. I paid attention to the open, compassionate expressions of the listeners, as well as the genuine amazement of their teacher, who read her list as well. There is an almost perceptible web of connections that forms when a group reads "I remember" poems aloud, invisible threads connecting one person to another as one poet's particular memory ripples outward toward the universal, and the dare of self-disclosure summons a respectful attention, even among teenagers, who are understandably adept at keeping their guard up.

But dancers, I was learning, are especially daring and disciplined. In writing classes, students routinely blurt disclaimers before reading anything aloud, but these dancers didn't hesitate one bit. Perhaps it was their teacher's eagle-eyed presence (she often would snap out corrections from across the studio during

rehearsals) or their desire to impress David, but they read their lists with an admirable willingness and poise. What we asked them to do the following day required even more courage.

Having written more "I remembers" for homework, the dancers sat in the circle with their crinkled pages as we explained the next step. First they had to select one memory from the list that held some significant resonance for them. One that makes your heart beat, David advised. The next step was to allow the memory to move them—to hold the memory in the mind and body and create a short solo. I looked around and saw the dancers taking in this information. They weren't being asked to imitate a routine or hone their technique; they were being invited to make something new. On the spot. And not just a flashy gesture or jump, but a phrase of movement inspired by something deeply personal. We were asking them to express outwardly some aspect of their inner lives, to traverse the dangerous boundary between private and public. We were asking these Italian teenagers to be artists, autobiographers, and collaborators. I imagined myself in their position and became electrified with vicarious panic. If someone had sprung this on me



Part of Angelica's solo becomes integrated into a trio. Photo by Matthew Burgess.



The final performance of Centro Studio Danza Siene at the San Galgano Dance Festival.
Photo by Matthew Burgess.

when I was sixteen, I would have run for my life or fainted or quickly twisted an ankle. Were we asking too much of them? Fortunately, David was there to crack the whip: “*Dieci minuti!*” I watched them scatter off to various corners of the studio, set their papers down, and begin. Stretching, dancing, stopping to think, and dancing more. It was working.

When the time was up, David called them back and asked if there was a “brava” who was willing to begin. The instructions: stand up, read your line aloud (Gisella would translate), and then perform your solo in the center of the circle. When they finished, David asked them to turn around and do the same solo facing the opposite direction, demonstrating the multidimensionality of choreography. The “brava” turned out to be one of the older students, Silvia, who stepped forward first. “*Mi ricordo quello sguardo indifeso e il desiderio di esserci.*” (I remember that look of helplessness and the desire to be there.) She performed her solo twice, and David, now on his feet, made suggestions to help her shape it and take it further. This was definitely a draft phase of the process, and though there were some melodramatic Romeo and Juliet-style

daggers-to-the-heart, there were many vivid moments that sparkled with promise. One of the youngest dancers, Angelica, mesmerized us with her interpretation of a seemingly straightforward line: “*Mi ricordo il calore della sabbia che mi sfiorava il corpo pieno di salsedine.*” (I remember the warmth of the sand that I touched, my body covered in salt.) She ran one hand across the opposite arm and then opened out in a slow twirl, and somehow the intensity of her gaze following the trajectory of her fingers

transported us from skin, to shore, to sea, to horizon line: she embodied the sensation—and we followed her. Their teacher, I noticed, was alternately moved, impressed, and sometimes genuinely astonished. Small breakthroughs were happening right and left—I was riveted. We went around the circle, one dancer at a time, and when we finished, the applause was spontaneous and abundant.

In the remaining days, my job became easier while David’s steadily intensified. He had slipped into a laser-like focus, taking it all in. He used GarageBand to collage a single piece of music out of various songs, and he asked the dancers to speak their “I remembers” into his laptop. He then layered each dancer’s voice into the music so that their lines of poetry coincided with their solos. The biggest challenge was to find the subtle connections between their memories and movement, to group them thematically and tonally, and begin to puzzle the individual solos together. It was less about placing them in sequence and more about creating a larger narrative structure that would contain—and connect—their various contributions.

When we came up with the idea for *Ricordiamo*,

we hadn't fully appreciated the combination of hard work and serendipity necessary to make it all cohere. There was a sense of risk involved, one that any teacher who dares to try something new keenly understands. Will this actually work? Will the students connect with it? Will they learn something valuable? This riskiness ended up being one of the most exciting aspects of the experience (as is often the case) because it placed us, and our students, on the edge of the creative process. "I remember when they did a 'run' of the piece for the first time and there was this moment when all their faces lit up," David explains. "They were looking at me and looking at each other and it was becoming clear to them that something bigger than their own story was being created." What began as individual solos were gradually merging into duets, trios, and group sections, and some gestures were repeated and patterned throughout the dance. In theory and in practice, the dancers were weaving strands of their individual stories into dynamic relation to those of their peers and collaborators, and the result was a powerful reminder of the connection between the personal and the universal.

On the final night of the festival, the dancers performed several pieces. Some of them had been learned during the week in other workshops while others had been rehearsed at the studio in Rome. One was full of jumps and tricks, the dancers looking exhilarated with their stage smiles. Another was a contemporary piece with its medley of music video moves, the dancers dressed in skimpy, sparkly costumes. "Ricordiamo" had a completely different texture and tone. David softened the rainbow-tinted lighting, and the dancers changed into their own tights and tank tops. We had printed and distributed a poem with lines from each of their "I remembers," listed in order of appearance in the piece, so the audience could connect with the memories that inspired the movement. The effect was that, when the piece began, we were suddenly seeing these dancers as themselves rather than performers in a splashy spectacle. It was longer and quieter than the other pieces, certainly less punchy, but completely cap-

tivating. As the final solo finished, one seated dancer stood up and began writing in the air, and as the overlapping voices emerged from the fading music, the others stood up, one by one, and mimicked the movement of the pen across the page, bringing us back to the beginning. "*Mi ricordo... Mi ricordo... Mi ricordo...*"

I thought back to the morning in Brooklyn when David and I dreamed up the project. I remembered what we had said. Maybe we could teach the students that art is not just about technical precision. Maybe we could use poetry to connect them to this truth, to demonstrate that the moves we make, both on the page and across the floor, are animated by our experiences, the memories we hold in mind and body. And further, we can make something of these memories—we can transform them into something that moves and inspires others. David lit up: "Wait, there's a Martha Graham quote that speaks to this perfectly!" Later, when he read her words aloud, they had the ring of a blessing and a dare, something we could share with our young Italian dancers:

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. ☺

