

The Work of Dancing: A Portrait of Kenji Matsuyama Ribeiro (Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal)

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This is not to indulge in the tired game of emotion versus thought, body versus mind, recycled by current academic fashion into concern with “the body” as key to wisdom. For where can such a program end but in the tightening of paradox; an intellectual containment of the body’s understanding? What we aim at is a more accurate, a more mindful, understanding of the play of mind on body in the everyday and, as regards academic practice, nowhere are the notions of tactility and distraction more obviously important than in the need to critique what I take to be a dominant critical practice which could be called the “allegorizing” mode of reading ideology into events and artifacts, cockfights and carnivals, advertisements and film, private and public spaces, in which the surface phenomenon, as in allegory, stands as a cipher for uncovering horizon after horizon of otherwise obscure systems of meanings.

Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (1992)¹

For several years now, Kenji Matsuyama Ribeiro has been a dear friend of mine. It is one of those friendships that start out as immediately comfortable and grow profound at a rapid pace. Beginning with our first meetings, at the home of mutual friends, our conversations, which usually play out across three languages, would inevitably circle back to the topics of multilingualism, cosmopolitanism, and the agony of (un)belonging. Our connection, in other words, originated in our recognition of one another as members of what Pico Iyer has called the “floating tribe” of “people not living in their own countries” and which, according to him, now represents the “fifth-largest nation on

¹ Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 147.

Earth.”² Kenji and I were born not even a year apart from each other of parents living in Paris but not at all *de souche*, and shortly thereafter both our families moved to provincial towns elsewhere in Europe—his to San Lazzaro di Savena, Italy, near Bologna, and mine to Neuenburg, Germany, near Freiburg. Thus, we both grew up in linguistic, cultural, and in his case also ethnic, environments different from those of our parents which, nonetheless, made a deep mark on us despite their relative randomness (we might easily have ended up elsewhere, in another small town or even in a different country entirely). At the same time, the values transmitted within our families were those of cosmopolitanism, “high art,” and what might broadly be thought of as “the European Left.” Then, as young adults, we both left our countries of adoption in order to attend school and, in his case, work in other European countries. Graduate school then led me to Canada, while for him it was a contract with the Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal.

While we marvelled at the similarities between our backgrounds and consequently complicated senses of identity, we also became increasingly fascinated with the parallels and differences that, we soon realized, could be drawn between academia and the world of dance, between attending graduate school and being part of a company. The similarities, we soon noted, take their roots in the institutional aspects of universities and dance companies—especially in a place like Quebec, where both are at least partially supported through government funding. Other similarities have to do with the internalization of a strong work ethic and a constant quest for perfection, and yet others with the sense of being apart from the rest of society, and of never

² It is Kenji who first introduced me to the ideas of Pico Iyer. See Pico Iyer, “Where is Home?” (transcript), *Ted.com* (no date) http://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ier_where_is_home/transcript?language=en (accessed March 20, 2015). See also: Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (New York: Vintage Departures, 2001).

THE WORK OF DANCING

having quite managed to “grow up” in both one’s own and the eyes of others. Finally, there is the almost existential fear, shared by both of us, of being (de)valued as, respectively, “just a body” or “just a brain.” On the other hand, the most notable difference between both spheres lies in the fact that, as a 32-year-old dancer, Kenji has a rich 11-year career behind him while I, having just turned 33 and finding myself on the cusp of finishing my PhD, feel like my career has barely begun. Kenji has been with the Grands Ballets for several years now, and he is slowly beginning to contemplate his next career move. Ultimately, he knows he might have to reinvent himself entirely, maybe even start a second career. I, on the other hand, am looking down into the abyss of the North American humanities and social sciences wondering, like many of my peers, whether there will ever be a place for me at a decent institution (or an indecent one, for that matter) and whether embarking on the long process of writing a PhD was even worth it. At a certain point, difference turns into sameness: like Kenji, I might have to think about reinventing myself soon and give up the one mode of functioning I have known for virtually all of my life—being “in school.”

One evening in the summer of 2014, Kenji came over to cook dinner and, over his excellent *penne alla puttanesca*, we proceeded to record the three-hour conversation that forms the basis of what follows: the portrait of one dancer in particular. Taking a reverse approach to documents such as Frederick Wiseman’s *Ballet* (1995) and Robert Altman’s *The Company* (2003), which examine dance through the prism of the institution and its many actors, I have chosen to focus on a singular person in order to tell the incomplete or sketch-like, yet highly personal and lively, story of (mostly European) dance within today’s rapidly-changing global setting. I am not an anthropologist and this is my first attempt at ethnographic writing. Similarly, I do not have a formal

SEACHANGE | PRACTICE(S)

background in creative writing. Yet, with this piece, I am attempting to draw on both of these practices because they allow me, through a few, simple stylistic choices, to bring out, not only one, but rather the many voices that I have heard in my conversations with Kenji over the years. There is the voice of his father, admonishing him not to take up dance but later recognizing him as a peer. There are the voices of teachers, often life-altering, and the internalized voice of a long-standing cultural institution (classical ballet) that pushes for ever-more perfection and for whom hard work is rarely ever “enough.” There is the voice of youth, of having been in the right place at the right time, at least once, and there is the voice of maturity, with its equal parts of reason and doubt. Finally, there is the voice of History, which runs through all of us sometimes, for instance when we are led to cross paths with figures who are larger-than-life, or when we are able to take a step back and tally the change that has happened within a given field over our own short lifetimes, while we were busy practising what we love.

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He cannot think of a time in his life when he wasn't practising something—first music, then dance. Both of his parents are classically trained dancers, and so he has always been exposed to dance. When he was born, his parents were living in France. They were poor (they still are) and they would not have dreamt of hiring a nanny. Instead, there are pictures that show him as a newborn lying in his mother's arms while she is teaching a class. A few years later, as a toddler, his mother has told him that he had learned every step of *Swan Lake* (Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1875-76) which she had been rehearsing with her students for the school's Christmas production. His father, however, was very much against his becoming a dancer—he didn't want him

THE WORK OF DANCING

to live the difficult life that he had lived. Instead, his father wanted him to become a concert pianist. So he started playing the piano when he was five or six years old. He attended the Conservatorio di musica di Castelfranco Veneto Agostino Steffani, which meant he had to commute to Treviso, a three-hour drive from where he lived, once a week.

For ten years, he practised at least four hours a day. He knows that he was talented and could likely have continued as a pianist. When he reached the age of 16, however, he lost interest in the piano. He had been thinking of taking up dance seriously for a while, but lacked the courage to tell his father. Shortly after he had quit taking piano lessons without telling his parents, he came home one evening and told his mother he wanted to be a dancer. His mother's response was supportive: "if you're sure," she said, "we'll have to get you started right away because it's already quite late!" She told his father about it when he came home that night. His father was extremely angry: "what does he think he's doing? He's already too old!" Nonetheless, he started training in his parents' school, where both of them were his teachers for several years. As with the piano before, his parents were very strict when it came to practice, but very liberal in other ways. He trained every day and progressed quickly. He built up muscles rapidly, but had to work a lot on his flexibility. He watched ballet videos constantly, often in slow motion. He would deconstruct individual movements, focusing on the exact height of a *passé retiré*, on the fluidity of a *développé*... Less than with the perfection of bodies *per se*, he was obsessed with the perfection of movement, of execution. At first, his father remained doubtful of his aspirations, but gradually he became more accepting. In the end, his father even accompanied him to audition at a series of schools. When he was 18 years old, he was accepted into the Koninklijk Conservatorium (Royal Conservatory) in Den Haag.

His first professional contract was with a small company in Marseille that he had heard about during his final year at the Royal Conservatory. That year, the majority of his classmates were getting jobs with important companies, mostly in Germany: at the Berlin Deutsche Oper, which still existed back then, or at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf, or in Essen. Other friends joined the Stuttgart Ballet, a world-renowned institution. By now, he was the only one who hadn't gotten into a company and he was growing anxious. He would go to auditions but, so far, without results; Marseille was one of the last auditions he attended. Since they were a new company, they were looking for 18 dancers all at once, a real rarity since usually a company will look for one, two, three, or four people at most. He went to their April auditions and, amongst the 500 people in attendance, was offered one of eight boys' contracts.

He was 21 when he joined the company, which was in its very first year. It was run by an ex-super star of the dance world who had started his career with Roland Petit at the Ballet National de Marseille and gone on to Monte Carlo, before dancing with the San Francisco Ballet. It was a small company: 18 dancers, a mixed, contemporary *repertoire*, and of course, the director, who would create his own choreographies, something which is also part of the duties of an artistic director. Though it was what he really wanted, entering the professional world was something of a shock to him, mainly because school had not fully prepared him for the professional world. *You don't expect it but you really want it.* Looking back, he'll say he was lucky though, because he didn't care so much about being part of a renowned company. In the end, he must remember that he doesn't do so badly with drastic changes, even if he's always very scared of them at first. Deep down, he knows he's very versatile.

THE WORK OF DANCING

So he just started working. The director never disliked him, really, but he was very *especial*—in the Spanish sense—in both a positive and a negative way. He would adore him, then he wouldn't talk to him, and then he would adore him again. *Dancing is very much like that, right? It's all about one person's taste.* One day, the director said: "I would like to talk to you." And he told him: "you grew up so much in a few months, and I'm very happy with your work." It must have been around the time of renewing the contracts, so six or seven months after the season had started. He thought to himself, this is fine but it isn't what I want. So he went to audition for the Junior Company of the Netherland Dance Theatre (NDT), which is a major institution in Holland.

As a student at the Royal Conservatory in Den Haag, which was only a five-minute walk away from the Lucent Danstheater, he had spent two years seeing every single show put on by the Junior, Main, and Senior Companies of the NDT. This had been back in the days of NDT 3, the company's senior division that had five members who were above 50.³ Overall, NDT 1, 2, and 3 gave you the opportunity of seeing not just dance, but also performance, over three different spectrums. Especially because of the presence of choreographer Jiří Kylián, all great dancers back then wanted to be part of that company, so NDT 1, the main company, had their pick of great talent. NDT 2, the Junior Company, had a different energy, youth... *The dancers were between 18 and 21, so they were like puppies but also like machines—just crazy, incredible.* The dancers of NDT 3, on the other hand, had a lot of experience and maturity. Naturally, the choreographies were not as physical, because you wouldn't have wanted to show them as unable to do certain things. To see them perform was a very good lesson for him, since he was so young. Watching them increased his

³ NDT3 was shut down in 2006 because "there was not enough structural subsidy to keep up the activities." From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nederlands_Dans_Theater#NDT_III (accessed February 5, 2015).

awareness that ultimately, all dancers will reach that point—some sooner than others, but ultimately everyone will get there, it is inevitable. Their performances were a testament to the infinite nature of dance. Once you set out to discover what the stage could offer you, what options could be discovered, it became a never-ending story of multiple choices and options. These older performers were not there to impress anyone. They were very comfortable with how they were, what they did, and how they did it. Of course, they had been very special to begin with—great dancers and great performers. That’s why it worked.

He auditioned for the Junior Company because only NDT 2 held official public auditions. He went to Den Haag without saying anything to anyone; he was very scared, worried that his director in Marseille would take it badly. After all, it was his first year, his first professional experience. So he escaped for the weekend. He travelled on a Saturday, auditioned on a Sunday, and was back in Marseille by the Monday. There were 450 people auditioning for only two or three girls’ contracts and one boy’s contract. *A lot of waiting around since there were so many people there.* Even so, it was the first audition he enjoyed in his entire life. It adopted a typical structure, with a first round of selections in class followed by a second selection process during *repertoire*—works regularly performed by the company that are taught to candidates on the spot. After some time, there were only 15 of them left, and then less than ten. The names were announced at the very end of the day, at 9.30 in the evening. *When they said the name of the guy and it was not mine, I thought I had nearly touched it and it flew away. But it was not a bad feeling—I was just so happy to have been there. The audition itself had been an amazing experience; to be there with so many talented dancers.* At the very least, he had made it until the end. That was something he could be proud of.

THE WORK OF DANCING

He went back to Marseille without saying a word, but something had shifted: now he was more acutely aware of a whole world of dance out there. A few months later, he happened to overhear two female dancers in his company discussing plans to attend an upcoming audition for the *Compañía Nacional de Danza* in Madrid. He of course knew of choreographer Nacho Duato, and he had seen the work of the main company, but he had not seen the Juniors, he didn't know who their director was or what they performed. Nevertheless, he asked whether he could join the two girls. He announced his plan of auditioning in Madrid to the director of the company in Marseille who threatened him: "if you go to the audition, you won't have a contract here for next season. It's up to you." He thought about it and decided to take the risk anyway. "Looking back now," he muses, "a lot of the time, with choreographers, you're made to feel as though you're someone's property. Not always, but often." Was he naïve back then, he asks himself. He was scared, but he was also courageous (perhaps more so than he is now, more than a decade later). Yet, in spite of his courage, it was perhaps no coincidence that his trip to Madrid started off on the wrong foot: he missed his train and, as a consequence, the connecting flight...

The first time he had seen the *Compañía Nacional*, it was as a child in Bologna and Duato had been performing in the show. Since the 1970s, a type of holy trinity—comprised of Jiří Kylián, William Forsythe, and Mats Ek—had been ruling over European dance. Duato had started his career in the Swedish company Cullberg Ballet under Ek, and he had also worked under Kylián at the NDT. More than sharing a singular choreographic language, these important figures were united by the fact that dance was changing in Europe; together, they had built an institution that markedly departed from the longstanding tradition of classical ballet. By 2003, they were garnering a

lot of attention and receiving numerous prizes. Their companies were what could be called *compagnies d'auteur*—something which, a decade later, is largely missing from the dance scene. Now, everything is globalized: whether you're in Montreal, in Vancouver, in Sydney, in Tokyo, in Oslo, or in Paris, everyone performs Kylián, Ek, Forsythe, Duato, Ohad Naharin... Perhaps the only thing coming close to *compagnies d'auteur* now are so-called “projects.” With national funding for the arts becoming more and more scarce, the structure of the institution has had to evolve in response to shifting economic conditions. A Canadian example is the Vancouver-based choreographer Crystal Pite who danced a lot with Forsythe in Frankfurt. She now runs a project-based company where dancers receive only short contracts, but in essence she is a nomad who doesn't have a fixed studio or theater.

When he finally arrived at the audition, they were looking for seven dancers—four girls and three boys—to be selected from a pool of 200 or so people. Duato was very demanding and the audition was accordingly tough. However, come evening, as in the NDT audition a few months earlier, he was part of only a handful of people remaining. *At this point I just didn't care anymore; I needed to finish this because my body couldn't anymore. I was so dead tired, all I could think was: just don't do this to me anymore.* They gave them a 30-minute break, and when they returned to announce the selected candidates' names, he couldn't believe his was amongst them. He was offered the stability of a two-year contract and the satisfaction of returning to Marseille to announce his success. His pay would be modest—800 euros the first year, 900 the second—, but since the company would be touring incessantly, he still considered it a remarkable opportunity. He called his parents and they were ecstatic, especially his father.

THE WORK OF DANCING

The extraordinary thing about working with Duato at the Compañía Nacional de Danza ⁴ was that here was an environment where one was given sufficient time to get to the essence of the language of the choreographer until it practically became second nature. *At a certain point, every cell of your body knew what you were supposed to do.* During his first year, the company toured Spain extensively. They travelled all over to Barcelona, Sevilla (several times), Pamplona, Girona, Salamanca, Cádiz, Jerez, Úbeda... He discovered the country and fell in love with it. It was an ideal situation: not only was he entirely fulfilled at a professional level, but he also made good friends and found love, all while his parents remained in nearby Italy, only a short flight away.

When Duato arrived at the Compañía Nacional in 1990, he sparked a revolution and created a name for Spain abroad. Duato was tall and good-looking, he spoke several languages and had a remarkable aura... He was also known for being both a perfectionist and a workaholic: back when he had also been a dancer for the company, as well as a director and house choreographer, he had had the obligation of creating several choreographies a season. Years later, anecdotes still circulated where he was depicted as dancing on stage one moment, and then shouting at a light technician off stage the next: “no, no, the lighting is all wrong!” How was it possible to simultaneously dance and yet be aware of everything else that was going on? This fit in with Duato’s larger-than-life personality and open-minded worldview. Another important figure in the company was Tony Fabre who had danced with the Ballet du XXe Siècle in Bruxelles under Maurice Béjart before becoming a principal at Sadler’s Wells Theater Ballet (now Birmingham Royal Ballet). On paper, Duato was

⁴ After José Carlos Martínez became artistic director of the Compañía Nacional in 2010, the Junior and Principal companies were merged.

the artistic director of the Junior Company, and Fabre was his assistant. In reality, however, Fabre was the *de facto* director. He was there every single day, for every show, and for every tour. He had stopped training several years ago and was over 40 at that point, and yet, whenever he demonstrated a series of steps, he moved beautifully. He was also a perfectionist, for whom no amount of work was ever enough. *At the same time, when he told you “good,” you were the proudest and happiest person on earth.* As a result, he was very appreciated—something which became especially visible after he passed away, when messages from ex-dancers began pouring in. Simultaneously, since he was not the official artistic director, he remained within the shadow of Duato’s almost cult-like following and, to this day, his name is essentially unknown outside of dance circles.

The Compañía Nacional 2 mainly performed pieces that were no longer within the repertory of the main company. Many of Duato’s old pieces in particular, such as *Jardí tancat* (1983) for instance, which was the first piece he had composed while he was still at NDT. Kylián had seen it and encouraged him, and so he had become the leading choreographer at NDT. Fabre always reminded the dancers that, even though they performed the same pieces several times over and the choreographies bore Duato’s name, there was no reason to relax. A strict standard had to be maintained. Fabre’s precise philosophy of work was what made dancing for the Compañía Nacional exciting and challenging. *Yet, I never felt the pressure—I always went home at the end of the day feeling satisfied. Dead tired but like I had achieved something.* He doesn’t count while dancing, largely because, with Fabre, they never had counts. “Listen!” Fabre would say, “It’s in the *nanana*.” “Where?” Again, he would make you listen until you got the *nanana* right. Knowing how to listen makes a tremendous difference. Dancers who have worked with Duato or

THE WORK OF DANCING

Kylián have this in common—a particular brand of musicality. Yet, this is not something that just happened; they trained hard to develop this ability.

Fabre was also very good at providing dancers with mental images. Dancing is not only about understanding and executing techniques; it's also a lot about images. *Ultimately, it is your brain that moves your body and allows you to play, or sculpt, or write, or film... As long as you don't have an image in your head, it's hard to do anything. At the same time, it's not all about control. The unpredictable is important too.* This is what is interesting about different companies: there are so many different ways of working. Ask a Batsheva dancer, for instance, and they will probably tell you something entirely different. "When I dance," he'll remark now, "I don't see myself from the outside. But I do have an image in mind—I would like things to look a certain way." *Let's see if I can do it. Then you try, you try, you try, and then one day you see yourself in a video and you say, "ha, listen, I always thought I looked so bad doing this and actually it's not so bad." Or, "I thought it would look a certain way and it's totally different." That's why it's important to see oneself on video from time to time.* Aside from filming their own performances, however, they never used videos or DVDs at the Compañía Nacional. Fabre was like a living encyclopaedia: he knew all the steps of every part, all the musical cues, all the light changes, all the spacings...

Two years was the maximum amount of time someone could stay in the Junior Company, but he was lucky to be given a one-year extension by Duato. After his third year, he had hoped to join the first company; in fact, it had become something of an obsession. He knew Duato believed in him and so he felt quite confident when he went to the audition. Yet, to his bitter disappointment, someone else was offered the job. *Everything cracked all of a sudden.* The explanation given was one he had heard several times before: he was very good, but he was too short. The last time he saw Duato was during a

visit to Spain in 2010, at a celebratory party for the 20th anniversary of Duato's direction of the Compañía Nacional de Danza. *He said that now that he was going to Russia to head the Михайловский театр (Mikhailovsky Theatre), he would need good dancers. It was simultaneously an opening and also a chance for closure. The whole experience had taught me a useful lesson: never to take things for granted. Life is like that: we work so hard to try to control everything, and ultimately we can't control anything anyway, so why stress so much?*

He was 25 now and, as he soon realized, having worked for Duato opened all kinds of doors. He returned to Madrid and accepted a contract with a small company, Ballet Carmen Roche. It was something of an institution, mostly because Carmen Roche, who directed it, had been in the Ballet du XXe Siècle and was married to Victor Ullate, another important choreographer. After a year, a friend from the Compañía Nacional told him about a new company that was opening in Zaragoza. He was hired right away, but unfortunately the company went bankrupt a few months later. *One day, we were doing our pliés, and they walked in saying: "everyone's laid off, it's over!"* That was in April, just before Easter. He was on unemployment for a few months until he heard that the Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal were on tour and performing in Baden-Baden, Germany. Together with his friend from the Compañía, he wrote to enquire whether it would be possible to take a company class. The Grands Ballets had a good reputation, and he knew two former dancers of the Compañía Nacional who were now there. So far, the plan was simply to make contact without having to invest in a transatlantic flight. He also wasn't sure he wanted to leave Zaragoza, where he now had a partner, in order to live in Canada.

THE WORK OF DANCING

They sent a DVD in advance and were invited to attend class in Baden-Baden. The day after—he had returned to Spain right away—he received a call. It was the artistic director of the Grands Ballets, calling to offer him a contract. Once again, the name of Duato had served him well: for what it's worth, he now had a *carte de visite* and everything had become easier. Yet, he hesitated before accepting the contract. His partner was the technical director of the main theater in Zaragoza and, once he decided to leave to Canada, they remained in a long-distance relationship. As he and his friend left for Montreal, he told himself it would likely only be for one year.

With 36 dancers, the Grands Ballets was the largest company he'd ever worked for. Compared to the National Ballet of Canada in Toronto, with its 70 dancers, this might still seem modest. But to him, it was a big change. It was also the first time that he was part of a company that followed the rules of hierarchy inherited from classical ballet more closely. *I had trained classical, but I had never performed classical until then. For The Nutcracker (Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1892) we had to wear tights and make-up and, you know, tralala—that was a first for me, for sure.* Four months after his arrival in Montreal, he contracted an injury and, for the first time in his career, had to stop dancing. Once he recovered, he decided to stay for a second year. He had joined as a *corps de ballet* but in his second year, with the signing of the new contracts, he was promoted to the position of demi-soloist. He was injured again. This time the injury required surgery and, again, he made a full recovery. He was pleased and stayed on, even after his long-distance relationship fell apart during his third year in Montreal. Mostly, he valued the stability that came with being part of a large company, so he kept on staying. Eventually, they made him a soloist. In certain companies, there is a substantial difference of

salary from title to title. Not so in Montreal, where promotions are mainly gestures of recognition from the part of the company.

The ultimate promotion available to him at the Grands Ballets would be first soloist, but he knows this is unlikely. *Based on which role you perform in the company's yearly production of The Nutcracker, you know whether your career is going well or not.* Since he joined the company, he has barely had the opportunity to dance with girls. In *The Nutcracker*, girls are *en pointe*, which makes it especially difficult. *Even the shortest girl is going to be at least my height. Plus, you add a tiara and then finger pirouettes are going to be more of a struggle, I understand that. But I'm never going to get the Flower Pas de Deux, the Snow Pas or the Grand Pas de Deux, and that's ok.* The emphasis placed on physical attributes such as height has to do, largely, with the company's dependence on its annual production of *The Nutcracker*. However, even he defends the idea that, in classical ballet, there is a canon and that certain criteria, such as specific body types, need to be respected. *Girls are in pink tights and they have a tutu and if you're not lean, it's just going to look ridiculous because you'll look like Miss Piggy. And to be a short partner to a girl that's taller than you is ridiculous, too. It's unfortunate, but that's just how it is. There's no frustration about that.*

One of his role models is Sylvie Guillem. At 19, she became the youngest *danseuse étoile* at the Opéra de Paris under Rudolf Nureyev. Later, she became a guest principal at the Royal Ballet in London. *She has this body that is blessed by Terpsichore, you know, the muse of dance and song. Crazy extensions, perfect proportions for ballet, strong... She's the first one who started lifting her legs like a gymnast. Before, girls didn't use to lift their legs that high, and now it's become a standard. Most of all though, she's amazing because she's one of the first dancers who broke away from the model of being something of a disposable body, of being simply at the mercy of a company director and choreographer's decisions about you. In an*

THE WORK OF DANCING

interview, she says, I think: “As long as you’re in a company, someone’s always going to make decisions for you.” She could just have stayed at the Opéra de Paris and done all the classical ballets forever (*Giselle, Manon, Swan Lake*, etc.) but instead she looked for challenges. She went off to work with Russell Maliphant in London, with Akram Khan, with Forsythe, with Ek, with Robert Lepage... She had a very broad range. He remembers an interview she gave after receiving the Golden Lion in Venice some years ago. She had created her own version of *Giselle* and a journalist asked whether she was planning on becoming a choreographer in her own right. Her answer: “you are a choreographer or you are not a choreographer.”

At 32 he finds himself at something of a crossroads. Sometimes, people have asked him, too, whether he might be interested in choreographing, but he doubts that it is a form of creativity he possesses. *Either you are a choreographer or you are not.* But then, he wonders, isn’t reaching for challenges a form of creativity, also? Other times, he is asked whether he could see himself becoming a repetitor. He is not sure. Being a repetitor is, in essence, to help dancers. However, for that to happen, one needs to be in a supportive environment, something that unfortunately is not the case in a lot of companies. So resources, politics, everything has to align—otherwise one has no power and it’s too tough. Other possibilities for a new direction in his career often come up in conversations with friends, colleagues, and strangers alike: dance teacher, dance therapist... Another injury has been keeping him away from dancing for over 9 months now. By the end of this month, he will have had surgery on both his knees. During this time, he has missed the stage, and he has felt somewhat cut off from his working environment at the company. He has had to imagine what it would be like to never be able to dance again—a thought that is very painful to him. On one level, it is all he

feels he knows how to do. *Take away my body and you take away my ability to provide for myself.* At the same time, he's still passionate about dance, there is still so much he wants to discover. "I am still hungry," he'll say.

Dancing is not about roles to me, it's not about applause. You don't do it so that you can be on stage a split second longer than someone else, or so that when they write a review about the show your name gets mentioned. Or so that your director comes to see you after the show and says, "that was great, I'm going to promote you." It's not about any of this. People will say that because I got a good role, I should just be happy. That strikes me as small, petty. This is mostly a systemic problem—it has to do with the way companies work, the way they're structured. So the challenge for me, right now, is to find another formula in order to keep on dancing.

Kenji Matsuyama Ribeiro has performed a number of works by Nacho Duato, including *Coming Together*, *Duende*, *Arenal*, *L'Amoroso*, *Gnarwa*, *Rassemblement*, *Na Floresta* and *Jardí Tancat*. He has also danced *Violon d'Ingres*, *Cendrillon* and *Burlesque* by Tony Fabre. His performances of works in the classical repertoire include: *Paquita*, *Raymonda* and *La Bayadère* (*The Temple Dancer*) by Marius Petipa; the leading male role in *Brahms-Schönberg Quartet* by George Balanchine; *Wet Desert* (Hans Van Manen); *Return to a Strange Land*, *November Steps* (Jiří Kylián); *Petrouchka* (title role), *Mireille* (Jean-Charles Gil); *El Trovador*, *Lo que el cuerpo no recuerda* (Victor Jiménez); and *D.S.* (Régis Obadia). Since joining Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal in 2009, he has danced in *Kaguyahime* by Jiří Kylián, *Danz* by Ohad Naharin and *Dream Away* by Stephan Thoss, amongst others.

THE WORK OF DANCING

Caroline Bem is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. Her thesis, titled “From Writing Tablets to System Reboots: *Death Proof* and the Cinematic Diptych,” examines Quentin Tarantino’s 2007 film *Death Proof* from the perspective of art history, narrative theory and (video)game studies. She is co-founder and co-editor of *Seachange* and she was the Assistant Editor for the journal *Intermédialités*, then based in the Department of Comparative Literature at Université de Montréal. Her wider research interests include narrative and gender theory in film, literature, and video games, as well as contemporary art ranging from painting to performance and new media installations. She has published exhibition reviews in *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Art* and *Ciel Variable*.

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