



“Dialogues in the Flesh”: The Choreography of Bebe Miller

by Suzanne Carbonneau

Bebe Miller’s choreography is suffused with mystery, serenely so. In her dances, meaning is a mirage, vanishing just as we begin to grasp it, and then tantalizing us to follow it into the distance where it shimmers and beckons us on. In attempting to come to grips with the most profound questions of existence, Miller reminds us that finding answers is a process rather than an arrival, and that we can never be sure of our journey’s end.

This refusal of platitude marks Miller as an artist who has spent a lifetime immersed in a close examination of the human condition. And in this she is an acute observer. In both her nuanced and detailed choreography and in her own remarkable dancing, there is a state of alertness, the ears pricked up, the antennae out. There she is, watching for those moments of felicity and beauty that can’t be anticipated. There she is, noting those silences and evasions that might slip by unheeded without constant vigilance. She is a seer, in both the literal and figurative senses of that term, an eyewitness as well as a visionary, whose observation bores through the skin to reveal the heart.

Miller proposes the dance space as a metaphorical arena of human interaction. Not for her E.M. Forster’s injunction, “Only connect.” For this choreographer, there is no “only” about it. She recognizes that connection is, in fact, the most formidable act that people are ever called upon to perform. Her choreography resonates with the sublimity of what it means to make contact with others, but simultaneously acknowledges the near-impossibility of achieving it. She understands that human connection is the ultimate Sisyphean challenge, the thing that we spend our whole lives trying fruitlessly but enduringly to perfect. But typically for Miller, who does not shy away from revealing the contrariness of the human heart, the desperation of our hunger to know one another is matched equally by our mortal fear of what it would mean to do so.

Miller’s dances are exemplars of the postmodern condition that presupposes uncertainty. Always, there is the acknowledgment of point-of-view—that your world (composed of the sum of your background and experiences) is not mine. It is from this philosophical stance that Miller issues the most extraordinarily compassionate of challenges: to risk becoming someone else.

Her dances are calls to courage in facing one of the most difficult journeys imaginable: our forays into the territory of the Other, the true heart of darkness. How far can we truly go into the terra incognita of another’s identity? In her artmaking, Miller demands of herself, as does the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison in her essay “Black Matters,” the ability to “imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar,” and in doing so to have “a willingness to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent....” That is, the artist must not only be willing to look into places that most people recoil from out of fear of otherness, but also to live there. To embrace otherness in such a way that one’s own identity is altered.

But if we exist in different worlds, how are we to know each other? One way, of course, is through our shared sensation of the body. We all know what it means to feel the lungs filling with breath, to be aware of blood coursing through our veins, to know the euphoria of a leap, the pain of endurance. Our shared experiences inside of our skins cannot be denied even by those who would separate us by social and

cultural markers. Where other postmodernists have chosen to explore issues of connection and otherness through language and philosophical discourse, Miller has posited the body as an alternative site for productive inquiry, with subtle and perceptive results. Working as she does from a baseline of what unites us, it is all the more manifest when Miller locates just where our differences begin.

While Miller is most often categorized as a postmodern abstractionist, her work is, in fact, deeply political. Miller's choreography addresses the conditions of a post-revolutionary world: after the initial battles in this country over civil rights, feminism and gay liberation have been fought, what are we left to negotiate in our daily lives? A lot, Miller insists. Over the past twenty years, her dances have chronicled how the personal exists within the political. Indeed, this subtextual theme was made explicit in her 1998 evening-length work, *Going to the Wall*, whose voiceover text acknowledged that "large places [are] made up of tiny things." Racism and sexism and homophobia exist not only as inscribed in law and custom, her dances aver, but in the most minute and mundane daily interaction, whether that be a sidelong glance, a change of direction, or a recoil from a touch. How are we, she asks, to inscribe our uniqueness in a world that renders our inherence invisible with alarmingly clumsy and chillingly reductive labels?

Miller's next work *Verge*(2000) grew out of her shared process in creating *Going to the Wall* with her company members and with dramaturg Talvin Wilks. Having worked with these collaborators for two years on a dance that used autobiography and group interaction as the basis for exploring issues of identity, Miller discovered in these working methods a mother lode of material concerning the individual's relationship to the group, and how culture and custom shape attitudes and belief systems. And it is this process that Miller has continued to mine for insights about the act of touch. *Verge* is an atlas of the kinetic landscape, where Miller posits the body as the ultimate negotiator of difference. Body against body, skin against skin, the meaning of touch is both intuitive and constructed by culture, and it can magnify or erase issues of difference. "Dialogues in the flesh," Miller called touch in *Going to the Wall*. While we tend to think of communication as a verbal enterprise in our culture, in *Verge* Miller explores how eloquently our bodies converse, as well as how many opportunities touch presents for uncertainty and misunderstanding. But again, Miller refuses to deify hard-won illuminations into definitive answers. In fact, as with all of Miller's dances, while she exposes the jerry-rigged scaffolding of our belief systems, she will not pretend that she has discovered alternative theologies to placate our desires for certainty.

Verge had originally been called *Map of the Body*, and in her newest work, *Landing/Place*, Miller expands her topographical explorations. She is a conquistador in reverse, adventuring not to impose herself on others, but to find herself—in every sense of that term—in unfamiliar places. Working again with dramaturg Talvin Wilks, Miller returns to her concerns with how identity is constructed and how the sense of self shifts as we experience change. What does place have to do with who we are? If place defines us, what happens when we change location? How do we know who we are when we don't know where we are? To be dislocated is to be out of articulation, and this can happen to the mind and spirit, as well as to the body. In *Landing/Place*, Miller is interested in charting who we are as we stand on shaky ground, dislodged from our certainties about ourselves and others. To be a seeker, Miller knows, is a condition of permanence. Definitive answers are a sop for those who, exhausted or frightened by the journey, have chosen to cease exploration.

So finally Miller leaves us to chase our hallucinations in the desert. In seeing enigma as a blessing rather than a quandary, however, she acknowledges the realities of being human: how, even as we construct intellectual and moral systems that posit the world in stark divides, it is not that way at all. For Miller understands that while the human heart is unfathomable, it is unapologetically and gloriously so.

For further reading:

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books, 1993.

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