

**William Forsythe
in conversation with Zachary Whittenburg**

The second of two wide-ranging interviews exclusive to Critical Correspondence, Zachary Whittenburg and William Forsythe discuss the choreographer's movement language, cataloged in a 1999 toolkit called [Improvisation Technologies](#), and how he defines and organizes dance geometries and architectures, both temporal and spatial. This interview highlights [Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's](#) performances May 31 through June 3 for its Summer 2012 Series at the [Harris Theater for Music and Dance](#). The company unveils its first production of Quintett by Forsythe on a shared program with the works of Ohad Naharin ([interviewed previously](#)), and resident choreographer Alejandro Cerrudo.

Interview Date: April 27, 2012 (By phone between William at the studios of the Forsythe Company in Frankfurt, and Zachary in Chicago, IL)

Zachary: Aside from the fact that Hubbard Street Dance Chicago is producing your Quintett for its upcoming program, I also wanted to ask you a few questions about movement vocabulary, the works that led up to the Improvisation Technologies project, and how you moved out of that process and into the work you're doing today.

William: Okay, so, the whole shebang, is what you wanna talk about. [Laughs]

Zachary: Ha! I suppose so. The whole shebang. Specifically dance through the lens of spatial and temporal geometries, torsions, that sort of thing.

William: You just used the word "lens," so I assume you went to college, right?

Zachary: I did not go to college.

William: You did not go to college? Good, because I did, and I didn't finish. [Laughs] It's a popular word. What's your background, then? What interests you? What are you interested in?

Zachary: Dance, first and foremost, although I've only been writing about it for about three or four years. I was a practicing dancer before that.

William: Oh, cool! And what kinds of training have you done?

Zachary: I started in classical ballet, a mishmash of Russian- and English-school, then had some Balanchine training later on. My performance career started at a Balanchine company, and went from there into more contemporary work, and I danced an evening-length in Montreal by Crystal Pite.

William: Oh, are you serious? [Laughs]

Zachary: Seriously. It's a small world.

William: Ah, so you're family. Okay, okay.

Zachary: We met, too, briefly, in Frankfurt about ten years ago. I hung out for about a week while [EIDOS: TELOS](#) was going up, around 2001, I think. And I danced some of your work at [PNB](#) [Pacific Northwest Ballet].

William: You danced at PNB. Okay, I get it. That's what you meant by the Balanchine company.

Zachary: Yes.

William: This is helpful—now I know how to talk. I'm good at giving answers. Just ask me questions.

Zachary: So, if one is looking to catalogue and describe movement in geometric terms, and looking at dance through that "frame," if I can use another collegiate word, how much of a dance's total data can be captured that way, and what things might it leave out?

William: The Improv[isation] Technologies started out as a kind of Cliffs Notes for my own company. I'd had a kind of epiphany, which was the "point-point-line" moment, which I describe in those lectures. It was the very first one—you know what I'm talking about.

Zachary: Yep.

William: That was sort of the seed of it all. "It starts at any point," was the message I got. So, point-point-line, line-to-plane, et cetera, et cetera. Now, that all came out of the ballet experience which—I consider ballet to be on some level a geometric-inscriptive practice. You're inscribing geometry, often, or using the inscription of geometry to create other affect. That's not the final goal—the final goal is something else—but you use it. Let's not confuse the two. It's a tool.

Zachary: When you say "to create other affect," what sorts of things do you mean by that, in particular?

William: I mean, how you engender line, and the qualities you imbue this engendering moment with, are up to the individual artist. That's what creates distinct performances. It's not just creating a line; that's sort of primitive. In fact, Improv Technologies is very primitive. And was never intended as a choreographic method. It was only, finally used to capture improv. It was meant so that, if you were in a research phase and you had moved without rational intention, if there was a category you were working on, and you wanted to notice what you had done, you could use those particular techniques, those tools to help you recapture what had happened, in some way or other. And, especially since I was working with ballet dancers at the time, it was very useful, because people were thinking in a fairly geometric-inscriptive way.

Now, a point is not necessarily a geometric point in space; it means any categorical observation. The object, a condition, language: anything can be the place where something can start. Nothing has to start in any particular way that's determined by history or practice or anything. It means

that it starts from anywhere.

Zachary: It's the point of departure.

William: Yeah, to a movement, or a larger organization, like a choreography.

Zachary: So, then, how do you put "meat on these bones," if you will? Once the work is mapped spatially and temporally, what kinds of language do you find yourself using to texture it and give it a greater sense of identity?

William: Obviously, ultimately, you want to hand that work over to the performer, because that's gratifying, as opposed to [the performer] just fulfilling various suggestions from me and trying to satisfy what they think is my intention. I more or less try to work with them on their own work, in general, and I do that by trying to find metaphoric language, poetic language, practical language: things that will give them tools for autonomy. Maybe, after the performance, I can go back and say, "Wow, those are really interesting decisions, beautiful decisions you've made." As opposed to saying, "You did it exactly right!" That would be horrible.

Zachary: I was reading a few days ago an interview you gave to the Telegraph, in which you talk about [le Grand Dupré](#)—

William: [Laughs]

Zachary: You're quoted, "He improvised on the violin while he danced. At that point the ballet was still improvisatory and I found that thoroughly liberating."

William: Isn't that great? I think it's such a cool thing to discover. It's been [Lowers his voice and whispers conspiratorially] suppressed! You never hear about it.

Zachary: Which brings me to another thing I want to talk about: One of the other works on this program Hubbard Street is performing, that includes Quintett, is a work Ohad Naharin made for the company. When I talked with him last Spring, he said that the process of developing Gaga technique led him to agree with things that he previously disagreed with.

William: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Zachary: He said that, for him, there is an element to Gaga of "getting rid of styles, or the recognition of school. But it doesn't mean I'm getting rid of what other people discovered."

William: Well, yeah, that's—Thank you, Ohad. That kind of describes how I work with my own dancers now. Now Quintett, mind you, is taking place in, what, '92? '93? And Quintett is very specifically from a period where I'm trying to derive motion from ballet but not always land square back on ballet. Often I did, often I didn't.

Zachary: How do you mean, "land square back on ballet?"

William: Well, for example, my buddy [Alexei Ratmansky](#) aims for ballet and he gets ballet, you know what I mean? He's working strictly within that vocabulary and that's exactly what he wants. I was looking at it and thinking, "Hm. What else does this look like if you follow the mechanics to some sort of logical extreme?"

Zachary: A phrase I used recently trying to describe your work was that it "debones ballet's body."

William: [Laughs] You should see it now. Come over to Brussels.

Zachary: Oh, I'd love to. But going back to this point in your career, this chain of events that culminated in the IT project, do you remember how you felt, once that was completed, about moving forward from there?

William: I think one usually writes things down, or publishes them, once they have sort of finished their... How do you say that? [Pauses] Once their impetus has stopped on some level. It was meant as a help. Don't forget that the original idea was never to [have Improvisation Technologies] be a big idea to be disseminated. It was basically me trying to help the new dancers in the company catch up. And what happened was, the people who published it, Paul Kaiser and Seth Goldstein and the people from [ZKM](#), said, 'This really should be disseminated.' At first, it was a pilot project, and the decision was made that it be publicly distributed. And I was skeptical about that—ideas wear out, you know. But it's proved to have a good shelf life, and it's apparently very useful, especially with students. I've seen it used on a 'how to krump' video, from L.A. I saw the idea lifted and beautifully used. I've seen [Forsythe improvisation techniques used] in Japanese commercials. It's had an interesting afterlife.

Zachary: I'm glad you're bringing up examples these examples. I sometimes tap readers and friends for question ideas and one was curious to hear your thoughts on seeing how your techniques have been reflected in street dance, or popular dance.

William: I don't know that they have. I know it's used by street dancers, that some have picked up on it, in various places. I used to teach a group of street dancers in Brazil, in the favelas in Rio [de Janeiro]. Some of my dancers have been hip-hop slash ballet dancers. I myself started in clubs with a fake license. [Laughs]

Zachary: In New York?

William: In New York, yeah. I was basically a club dancer until I was 17, 18. I didn't start ballet until then but I was an extremely good club dancer.

Zachary: Where would you go?

William: Oh, all kinds of clubs. There was one great place called Murray The K's World. He was a DJ in New York and, like, 2,000 people would show up to this huge airplane hangar [at Roosevelt Field] that had been converted. It was great. My idea of a good time was to be able to get up on

the—what you call it, the podium, with the lights. And I also worked in a Speedo, in a club, with people pushing dollar bills in my undies. [Laughs]

Zachary: Oh, yeah?

William: Sure!

Zachary: What club was that?

William: Oh, I can't remember the name. It was back in Jacksonville, Florida. I went to go there one night and everyone had been arrested and... You know. It was back in the day.

Zachary: That's funny. I found out recently that Lar Lubovitch apparently did the same thing for a time, also in New York. [Anna Kisselgoff gently ribbed him about it at Dance/USA's 2011 Annual Conference in Chicago, while presenting Lubovitch with an award.]

William: There you go.

Zachary: And I did a stint, myself.

William: See, there you go! I've never been a sex worker, though. That was the closest thing to it, I guess. [Laughs]

Zachary: So especially at this nascent stage, when you were a teenager, what sorts of things would you notice about dancing, your dancing, that interested you?

William: That I pretty much throw my weight around, with my pelvis, a lot. I really initiate a lot of stuff in the hips—hips and head. And then I try to counterpoint, basically: heel to head, head to shoulder, heel to hip, to head to elbow. What I did was, I tried basically to...Hm. I don't know what the word is. To "hip-hop-ify" épaulement. I think épaulement is our secret weapon in ballet. It's not really the positions—I don't really care about those. But the torsions of them: All that counter-torsion, which comes from épaulement, is what I still use to find really cool coordinations. And I try to teach it so that people dance "backwards." I would say, "Never dance forwards, always dance backwards," using épaulement.

Zachary: What do you mean by "dance backwards"?

William: That's the thing: How do you do it? If you wind up...like an egg timer, you know, something with that kind of spring inside? You keep that tension between the feet, the hips, the shoulders, the head, rotating on quasi-horizontal planes. For example: I could go ahead with my feet, keep my hips back and keep my gaze back, but then move my shoulders with the feet, and then the hip catches up and then the head goes ahead and the whole thing, and everything else catches up. You always go toward the back, you never take a step forward. All the steps go towards the back. And I learned it from a ballet teacher.

Zachary: Who's that?

William: Her name was Madame Boskovitch and she was the only teacher who taught on Sundays in New York City, back in the early '70s. She had her own little studio and she only appeared on Sundays, with a cane, from behind a curtained alcove. [Laughs] She was a student, apparently, of [\[Olga\] Preobrajenska](#) and she had this wonderful young woman demonstrate for her, named Cami, I think, with a C. And Madame Boskovitch would say, [Switches to a thick, Russian accent] "Show me the combination," and Cami did these amazing combinations of Madame Boskovitch's which literally looked like ballet was turning herself inside-out, backwards. That was, I think, a first major epiphany. It was, like, Oh! You felt the backwardness of it in your body, and the arms moved counter to this. It was very interesting.

Zachary: How often now do you go "back to the well," so to speak, and look at pure ballet to trigger ideas about movement?

William: It's like reading, say, [Kathy Acker](#) versus reading [Stendhal](#), or something. It's literature. I look at it and I see it hopefully for what it was at the time it was made, and I enjoy it for what it is. I don't know how much I can really take from it, doing what I do now, but I really do admire some of the well-made stuff. I admire the craftsmanship. Like, for example, the variations in [Paquita](#) are beyond my comprehension. I don't get it. You understand Balanchine, if you can watch a Paquita variation. I've seen the [Kirov do \[Paquita\]](#) and you go, "My God: It's Symphony in C." You realize where it started, you're like, "I get it."

Zachary: Talking about complex torsions, that brings to mind not only Balanchine, but also [Bournonville](#).

William: Absolutely. I studied Bournonville, too, at the [Joffrey](#). We were taught all the classes, you know, the Monday class, Tuesday class, Wednesday, you know, all of those horribly complicated classes and at that point they were still taught by Perry Brunson and [Meredith Baylis](#). There were some amazing dancers at the Joffrey: [Francesca Corkle](#), Rebecca Wright, who were masters. And those were complicated coordinations. Those were horribly difficult.

Zachary: In a physical, anatomical sense?

William: No, in a mental way. But oh, my God, physically, too, yeah. Both. On all levels. How can I say it? They're like the Rosetta Stone. I think, right now, they're a bit overlooked, keys to the future that somehow have gotten ignored. Hm. [Pauses] Yeah. I haven't checked if they're online. I wonder if the Royal Danish [Ballet] has them online. There's some extraordinary Bournonville stuff which I was privileged to be a part of.

Zachary: Thinking of something like [Artifact](#) or [Quintett](#), those strike me as very high-bandwidth pieces of choreography—

William: What do you mean by that?

Zachary: That the pipe, if you will, that carries the visual information of the piece has a wide diameter. There's a lot of data in those dances.

William: Ah. Gotcha.

Zachary: This quality, your work's complexity, is localized in the [Synchronous Objects](#) project. And I was curious how your relationship with complexity itself has evolved, over the years.

William: Okay. I can sort of give it to you in a nutshell, hopefully. It starts a ways back, a little bit earlier than Artifact. It comes from me, first of all, watching all the Balanchine ballets. Basically, I went in there for a dollar every night, as a student, in the late '60s, early '70s, and every night after, [was] shaking my head and going, "I don't get it. I don't get it. It's so simple." But it was so complex, at the same time. What I realized after many, many years, [was] that what appealed to me was counterpoint. I'd grown up with a very intensive musical education, played violin, bassoon, flute, sang in choruses, and my grandfather was a violinist and tried to teach me how to conduct, and so on and so forth, I could read scores and I studied music in college, and so on. That said, with Balanchine, it's sort of "half the project," so to speak. He had a very particular relationship to music that—I realized that I couldn't repeat his projects and every time I did try to do a ballet like that I was absolutely murdered.

Zachary: Murdered because...

William: For being imitative. I thought I was doing what I was supposed to do. "But he's the best! Shouldn't you try to imitate your models?" Slowly, I realized that, in terms of art history, you can't do that. You have to invent your own model before you're allowed to enter the conversation. So, that said, I realized that what I really wanted to do was to create contrapuntal structures. Synchronous Objects is basically there for my purposes, yeah, to demonstrate how the term "counterpoint" has migrated from the acoustic, or the musical domain, to the visual domain. And my only interest there is in saying, 'This is basically what it looks like and how it works and it is no longer determined by a kind of broader field of symmetry, but actually many tiny fields of symmetry.' What you call "alignment," or "identity." And this comes from being introduced to set theory, and I began to understand more and more about counterpoint by studying set theory. That said, Artifact was my first attempt to make a contrapuntal ballet, so to speak, as full-length. It's composed of very few steps but they get constantly recombined. I didn't make a thousand steps, I made a hundred steps, and used just those.

Zachary: The limited palette idea, like the theme phrase in [In the middle, somewhat elevated](#) and how you develop it in that ballet.

William: And that is really straight. middle is really straight. middle is theme and variation—basta.

Zachary: How does Quintett look to you now, in retrospect?

William: Well, I'm more interested in the performance [of it today] than [in] the ballet, because ballet only lives through performance. I'm interested in the dancers. It's easy to learn steps. It's

difficult to learn how to be in relationship on stage. The hardest thing [for Hubbard Street dancers] will be for them to establish relationships, and make that the focus of their enterprise, and not simply doing things right. In *Quintett* there's a lot of dancing on the edge, [moments when] you can really crash and burn. If they try to do it safe then it won't work, you know what I mean? They're young dancers and they're probably very concerned with combining duty and responsibility. They're two different principles.

Zachary: There's a team of three people who are staging *Quintett* for Hubbard Street. What instructions, what priorities or methods do you give rehearsal directors?

William: Well in this case, three of the original cast are there, so I'm not so worried. I usually have each [role] taught by someone who's danced it: Every time I've set it... [Pauses] No, no, no: This is the first time we haven't had a full cast [of five] go. It's just too expensive. Here we can just take a train, or do it overnight or something, and [dancers also] come to us sometimes on the train. It's Europe. [Laughs] That said, I think it will be fine. [Thomas McManus](#) is original, Dana Caspersen is original, Stephen Galloway is original. I don't think it will be a problem, at all.

Zachary: Do you have best practices or a preferred order of operations for restaging this work, or your choreography in general?

William: No, no, no. These people—They're so skilled.

Zachary: Do you find that people make similar choices about how best to teach your choreography?

William: I think they have really individual styles. Because, I mean, I just don't work with a uniform group of dancers. Their approaches to reproduction—there isn't a standard.

Zachary: There's something great anyway about not having just one person be the mouthpiece for a work, to teach it to a new cast or a new company, right? I know that when Hubbard Street learned [Enemy in the Figure](#), there were also two Frankfurt dancers in the studio. To teach something through dialogue isn't common in dance, but I think there's something key to it, especially with regard to your choreography.

William: Yes. A great deal of discussion goes on in our company. Today, we all sat down and compared a video from Paris and a video from Dresden [of [Sider](#) in performance]. We sat for three hours and just kept going back between different scenes and looking and trying to decide, "Are we gonna make a hybrid of these two? If so, in what way?" That kind of thing. "Were we trying too hard in Paris because we know the audience is difficult?" In Brussels, the audience is very critical but not "noisy," so to speak. They're more intellectually tough but not impatient or spoiled. In Paris, I think we were just trying to avoid, you know, people slamming doors. [Laughs]

So we looked at it and said, "Let's wind that back... Let's take that weird... There's too much here... Okay, this is excellent, let's adopt that and keep that other thing but let's chuck that thing

out,” and so on and so forth. And people [were] really having comments about it, their own critiques of what they were seeing.

In the middle of that conversation, we had another conversation about cognitive psychology because there are certain principles, which... Counterpoint in bodies I think help keep the brain alert. It has to do with the way that movements are timed and the distribution of anomalies throughout the choreography. I guess you could call that “phrasing,” right? But in this case, the performers also have to choose a lot of the movement. For example, in *Sider*, they have to listen to a 16th-century play on earphones, while they dance, and then they have to time everything to the text. So, in that case, it’s really—a whole number of other compositions are coming into play.

Zachary: This method of having the dancers hear one score, through headphones, while the audience hears another: You’ve used that previously, correct? Or no?

William: Not that way. I’ve directed live.

Zachary: Through in-ear phones, or something?

William: Yeah, but only in, like, two or three pieces. That’s not—People always want to emphasize that, but I’ve been doing it a.) for 20 years, and b.) sometimes we have no other way to give signals, without a conductor. And [we used live direction through monitors because] the lights were too complicated and so on and so forth. It was just the easiest way to get the timings across.

Zachary: Your background in music and the interest in contrapuntal structures you talk about is really clear in your choice of music such as Thom Willems’s score for middle, for example, and the works you’ve choreographed to Bach. One thing that’s always interested me about *Quintett*—I saw it for the first time at BAM—

William: Oh! That’s great that you’ve seen it.

Zachary: Yes, on a program with [Enemy \[in the Figure\] and Woolf Phrase](#), about ten years ago.

William: Oh, cool. That’s great.

Zachary: But the [Gavin] Bryars score for *Quintett* is so different from those other pieces of music you were choosing, or having written for you, at the time. What about it struck you?

William: Well, Bryars heard [that fragment](#) [of vocals] from the documentary film. You’ve probably heard the story about that...

Zachary: I have. [The singer is a homeless man, the source a field recording made for but not used in a 1971 documentary about down-and-out people in one of London’s rougher districts. One set of lyrics lasts about 25 seconds; the score, as Forsythe says, is 25 minutes long.

Bryars's composition adds rich harmonies, in waves, to an unbroken loop of this unknown, broken man's voice.]

William: And that he asked for permission to take that little piece out and use it. Okay. I have to say that his inner ear, which heard that little three-quarter beat underneath the hymn that the man sings, is just an incredible artistic discovery. That he was able to hear that. There's a kind of reverence, almost, in his... How can I say it? In his respect for what that song meant to the singer. [Pauses] This reverence and this respect, and deeply felt resonance: Every artist would like to understand things that way.

Zachary: When I hear it, I think of the looped vocals as a body, and the strings and sound textures as a bed made for that body.

William: Oh, that's interesting. Because I feel that [the Bryars composition] expands out [from the vocal]. I hear the vocal line and then I hear structurally... It's like an architecture that builds outward from a series of little, tiny points—[Quickly sings the melody of "Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet"]—and then that gathers Bryars's understanding—once again, it starts from any point—and builds, from that, amazing architecture, orchestral architecture. Out of a single line. With a single instrument: the voice. [Bryars] understood that this was... What do you call that? That it was just waiting there...

Zachary: Latent?

William: Latent. Thank you.

Zachary: That reminds me of what someone wrote about the C-minor passacaglia and fugue: that it's Bach's building of a cathedral of sound from a single phrase.

William: I always have a really architectural feeling about music, and it's good.

Zachary: Some would probably say you have an architectural sense of dance, as well.

William: Maybe... I feel—I hear you, but I don't feel... [Pauses] I see music physically, you know what I mean? I think many dancers probably do.