

Lance Gries: The FIFTY Project, part 2 – Nancy Dalva

*For his fiftieth birthday, **Lance Gries** invited fifty dance colleagues, from a twenty-five year career span, from all over the world, to meet him in a studio for a fifty minute dance encounter. The intimacy, immediacy and vulnerability of some of the most beloved dancers and choreographers from New York and Europe is captured in these edited studio sessions. These fifty video documents are presented in a multi-dimensional immersive installation, a visual moving family tree of the New York dance community in a mass choreography of images, personal stories and dancing bodies. Critical Correspondence has teamed up with Lance to host a series of essays and visual documentation of this expansive project.*

Is there any configuration in dance more suggestive than the duet? From its very structure, the duet suggests relationships. Then the casting opens up variations upon the theme of the choreography. (Yes a trio is complicated, but once you get past unison or canon and triangulate, it's just a duet and a solo. A quartet in like manner is, after you get past unison or canon, four solos; or a solo and a trio; or two duets. With partners assigned, or deliciously slipping from one to another.) This project has an added complication: When you see two duets side by side—double duets—and Lance Gries is in both of them, is he two Lances, or the same Lance? Watching them, you will waver on this point....

Here are some small number of the many possible structures of duets, all of which define and describe relationships: mirroring; lifting, supporting/being lifted, supported; dancing the same thing in parallel; dancing different things in parallel; lead/follow; and so forth.

This doesn't begin to take into account initiation; attack; pursuit and evasion; varying speeds; direction; and the significant matter of facings. Do they look into each other's eyes? Does one person look up? Down? Away? Do both look away? And then of course the roles can be reversed. Or just change.

Let us take just one example. Parallelism. A couple dancing side by side facing the same way doing the same thing (however simple or complex) suggest oneness of mind. They might be twins. They might be lovers. They might be any number of things. But they are in some kind of essential agreement.

(Gender? Yes there is gender, and it introduces other possibilities, not so much romantic and amorous—those exist the same way whether you have two women, two men, or one of each. But with same sex couples you get other possible relationships== the sisters, the brothers; the father and son, the aunt and niece. Still, is gender any more important than any other physical contrast

or similarity? Slight, muscular. Tall, short. Well maybe a bit more important at that, depending on the doer, and the maker. But really what is important isn't so much gender as that gender's intention in a given person. As they say on facebook, it's complicated. And in the theater and theatrical performance, often disguised or transformed by acting. But this is improvisation, and people are being themselves, at least as much as they ever are when in a room with a camera and another dancer.)

Then there is the entire issue of interpenetration of form—that interplay of line and volume— and what that can signify, suggest. In a duet, negative space is not only a place—as is, for instance, the space formed by a plié—it is personal territory.

Let us say all these things and more are settled, fixed, and a choreographer makes a duet. Then come the vagaries of casting: physical harmony or contrast; temperament.

Take all of these permutations and combinations and you begin to see the simple complexities of Lance Gries's 50 for 50 project. He's been engaged in a long form fusion of speed dating and slow dancing.

Here's how it goes. Invite 50 people to improvise in duet form. You are always one partner. You may vary according to your mood, your sense of well being, and your level of comfort with your partner. But you are always you. (Or in this case, Lance is always Lance.) But the partners are all over the place, within the wide perimeter you set. Some are men, some are women, some are your age, some are older, some are younger. Some have danced with you before. (A lot of them have danced with each other before, or have danced in the same company at different times, never mind whatever else lies in their back stories.) Some are familiar with improvisation, somatic techniques, certain qualities of fall and recovery, release, suggestion. Others are not. Some are much more familiar with a certain aggressive exchange than you are; others are reticent to the point of self-effacement. Then there is their chemistry with you. Hot, warm, cool, maybe unexpectedly icy at moments?

Each one of these meetings is different. There is no knowledge passed on from one partner to the next; they don't see each other. Each duet is self contained, a little universe, its own story. You are always you; but maybe you are not the same you. You might, it turns out, be 50 different yous.

What do these duets tell us, seen side by side? If you put two films side by side do you get a quartet? Let's say you are a mirror. (You, Lance, are a mirror.) Each of these dancers approaches you, finds himself or herself in your reflection. What do they see? Feel? And what about you? How are you different? And how does that tell us, and what does that tell us, about your partners? Isn't the way you change a portrait of what they are?

We are going to have questions, Lance, and so are they. Which was your favorite? Who was the most difficult? Which was the most romantic? The hottest? The sweetest? The one you wish could have gone on forever? Who did you miss while dancing with X? Who did you remember while dancing with Y? Whose eyes made you look away? Whose eyes were kind? Who offered comfort? Challenge? Who made you feel brave? Who made you feel gallant? Who made you

take risks? Who was as comfortable as an old soft shoe? Who surprised you the most? Which one did you hope would never end?

And now: When you step back and look at the film, does any of that matter? Does pleasure in the doing translate into pleasure in the seeing? Or is there some perversely inverse relation? If you can forget what it felt like, what do you see?

Now we will see these. Will we feel what you felt when see these? Or what your partner felt? Or will we be negotiating the terrain that lies between you, that you enhance or obliterate through some alchemy? Who are you two, when you are together?

The better we know you to begin with—and many of us will know many of you at the outset, then as you move out into the world with these films, less so—the more particular will be our pleasure. The less we know you, the more the movement will tell the story. Improvisation as formalism. No story, no music, no characters, and not even movement given. Just the structure created in the movement, just this once, captured on film without any value judgments. Just the cameras, no intervening human eye.

Until now. Here we are. Mirror, mirror. Mirror.

-Nancy Dalva

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