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Michelle Boulé
by Samara Davis
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Michelle Boulé in Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People's *Last Meadow*, 2009, Dance Theater Workshop, New York. Photo by Ian Douglas.



I first saw Michelle Boulé perform in Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People's *Last Meadow* at the Dance Theater Workshop this past September. *Last Meadow* is a journey into America and its archetypes, with the elusive and bewitching icon of James Dean acting as its frame. It unfolds in a dreamlike sequence, and Boulé—playing Dean—is at the forefront, hauntingly driving the cast forward. I was mesmerized by her ability to embody a gesture so completely, eerily miming Dean's masculine and seductive postures. Each dancer in *Last Meadow* added a hypersensitivity to very gendered roles; I was impressed by the slight and nervous distance between the archetypes they played and the real bodies they inhabited, and Boulé seemed especially capable of capturing and imprinting a succession of fleeting forms.

I next saw her in Deborah Hay's *If I Sing To You* during Performa 09 and became completely convinced of her veritable malleability. *If I Sing to You* was complicated and disturbing to watch, the dancers seemingly pushed to extreme states of vulgarity and timidity. In our interview below, Boulé describes her actions as "going fucking crazy." One section in particular had Boulé running mad around the stage, scratching at walls; in another she barked like a dog. And yet even in these awkward and challenging states, she convinced me of something she refers to as the "authenticity" of that moment.

Boulé has been living in New York since 1999 and has been involved in the creation of seven pieces with Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People over the last 10 years. In addition to Gutierrez and Hay, she has danced with John Jasperse, Donna Uchizono, Neal Beasley, Christine Elmo, Beth Gill, Judith Sanchez Ruiz, Doug Varone, and Gabriel Masson. Along with dancing, teaching, and choreographing, she is also a certified practitioner of BodyTalk, a holistic therapy technique for the body. She is articulate and warm, and I've come to associate the power and thoughtful flexibility in her performances with a personal willingness and openness to communicate her knowledge to others—and to explore her own body's potential.

SAMARA DAVIS How did you start dancing?

MICHELLE BOULÉ I had the typical experience of having to choose a focus at a young age. Ballet or jazz. I tried to be a ballerina and got injured from bad technique, which is super common in ballet, where you're really trying to conform to an external form that oftentimes bypasses what's best for your body. So I quit dancing.

SD How old were you then?

MB I was 16. Summer school at the Boston Ballet, and my boyfriend was at the Berkeley School of Music. When I went back for my senior year of high school, I wasn't dancing because of my injury and he broke up with me. We were pretty much the only two artists in our respective conservative Catholic high schools in Aurora, Illinois.

SD Two freaks.

MB Yeah, two freaks that found each other. (*laughter*) I later went to the University of Illinois. My dad made me, even though I got into NYU and other schools. I went in as a business major, but quickly changed it and looked at anything and everything: Spanish, sociology, journalism, architecture, English. Then, I remember peeking into the dance department building, and seeing people running around in shorts and holding hands. I thought, What kind of dance is this? I realized later that it was a non-majors course, the science people coming to dance. (*laughter*)

I started to dabble and finally took ballet again. I was taking a course with the dance majors and asked my teacher if I could have a mid-semester review. She asked me, "Why aren't you doing this?" and I told her that I couldn't. In my head I had this injury, and my dad, who is a doctor, along with other people in my life, told me I didn't have the right body. If a ballerina doesn't fit the mold physically, there's nothing you can do. But she gave me a scholarship. So it kind of happened to me. You know that moment when someone else comes in and guides you and you get back on a path? I graduated and moved to New York



because I got a job with a choreographer, Gabe Masson, who doesn't live here anymore. But, I was getting "paid," or at least covering my transportation to and from rehearsal.

SD Did you feel more at home in the New York dance world?

MB At some point I met Miguel Gutierrez and instinctively knew there was some connection and fascination right away. How we started working together is another story. By coincidence I got injured in one of Miguel's classes, which led me to explore more alternative ways of dealing with pain in the body and healing the body. This has become a major part of my practice as an artist. I stopped taking Miguel's class for a few months and the first day I came back he asked me if I would do a duet with him. I saw that he was the answer to the question that I was asking when I had starting dancing again: how do we treat this form within its own historical context and within our own personal desires? How do we treat it in time, space, and history, and how do we transform it? And how do we transform ourselves, because transformation happens to me every time I go into a process with him.

SD When you enter into a new process with him, is it always about self-transformation?

MB It's not directly about that, but there's been a nice parallel in his process, like the things that I'm interested in: using my voice, singing, acting, exploring embodiment of ideas, emotions, characters. He's called a lot of things out of me. He comes in with all these ideas, so ready to shape things. Some people have said, "You're like his muse." That seems so old school. I feel resistant to that.

SD But there's also something that's happening within you, it sounds. Maybe Miguel is your muse too.

MB Over time, we've developed a personal friendship. There's a real interchange. Mutuality in a relationship can really further it. A lot of mutuality is based on trust. Like in that first piece that I did with him.

SD Could you talk about that?

MB It was 2001 and we had a two-week rehearsal process in order to make an eight-minute duet. We rehearsed in his old studio in Bushwick. John Jasperse also had a space in that same building. Jennifer Lacey worked there. Jennifer Monson spent time working and living there. Then everyone got evicted! While working on that piece, I hardly said anything, didn't really know how to talk to him. But I picked up the material really quickly and was able to hold onto it and do something with it. We worked super fast making that duet. I was very uncomfortable socially, but I felt like I was inside this thing and I knew something was cooking. I was maybe 23 and I would go home and practice the dance in my living room. I still have a scar from practicing these arm swings; I knocked my hand on the corner of the wall at home. I felt like something was *there*, and I just asked him, "When's the next thing?" Miguel has also said that my interest helped give him courage to stop dancing in other people's work, drop his rock band, and just really focus on his own work.

SD That's the mutuality.

MB Right. That's the seminal nature of how we began working together. I can't think of many other collaborations like it... maybe Marina Abramović and Ulay. Trisha Brown had Diane Madden; these people become the staple figures.

SD Encouragers...

MB Of the choreographic identity of an artist. Sometimes that figure is only known by other artists or people in the community. In the dance world, and also outside of it, people are concerned mostly with the identity of the choreographer, whereas in the art world it seems that there's much more collectivity. Even in some newer theater groups, there's no clear director per se; it's a collective.





Michelle Boulé in Deborah Hay's *If I Sing To You*, 2008, Melbourne International Arts Festival. Photo by Belinda Strodder www.dancephotography.net.au.

SD You definitely see more artists having a choreographer-like status. The master producer, the person behind the whole production. That's why I'm interested in you as a dancer; you're very much a part of the choreographic process and yet you're being passed among many producers at the same time. You're leaving your mark *and* informing all types of different decisions and collaborations.

MB I feel it. With Miguel because it's been so long. With Deborah Hay I got to enter something very special. I got to enter into someone else's *process* and that's especially interesting when someone has been working as long as she has. She's developed this process, this language, a specificity around the work. She uses language in the form of impossible questions that create a dynamic space for the body to explore and be inside the question without ever finding the answer. For example, one of her questions is, "What if every one of my 30 trillion cells has the ability to get what it needs, while surrendering facing a single direction in the lab?" The lab for her is the theater or studio. And every time we meet to rehearse, she has more language. During Performa 09, when we were performing *If I May Sing*, she used a Foucault quote about self-knowledge and self-transformation.

What I like to do—although I don't feel like I'm any good at doing this for myself at this time in my life—is enter into someone's personal sense of specificity. Then I feel like I am. When I enter into the limitations that someone else gives me, I feel like I can get really specific.

SD Where you don't have to perform *and* choose the parameters?

MB When I don't have to worry about what it gives me permission to say. When I can trust their choice, I trust my own choices more... maybe because I don't have to take agency? Even though I have full agency with how I interact with the material.

SD Deborah Hay's *If I Sing To You* is a piece that is almost terrifying in its emotional abstraction. All the rage and nervousness expressed solely in movements, with little verbal/lingual or narrative framing. Where do you go when you enter into that world?

MB I go into a place that I could not before cognitively perceive. Those are the moments when it gets really thrilling. Of course right now I remember the moments that are more physically dynamic: there's this section called *The Dark Side* which was about tapping into all that is vulgar, perverse, cruel, and sexist towards self and other. It was a duet and a solo performed by the same women every time. In one city she opened it up, allowing for the possibility of any of the cast members to perform these roles. It was a way to say that anyone could do



The Dark Side.

To be inside these questions that Deborah asks brings me somewhere I would never go myself. It is a pretty amazing thing to feel. Maybe it's the absurdity of that particular section, but I can also remember a more subtle magic where I get to be carried by something. It's simultaneously being carried and also being fully independent. A solidarity. Maybe the words don't really matter.

SD I'm completely captivated watching you dance because it seems like you're channeling some crazy, often demonic spirit. At the same time, you have such control, a grace unlike other dancers. That's very specific to your own movement. It's communicates control over your body, but also letting go of control.

MB I feel like I get a chance to be a conduit. That's how I teach too. I see the limitations in everyone's bodies when I teach, so I have to think, How can I keep opening up this channel? And I ask myself, How can I experience this thing with more consciousness? That sounds generic, but it's what I've been thinking about while rehearsing.



Michelle Boulé in Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People's *Last Meadow*, 2009, Dance Theater Workshop, New York. Photo by Alex Escalante.

SD Are you choreographing your own work?

MB I'm trying to set up structures for myself. They've been as basic as timing the watch for ten minutes and moving nonstop or timing the watch for ten minutes and talking nonstop. I did find a moment in the talking one where I felt like I started channeling archetypes. I felt that in the most recent piece by Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People, *Last Meadow*, where I played and explored the character of James Dean. I got to channel the archetype or a certain energy that is beyond the immediacy of my own ego. That feels incredibly expansive and experiential. I think it's also a search to find the reality of what I'm doing. That's always been a question: why does this matter? I'm thinking of this closing monologue I do in a piece with Miguel called *Everyone*. It's about pain and loss—in some ways pain and pleasure—and conflict.

SD We've talked before about the intersections between art and dance. Is that still relevant to you and if so, how?

MB I'm curious about it because I feel like a dancer spends so much time in her body building sensitivity—some would say I'm interested in what's happening in our bodies at a level that's obnoxious—even our bowels. I've always been touched by the space visual art gives me. I want to look at it in terms of how artists are educated and working. I don't know if it makes a difference if a person knows how her spine feels when she's creating something, maybe it does. I feel that a physical re-patterning and awareness directly lends itself to expanded creativity. I know the transformations that my own body is aware of. Maybe I'm making a gross assumption, but I feel like there's another kind of awareness in the art world that could reciprocate what we're doing in the dance

world.

It feels like the dance/art intersection is happening, for example, in the coverage *Artforum* has been giving to dance, the attention to dance in The Whitney Biennial, and performances taking place in gallery spaces. People in the dance world are getting excited by it. It's a validation of what we do in a space that already has cultural validation. There's a lot of frustration in the dance world because we see things in the art world that have been happening in the dance world for a long time. They just haven't been packaged in the same way, they haven't been as accessible. One of my friends was really upset about the Tino Sehgal show at the Guggenheim. She said, "We're doing this all the time in the dance world!" I said, "Well, do you *want* to be doing this?" She said she did, so part of it is jealousy. I wanted to encourage her, tell her she could do it, but then my artist-friend made a good point about Sehgal being a bridge. He's capable of introducing ideas to the larger community that may have already been happening for some time within the more insular dance world.

There's also the question of how widely accepted dance needs to be and what the point of that is. When we were making *Last Meadow*, Miguel had brought in Jerzy Grotowski's book *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Miguel was talking about the esoteric nature of Grotowski's work as a theater director and its *specificity*; Grotowski was into asking deeper questions and not pandering to what was accepted or already known. For example, my younger students question why someone is just sitting in a chair or standing up during a piece for ten minutes or why in a Deborah Hay piece nothing happens. In these situations, art can shift a paradigm around viewing or experiencing something. And if we can ask ourselves to be open and hope that an audience can do the same, we start to find transformation. Otherwise we're just eating candy over and over.

SD Do you think it's better to have an audience that's versed in these concepts?

MB I'm somewhat unconcerned. Sometimes just out of my own insecurity, I make assumptions about what people are ready for and I get pleasantly surprised. When we premiered *Last Meadow* in Seattle, people came up to us after who had no relationship to the art world, they were carrying their cocktails, having their night out, and they loved it! There's this closed preciousness around what we do. We're protective of it because we worry that people won't get it. Whether that's because there's a history of people not getting it or because we have a culture that doesn't accept the body, I don't know, but this is a fact.



Michelle Boulé in Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People's *Everyone*, 2007, Abrons Art Center, New York. Photo by Alex Escalante.

SD You're a certified BodyTalk practitioner. How did you get involved in that and what exactly is it?

MB It's referred to by the International BodyTalk Association as "energy



medicine" or "consciousness medicine." Which I think is a new paradigm in healing or self-revelation or self-expression. Bonnie Gintis, who is a continuum practitioner and an osteopathic physician, refers to healing not as a means to an end but as an opportunity to live to your fullest expression. When I first started training in BodyTalk, I realized that even if I didn't become a practitioner, all this information was going to transform my life as an artist.

SD How is the body a medium in your art?

MB Now I'm thinking of the metaphor of uncovering dirt, and I feel like I get to do that in dance. I make myself vulnerable somehow. I remember Miguel giving me feedback after watching me rehearse and later writing him in a letter telling him that we can't hide inside of this form. Everything is visible through the body, and what a beautiful thing it is to see and to know, to give oneself permission for that. That's the thing in Deborah Hay's work; she coaches people on how they are inviting themselves to be seen, then you get into craft and authenticity from there. Is "authentic experience" what we're looking for? Not necessarily, but it's something. Miguel has been asking that question.

SD Authenticity as what?

MB Like what the goal is of making work. Does authenticity have a value of moral goodness? What if we wanted to convey the authentic *sadistic* side of something? What if it's an evil something? That's interesting too, because that's also the fullest expression of something. Everything exists, and we only give ourselves permission to experience a couple of those things. A friend of mine said to me that dancers give people permission to have a visceral experience of something. Then they get relief. They see me onstage going fucking crazy! There's a point where I stop making choices when I'm performing and it becomes so spontaneous. I feel it in the more heated moments. Maybe this is because I'm still under 35 and can access things through extreme physicality. Although when I go into my own rehearsals, I just want to fall asleep or talk or shuffle from here to there. Sometimes I'll go into rehearsals and just walk around, like what Deborah would do.

SD I wanted to talk about Sarah Michelson's work. It's so visual.

MB Yeah, she really designs the space. John Jasperse also does that.

SD Miguel has talked about honesty as a texture. I think it's interesting to think about honesty as a visual element... because it's experiential. What can you say about the visual in Miguel's work?

MB Miguel has helped me to appreciate things that are messy. People said to us after we premiered *Last Meadow* in Portland, "Why don't you guys ever wear pretty costumes?" Miguel is not going to make a piece that looks like Sarah's. That's just not him. Sarah has her specific fashion aesthetic. Maria Hassabi also.





Michelle Boulé (background) in Deborah Hay's *If I Sing To You*, 2008, Festspielhaus Hellerau, Dresden. Photo by Sylvio Dittrich.

SD *Last Meadow* is all over the place visually, carried to a million places, but there are obviously visual choices made throughout. Are you conscious of the visual when you're dancing?

MB I feel more conscious of the experiential than the visual. In Deborah's work, it's not about what you *do*. It gets boring when you start to do something. Here I'm equating visual with something *happening*, and something happening is obvious. The experiential isn't always obvious.

With Miguel, we appropriated external information in order to create something. But it became a suit that I put on. When I worked with the archetype of James Dean in *Last Meadow*, there are so many questions and ideas and desires placed around him that I got to go way inside and create what I thought that all meant.

SD You're now starting to choreograph yourself. Where does that impulse come from?

MB I'm not sure if that's what I'm doing and maybe that's my own denial. This is something I should probably talk about in therapy, not here, but it's a challenge to put something into structure. I don't think everyone is meant to be a choreographer.

SD It's interesting because your role in these pieces, specifically with Miguel and Deborah, has been so large.

MB I don't like to be a dancer who is told what to do. I just need some boundaries and then I want to do exactly what I want to do.

SD Well, maybe the structure is found in the dancers, in the *other* bodies that you're working with. It sounds like that's what Miguel kind of does.

MB He chooses people he's comfortable with. We experiment, but the playing field is very safe. I come up with ideas all the time that I haven't materialized yet because of my own fear. And then I have my own ideas about what it means to be a choreographer and what it means to be a maker. Once you're a maker, you're only a maker—people get categorized in that way, especially in Europe, where you're either a choreographer, a performer, or a teacher.





Michelle Boulé in Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People's *Last Meadow*, 2009, Dance Theater Workshop, New York. Photo by Alex Escalante.

SD Do you think fear is something you can workshop? (*laughter*)

MB I've been workshoping mine for a long time.

SD But you seem so fearless, so limitless when you dance.

MB It's naiveté on my part.

SD No, it doesn't seem naive. It's about control. Your borders become defined in front of everyone. You activate yourself with this fullness. It's like you illuminate yourself as a body to other people. So you're expanding yourself, but you're still controlled and contained in this form. It's amazing. But it seems like you have to be beyond fear to extend yourself in that way, to allow yourself to be completely activated. Fear *deactivates* certain parts of you.

MB When I perform, I get a chance to step up to something.

SD Step up? Like face something?

MB I guess so. Step up to a challenge. I don't feel like I've digested my performing experience very much. I've had people say that what I'm doing is affecting, but I haven't dissected why that is.

SD Maybe you can't really know what other people are experiencing when they watch you.

MB I'm trying to think about what I'm experiencing when I see other people doing it.

SD I think there are certain performers, maybe just *better* ones, who are completely captivating. You're locked into their movement.

MB I feel like it's a channeling thing. A conduit thing. An egoless thing.

SD There's an immediacy to what you are transmitting.

MB Yeah, there's no wall. Maybe that's what the stepping up is. It's hard to access that place, though. That's why I'm a dancer: to trick myself to go there. Performing is weird. It's live.

SD It's about mental endurance.

MB You get to be fully alive, to be present when nothing else matters. It's a rarity in today's world, like maybe for an hour and a half you don't know what's happening on your cell phone.



SD It's about committing.

MB Especially in Miguel's work. In most of his pieces I'm thinking, How can I physically get through this? The very first time we used a song in *Difficult Bodies* and there was a possibility of singing on stage, I signed up for voice lessons. It wasn't fa-la-la voice lessons; it was about finding my voice, which has always been important to me. I've always had to clear my throat ever since I was a kid and that's slowly been going away. I remember seeing the choreographer Vera Mantero sing when I was studying in Vienna and that being incredibly moving and touching. There's something about the voice that's related to expression. But there's something in dance related to a clamped jaw for me. My voice teacher said, "You're talking more like an artist now," in our last session. I want to know what my voice is, unmediated. Does that mean I should create something?

SD Do you feel you haven't fully found your voice? That there's still the step of choreographing?

MB Yeah, because there's something I'm afraid of there. Maybe that's the next thing I can step up to. I don't like feeling afraid, because that's when I shut down and retreat.

SD Maybe there's a moment in your life when you just need to follow challenges, and then at some point...

MB Just sit back and rest.

SD Yeah, rest. Or just understand what you've accomplished.

Michelle Boulé will perform her own work in New York during the opening night of the Movement Research festival *Hardcorps* on June 2 alongside artists Michael Portnoy, Shana Moulton, Deborah Gorman, and Mariangela Lopez.

Samara Davis is a New York-based writer and performer who will be pursuing a master's degree in performance studies at NYU this summer.

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