

Contents

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PIPIOLLOTTI'S PICKLE Making Meaning From the Feminine Position <i>Elizabeth Mangini</i>	1
PAUL McCARTHY Rites of Masculinity <i>Jennie Klein</i>	10
PERFORMANCE TEXTS	
DARK ROOM / GRAY SCALE / WHITE NOISE <i>Beth Herst</i>	18
C'EST-À-DIRE <i>Leslie Satin</i>	28
RHYTHMS/GRIDS Neil Goldberg interviewed by Robert Marshall	35
ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES	
RECEIVING THE MANTLE Mark Dendy Dances <i>Monroe Denton</i>	44
DANCE IN CHICAGO New Work for a New Millennium <i>Cheryl Tobey</i>	48
DISCREET SUBVERSIONS The Surreptitious Installations of Sarah Wentworth <i>Mia Rosenblatt</i>	55
IN SEARCH OF FALSE TIME Slater Bradley/T. J. Wilcox/Isaac Julien <i>Elisabeth Kley</i>	61
BONFIRES OF URBANITY The Public Art of Barnaby Evans <i>Lee Klein</i>	68
FOLLIES AND FALSITIES Architectural Photography <i>Richard Eoin Nash</i>	71

C'EST-À-DIRE

Leslie Satin

The performers in this piece, in which fact and fiction overlap, are not quite characters but neither are they "simply themselves"; for the sake of simplicity, they are identified in the script as Speaker 1, Speaker 2, Dancer 1, and Dancer 2. The original cast was comprised, respectively, of Marjorie Gamsu, Elaine Shipman, Leslie Satin, and Renni Greenberg Gallagher.

PART 1

[The performing area is set with a small table, placed upstage right and covered with a white tablecloth. Behind the table are two café chairs. Two more chairs, facing the rear wall, are set in the space; one is upstage center, the other slightly down and left of the first. The wooden chairs, their backs curved and sinuous, recall Degas's ballet studios as well as the cafés in which this fantasy begins.

Two women enter from upstage left and walk to the table. They are dressed elegantly in "timeless" street clothes—Speaker 1 is in a black and white print dress, Speaker 2 in a black one—with high-heeled shoes and brimmed hats; both of them carry suitcases. They go to either side of the table and begin to unpack the suitcases, which contain books and papers, cups and saucers, glasses, pens, cigarettes. They pile the stuff on the table, leaving the not-quite-empty suitcases ajar on the floor; then they sit. They gesture

nervously, come together for a slow, mostly unison sequence of small actions: legs cross and uncross, palms turn down and up, heads swivel, an arm floats. Their gestures completed, the two women begin alternately to write on the papers and books and to read them. They continue these actions throughout the performance. Intermittently, one or another might raise a cigarette or a glass to her lips, or turn a page, or she might merely brush her fingers across an object and retreat.

During this section, two more women enter the space and go to the empty chairs. They wear full-skirted dresses that suggest both the long tutus of nineteenth-century ballet and the "New Look" Dior-inspired fashions of the 1950s; echoing their counterparts, Dancer 1 is in a black dress, Dancer 2 in a black and white print. They are barefoot, and their toenails are painted red. They stand behind the chairs (Dancer 1 center, Dancer 2 down left), facing upstage, their arms held behind them, their hands curled around the wooden loops of the chair backs. They are nearly still, moving slightly and very slowly, always connected to the chairs.]

SPEAKER 1: Prelude. And so life in Paris began and as all roads lead to Paris, all of us are now there, and I can begin to tell what happened when I was of it.

[Dancer 1 begins to dance, moving toward the table. As she travels, she picks up her chair—as though it were a suitcase—and



Elaine Shipman (left) and Marjorie Gamso at the beginning of *C'est-à-Dire*. Photo: Courtesy Tom Brazil.



Leslie Satin (left) Renni Greenberg Gallagher in the "French Film" section of *C'est-à-Dire*. Photo: Courtesy Tom Brazil.

re-places it, three times, then turns and heads downstage, dancing. Dancer 2 watches.

Note: The dancing throughout C'est-à-Dire is sensual, soft, stretched, its qualities and its lexicon bordering on and borrowing from the balletic and the post-modern. Each section is derived from a specific movement principle (for example, all of the movement in one section begins in the hips, and another is a series of balances) and travels along a set path in the performance space. Within those rules, the dancers improvise in performance, their in-the-moment decisions guided by the responsibility to avoid at all times any synchronicity of action and corresponding speech: a spoken description of the crossing of a leg, for instance, must never be accompanied by the enactment of that gesture.)

SPEAKER 2: Always, she had dreamed of Paris. She imagined herself in the salons of Gertrude Stein, gazing at the walls filled with paintings by Picasso and Matisse, murmuring her admiration of the images to the artists themselves over tea, bringing her face quite close to Pablo's—she called him Pablo—and even laughing, not too loud.

SPEAKER 1: Always, she had dreamed of Paris. She saw herself at those cafés, the ones where the artist rubbed calloused fingers over the surface of the table as he spoke earnestly of painting or looked quietly into her green eyes. Or he absently shifted the materials of the table, the single glass, the wedge of lemon, the newspaper whose bold-face "J" on real oilcloth would change canvases forever.

SPEAKER 2: He leaned forward to speak to her, he brought his face quite close to hers. She did not laugh. She crossed her legs.

[During the next section, Dancer 2 begins to dance, first with her chair, then on her own, traveling toward the center. Dancer 1, finishing her dance, goes to the table and joins Speakers 1 and 2, standing behind them.]

SPEAKER 1: She crossed her legs and uncrossed them. She reached into her bag and brought out her book and began to read it and she sipped her coffee. She brought out an enormous pad of paper and began to write a book and she wrote it all at once in a hot rage of imagination. Words exploded from left to right across the pages like horses through an open field, and he gazed at her and her words and murmured his admiration.

SPEAKER 2: She crossed her legs and uncrossed them. She lit a cigarette and glanced at him and went back to her book. Finally she rose and packed her bags and they walked out together into the thin winter light.

DANCER 1: [Reading over Speaker 2's shoulder.] They walked out together into the thin winter light, late afternoon on the Boulevard St. Germain, their faces close to each other in the thin winter light—

SPEAKER 2: She crossed her legs and uncrossed them. She lit a cigarette and glanced at him and went back to her book. She rested her left elbow on the table and cupped her chin in her left hand, her fingers fluttering against her cheek. She thought about Alice, as her fingers fluttered against her cheek.

[Brief silence as Dancer 2 finishes her dance. As the next spoken section begins, Dancers 1 and 2 walk to a wall section that is set apart from the others and functions, now, as a screen; it is marked either by a length of white paper or by peeking out from between two dark curtains. The two women stand against the wall, very close to each other, Dancer 1 stage right of Dancer 2. During the next section, as Speaker 1 speaks, Dancers 1 and 2 move fluidly, quite close to the "screen," as though their images were film projections.]

SPEAKER 1: She imagined herself as a celluloid Parisian queen, a Zelig of film noir and la nouvelle vague. She kissed Antoine Doinel through the gates of the reformatory, she teased

Michel Piccoli into loving articulation of each part of her body—

DANCER 1: [From the wall.] Aime-toi mes pieds?

DANCER 2: [From the wall.] Aime-toi mon dos?

SPEAKER 1: —she made love to Gerard Depardieu before he gained weight, she zipped Zazie's uncle into his green dress—the tight one, she spoke volumes silently for Bresson, she honked her horn for Godard, she suspected from the start that Simone Signoret was trying to trick the headmaster's fragile wife, she fell unexpectedly for Miou-Miou, and yes yes yes she loved Jules and Jim and petite Sabine.

[Speaker 1 sings Jules and Jim theme music: "la la la la la . . ."; Speaker 2 joins in here and there, in French. Dancer 1 leaves the wall and walks toward downstage right. She begins a solo that arcs through the space, ending in the down left area. It is largely quite slow, except for a brief (and still barefoot) tap section. Dancer 1, meanwhile, returns to the table.]

SPEAKER 2: She waited near the window. On the table was a single cup, it was her cup, and the coffee in it, which was dark and bitter and delicious, was, nonetheless, cold. She waited for something to happen and every now and then she took a small sip of her dark and bitter coffee, which, because it was cold, was not quite as delicious as it might have been, as in fact it had been when she first sat down to wait at the table near the window. She could not light a cigarette to pass the time—

SPEAKER 1: —in fact she did not smoke at all and so in any case would not have lit a cigarette—and she was momentarily distracted from her waiting by the realization that her restless cells had no outlet: her fingers could not focus themselves on raising the lit cigarette to her lips, her right leg began to cross itself over her left knee but stopped when she realized that the gesture, so sultry in alliance with a lit cigarette, looked merely nervous as a solitary action; of course she might have wedded the cross-

ing of the leg to the lifting of the cup holding the coffee but—

SPEAKER 2: Christ, the coffee was gone somehow, only the pale tan trace of the once delicious dark and bitter drink remained at the bottom of the cup and there were even a few grounds, nearly black and certainly not delicious.

PART 2

[Brief silence. Speaker 2 resumes speaking. Dancer 2, in the downstage left corner, begins to "write" with her fingers on the wall. Dancer 1, too, air-writes, first on the wall behind the table; then she crosses toward Dancer 2, moving the chairs, in passing, to the upstage wall and positioning them to face stage right. As their duet progresses, the women write on whatever surfaces they encounter, including their own and each other's bodies.]

SPEAKER 2: Prelude: You see I feel with my eyes and it does not make any difference to me what language I hear, I don't hear a language, I hear tones of voice and rhythms, but with my eyes I see words and sentences and there is for me only one language and that is English.

SPEAKER 1: But there are many languages other than English. Just because Gertrude Stein wrote that there was only one language for her—and do you realize that she referred to herself by her full name throughout The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas? Why do you think she did that?

SPEAKER 2: I don't know. I suppose she was impressing upon us, the readers, that she wasn't referring to herself the person, who Alice would certainly have addressed by her first name, maybe she even called her "honey" or "mon petit choux-fleur" if she was going all the way with the French thing, but to herself the character of the novel and its self-conscious creator—

SPEAKER 1: We're digressing. We were talking about language. Do you realize that only a



Renni Greenberg Gallagher (left) and Leslie Satin in the final section of *C'est-à-Dire*.
Photo: Courtesy Tom Brazil.

few months ago the linguist who had made his mark disagreeing with Chomsky died? He spoke thirteen languages, and he loved to cook. He was really a terrific cook, and he loved to entertain. I learned this from the obituary in the New York Times. There was a picture, he looked kind of like Sonny Bono. Anyway, he came up with the theory of generative semantics, which countered Chomsky's theory of generative grammar—

SPEAKER 2: Okay. Enough of that for now. I need to write. I'm going to put on the music.

[She bends to reach the portable audio tape player sitting under the table and turns on the tape. Soon, a rather scratchy recording of Edith Piaf singing "Je Suis À Toi" begins. Before its first notes, Dancers 1 and 2 walk to the upstage left corner, where Dancer 2 supports Dancer 1 in a momentary forward lean—imagine the prow of a ship—then crosses upstage to the table. Dancer 1 dances on a diagonal path toward downstage right throughout Piaf's song, lightly supported by its measures. Finishing, she leans against the stage right wall and watches Dancer 2, who replaces her in the down right spot, dancing in that small space.]

SPEAKER 2: She crosses her right leg over the left but senses that the gesture is too crass, too final, too certain. And so she retracts the action, choosing instead to delay the moment of arrival, the pleasure of completion, by a series of feints and interruptions. Sometimes these strategies take off on their own like freed birds, and the leg follows another score entirely, maybe alone, maybe pulling another limb along—maybe seeking a partner elsewhere in the café—before remembering the original direction of the gesture—the crossing of the right leg over the left at the knee.

Of course sometimes she, or her leg, forget the original direction of the gesture.

Or she, or it, remembers, but decides upon resuming the gesture that it doesn't work any more, it doesn't propel the phrase.

Sometimes she is just still, arrested midway or even closer to the generation of the gesture or to its completion. She isn't really still, of course: she is preparing to move again or she is waiting or she is recovering or she is building up cells or heart or she is ordering another coffee.

PART 3

[When Dancer 2 finishes dancing, she leans against the stage right wall. Speakers 1 and 2 begin speaking. Dancers 1 and 2 come into the space; each retrieves one of the chairs from its upstage post, then carries it toward the center. The two women perform a long, three-part duet, resetting the chairs at the start of each section. Dancing always with their chairs, they lean on them, nuzzle them, circle them, caress them; they never sit.]

SPEAKER 1 & SPEAKER 2: Prelude.

SPEAKER 2: One of the things that I have liked all these years is to be surrounded by people who know no English.

SPEAKER 1 & SPEAKER 2: It has left me more intensely alone with my eyes and my English.

SPEAKER 1: I do not know if it would have been possible to have English be so all in all to me otherwise.

SPEAKER 2: Now there are two of them, sitting or not sitting in the chairs.

Sometimes standing, they approach the chairs. They approach the chairs with the wariness of those whose approaches have been met—once or more—with a turn away, a sweep of the eyes across the headlines, a kiss blown elsewhere.

Sometimes standing, they wait. Sometimes, standing, they wait until the perfect moment to sit in the chairs, the moment when no one will walk toward the door or blow a kiss at the man in glasses whose long hair falls into his eyes when he leans forward toward his book. He is reading Foucault, and his lips part slightly as he forms the

words with his own skin, the words that sit so quietly on the paper like little houses where Foucault once lived.

SPEAKER 1: Still standing, they walk toward the chairs. Still standing, they walk toward the chairs with the tremblings of those whose thighs have stiffened in lengthy pauses, of those whose arms have traced heroic circles above the anachronistic pas of the backwards bourée, with the fluttering fingers of the hand holding the pen and writing air-texts of invisible scrolling words and boldly executed punctuations [SPEAKER 2: dot dot dot dot dot dot] in historical disjunction above the delicate feet. Actually, the feet are not so delicate, but they recall the delicate feet of Taglioni, whose bourées brought Gautier to his knees, set aflame by her chastity, by her sacred feet, by her toes whose tips were like wood, like iron, and she stood upon them in her pink satin slippers waiting for someone to invent pointe shoes with blocked toe-boxes.

Still they do not sit, and yearningly they reach for the chair, with this hand or that,

with one tentative or anticipatory hip, with the other one.

SPEAKER 2: Still they do not sit, their feet possessed as so many feet have been possessed before, have been driven by desire to the last sad pages of dance stories and love stories.

SPEAKER 1: Still they do not sit, circling their chairs with yearning hips and fluttering fingers while around them in the streets of Paris, the city of light—

[The dancers have finished their duet. Echoing the start of the piece, they stand close to their chairs, moving very slightly.]

SPEAKER 2: —Simone de Beauvoir waltzes with Ernest Hemingway and Colette tangoes with Marguerite Duras and Matisse's dancers throw back their heads and Duchamp, setting sail for America, adjusts his hat.

[All four performers freeze. Blackout.]

END

LESLIE SATIN is a choreographer, dancer, and writer who lives and works in New York. She teaches at New York University and SUNY/Empire State College. *C'est-à-Dire* is the first of a series of dances about travel, called *Foreign Currencies*. She is currently performing versions of the next piece in the series, whose working title is *Torch*.