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LESLIE SATIN AND THE DANCE OF MEMORY

Nicole Plett

Leslie Satin and Dancers, The Construction Company, New York, New York, April 26–27, 2003.

One of the first dances I saw by Leslie Satin, *Walking the Plankton* in Santa Fe, in 1980, upended much of what I thought I knew about dance. It also brought me into dance criticism. She and I were both much younger then, both products of American university arts education (in my case art history in California in the late 1960s; in her case dance in New York in the early 1970s). What continues to astonish me is that I can still recapture the tone of that "Plankton" dance—its playful, punning title, the structural complexity of its movement themes, its real-world references to divers and diving boards, its dance abstraction. And there was the indisputable materiality of its planks: those pine boards, hefted about by the dancers, defining, redefining, and carving up space, that slotted right into my intense interest in minimalist sculpture. Out of that meeting and shared dance-art connections, our long-lived friendship arose.

Walking the Plankton, *Cross Sections*, *Pressing Matters*, and *Oat Cuisine* were part of a flurry of challenging and origi-

nal dances Satin made in the early 1980s during a three-year stretch in the Southwest, following six years of zigzagging between New York and New Mexico, showing dances in both places. Then, as now, her persistent wordplay and ambiguous, sometimes inscrutable movement and gesture choices resonated with sentient and sensuous human impulses. As an undergraduate at SUNY Buffalo in the early 1970s, Satin studied ballet and composition with James Waring; this was a formative experience that still reverberates with possibilities. "What I learned from Jimmy Waring was to be open to anything—he taught me to keep my eyes open," she says today. (Satin's essay on Waring, "James Waring and the Judson Dance Theatre: Influences, Intersections, and Divergences," is included in the 2003 anthology *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything was Possible*, edited by Sally Banes. Her thoughts on the relation of the dancer and the dance may be seen in the introduction to "Performing Autobiography," a special issue of *Women & Performance, a Journal of Feminist Theor*, Spring 1999, that

she co-edited with Judith Jerome.) Other influential teachers and mentors have included Merce Cunningham, Peter Saul, and Robert Ellis Dunn, who led the initial Judson Dance Theater workshops of 1962–1964. Long-time colleagues and collaborators include Marjorie Gamso, with whom Satin has danced, on and off, since the mid-1970s; and, beginning in the mid-1980s, Sally Gross. For the past several years, she has been studying Klein Technique with Susan Klein and Barbara Mahler. After returning to New York, Satin combined her dance practice with academia, completing her Ph.D. in Performance Studies at New York University. Navigating the traditional boundary between scholarship and art-making, between interpretation and creation, she remains both artist and scholar.

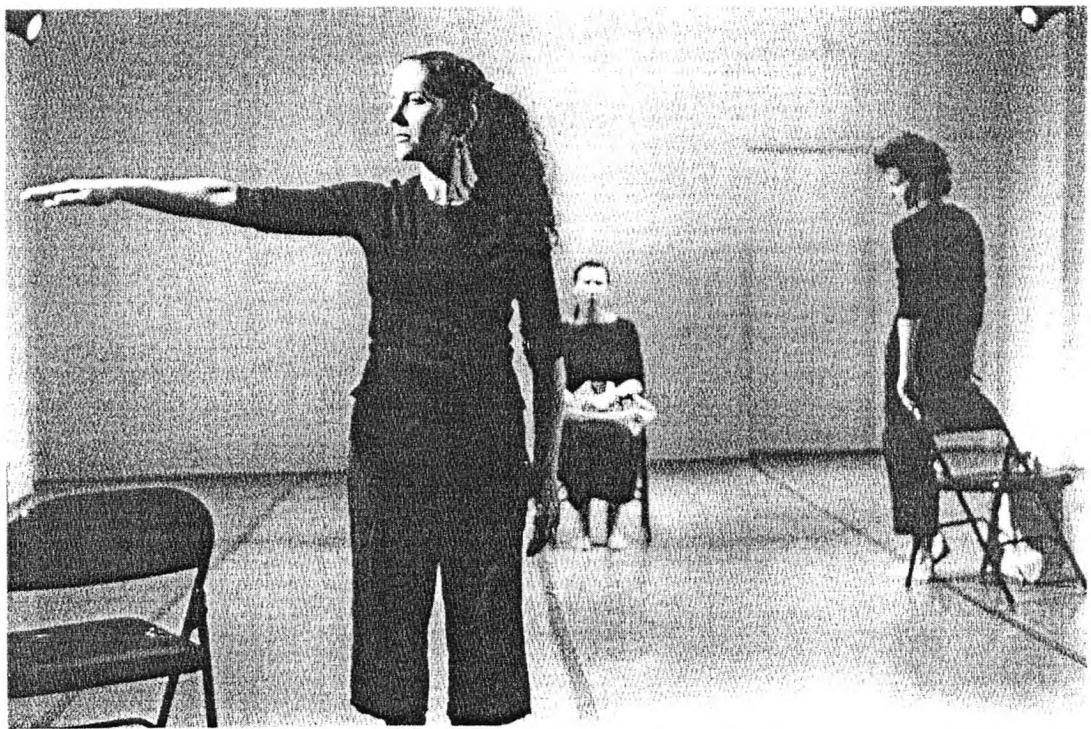
Satin's scholarly work for some time focused on the interaction of autobiography and formalist dance of the early 1960s. Citing tastes and beliefs that are as deep-seated as they are contradictory, she is drawn to formalist work and work that is demonstrably linked to the world outside the stage. In her introduction to the 1999 issue of *Women & Performance* that examines autobiography and its variable relationships to truth, she makes a general observation that rings true for her own dances: "Not every autobiographer returns to the past; some anchor us in the present moment or urge us into the future." From the first, Satin's dances have served to anchor this viewer in the present moment.

Still watching Satin's dances more than twenty years down the road, I am struck by the dual paths of continuity and evolution. Market forces of the late-20th century long ago drew most Judson

pioneers such as Trisha Brown (whose *Accumulation with Water Motor* and *Talking* of 1971–77 some of us still consider the mother of all talking dances) irresistibly toward spectacle. Satin has stayed with the intimacy of movement for its own sake. Her gentle and idiosyncratic dance vocabulary, rooted in her own body and drawn in part from the pleasure of studio practice, luxuriates in qualities of stillness. This is movement with few bravura jumps and none of that post-Judson running (*à la Twyla Tharp*); hers is a conscious, forthright walk. Satin has also remained wedded to the Judson's potent coupling of dance and text; and the advantage here is her uncommon gift with words. Her texts are marvels of complexity and double entendre, rooted in history, literature, ideas; they give her works a heft not always found in dance and text pieces. "Talking and dancing can't replace each other, but they can embrace and they can fight like cats," she wrote in a recent essay on "Talking and Dancing in the 21st Century" for the Brazilian performing arts journal *Gesto* (Issue 1, 2002).



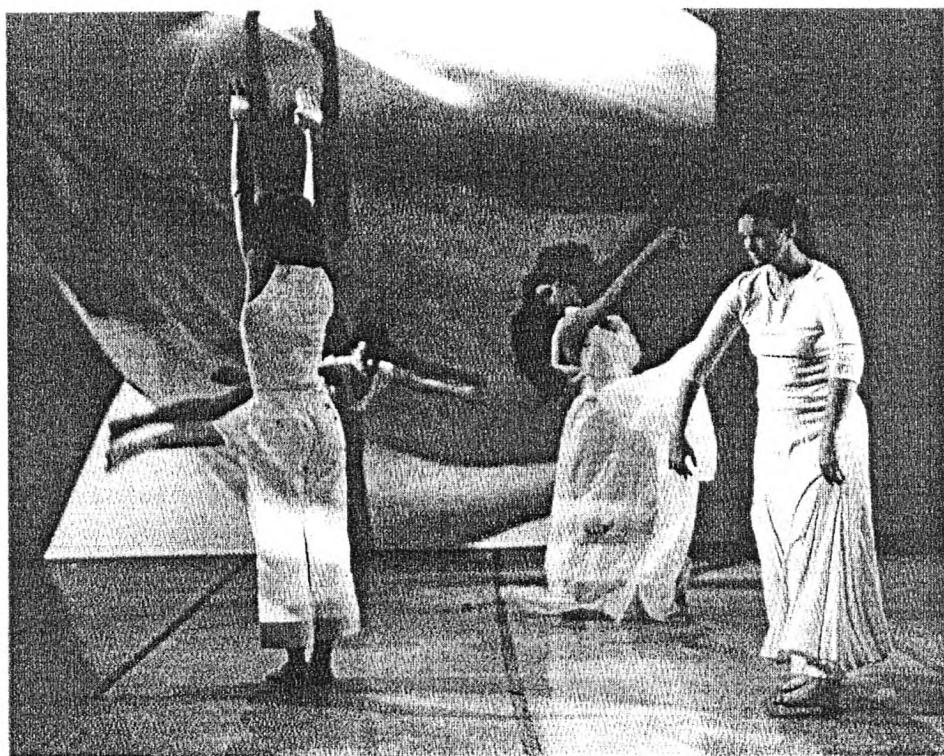
Satin's April 2003 New York concert started simply enough with a coming and going dance. *Far From It* (2003), which opened a concert of four works under the title "Leslie Satin and Dancers," presented by the Construction Company, begins with a lone dancer finding her way onto a darkened stage that gradually fills with warm light. Barefoot, wearing a rustling black circular grass skirt and a dark blouse, Satin stands in silence, facing her audience. It starts with three rises, sometimes quick,



Top: *Take-Off and Landing*, with Leslie Satin, Iris Rose, Vicky ~~S~~nick.

Bottom: *Shadow Load* with Vicky ~~S~~nick, Barbara Mahler, Dages Keates, Susan Osberg.

Photos: Courtesy Tom Brazil.



sometimes slow. As she rises, she swings both arms outward; hands and arms knead the air, probing or grasping for balance. The motion is repeated, incorporating a brief passage of frenzied, ineffectual arm waving before the dancer resumes her quiet stance.

Erasure—or, one might even say, destruction and obliteration—is an explicit theme of this post-9/11 concert program, a suite of four challenging and intelligent new dances. Even Satin’s complement of titles—*Far From It*, *Shadow Load*, *Take-Off and Landing*, *Dis/Place*—seems to chew over the terrible terrain of our new world. In an adagio duet within *Dis/Place*, the diminutive choreographer pairs herself with her tallest dancer. Moving in unison, one behind the other, against the studio’s upstage wall, she, the smaller partner, is rendered effectively invisible—an absent presence, a ghost, a receding memory.

Yet there is more than demolition going on here: the new work is also about building and rebuilding. Satin’s gentle, meditative works express her perennial affection for movement for its own sake—no matter how unexalted. A finger flutters, a foot brushes the floor, a leg rises to arabesque; such nuances of gesture ask only for the viewer’s close attention. And over the course of the evening, in the succession of dances that unfold from Satin’s opening solo, we see a personal movement vocabulary gradually amplified and multiplied by an ensemble of eight performers. And even as themes of loss and erasure are made explicit, the affirmation of the primacy of art-making becomes this choreographer’s implicit Ground Zero.

Far From It is a collaborative solo built of movement material choreographed for Satin by Marjorie Gamso; it continues a working friendship that dates back to the earliest years of Satin’s career. Gamso had also been a student of Jimmy Waring, and the pair met at the Cunningham studio in the early 1970s. Erasure was a concept that both choreographers first investigated in the 1970s and 1980s. The work’s understated and unpredictable vocabulary includes sensuous passages for the dancer’s bare arms and hands: a hand stubbornly pushes back on a shoulder, the hand pat-pat-pats the air, then fingers flutter; small, irregular hip thrusts provide the punctuation.

Minutes into the ten-minute dance, Satin walks a circular path and returns to face front. This is the moment that defines the junction between the dance’s coming and going. Now music joins the mix—fragments of John Cage’s 1942 *In the Name of the Holocaust* for string piano—as Satin begins again. But this time she subtracts and adds, cumulatively bending and shaping Gamso’s movement score to make it her own. In four successive permutations, performed in slightly different orientations within the space, dance phrases are embodied, embellished, and corrupted by the performer until the source material is erased—or rather, overwritten and made new.

The concert’s second dance of erasure, *Shadow Load* (2003), is a twelve-minute collaborative quartet with video, created by four performer-choreographers—Dages Keates, Barbara Mahler, Susan Osberg, and Vicky Shick—from a score of fifteen still photographs by

Karen Robbins made from a source dance by Satin, which is never seen by viewers. Presented with the fifteen photos, each dancer was directed to reproduce the photographic material, in sequence, within given time frames. Videographer Andrew Gurian is a sixth collaborator on the work: selected and manipulated video fragments of Satin performing the original dance material fill the studio's upstage wall. Each *Shadow Load* dancer wears an all-white costume of her own choosing. First to enter is the young Keates who rustles her way to center stage in a floor-length white gown of white plastic garbage bags and Saran Wrap. (This character I immediately and involuntarily nicknamed "The Lunatic Bride.") The three other women wear more ordinary combinations of white pants or skirts and blouses. One of the visual highlights of the concert program, this dance features the gifted foursome, each with very different movement and choreographic inclinations, brilliantly reinventing the movement material and the assignment, making it their own in a sumptuous collage of four simultaneous solos which are repeated, but never in the same spatial orientation to one another.

The program's second half comprised a suite of two works that continues Satin's *Foreign Currencies*, a series of dances imagining travel that she began in 1999. Preceded by *C'est-à-dire* (Paris)—whose text was published in *PAJ* 68, Spring 2001—and *Torch* and *As It Happens* (Japan), Satin's travel dances are fraught with chance, mystery, conflict, and a touch of whimsy. However this one, composed in Fall 2001 and interrupted by 9/11, is suffused by a sense of peril, of loss of position, of loss of control.

Take-Off and Landing (2001) is a work for three women, each toting a chair and a canvas bag packed with maps. Danced by Satin and Shick, it is accompanied by a pungent monologue written by Satin and performed by actress Iris Rose. The narrative begins when Satin, facing the audience, utters the words "kiss me" and her right arm slices toward and away from and around her head. The circuitous and self-contradictory story is quickly taken up by Rose and unfolds as a writer's story about herself, a loving relationship, plans for a journey, an autumn walk amidst the wildflowers of the Hudson Valley. Maps are folded and unfolded, routes are charted, Satin and Shick wrap themselves in their maps, sarong style. At one point Shick, seated on a chair, crosses and recrosses her legs as if trying to get comfortable, her face wearing the opaque mask of the waiting-room traveler.

As the narrator's anxiety grows, planning and listmaking goes visibly awry. The chairs are reconfigured and Rose become the talkative back-seat driver of the trio in a set up that resembles a small-screen sit-com. Occupying the two front seats, Satin and Shick sit, facing forward, with the blank stare so peculiar to travelers in motion. "Robert Frost is not at the steering wheel on this trip," exclaims the agitated Rose before being interrupted, we're told, by a telephone call with "news about flying." The narrator's closing words, after regaining her apartment, about how "I shift from heels to toes, feet feeling for the right path, from the desk to the bed," could well stand as a metaphor for the artist's project.

The program's final, longest work, also part of the travel series, was the new

quartet *Dis/Place* (2003), a work that was moored to *Take Off and Landing* via an entr'acte video by Andrew Gurian, an abstract study of a child's spinning globe. Choreographed by Satin, the dance was performed by Satin with Johanna Hegenscheidt, Laura Hymers, and Vicki Shick. It opens with a half-solemn, half-comic processional for four women in black pants and jackets, a slow walking line that crosses and re-crosses the stage in the manner of the Shades of the iconic Russian ballet *La Bayadère*. Satin's musical accompaniment is a short passage from a yearning, lilting waltz on strings by Umebayashi Shigeru, which recurs intermittently over the course of the dance. Moving in succession, the dancers hesitate, not to descend into the classical arabesque, but for a deep, wide plié, a hand passing across the brow, or a back bent forward, palms lightly rubbing the thighs. Each dancer adapts Satin's quirky vocabulary to her own physique and kinesthetic sense. Even when dancers remove their jackets, we consider the variable cultural meanings of their pedestrian task.

Dis/Place also encompasses four short video segments by Andrew Gurian. In one we see a black-jacketed figure removing objects (or colorful nouns) from her pocket. We watch the long fingers disappear and come up with a fish, a kazoo, a brown egg, an orange, a tiny blue plastic doll (which, enlarged on the upstage wall, becomes equal in size to the live dancers), and a pair of spectacles. Finally the hand grasps an antique, leather-bound book which then drops soundlessly off the edge of the

projection and out of our sight. It's so quirky and poetic, and for a moment, the dance ensemble sinks to the floor and watches.

Presenting these works at the Construction Company on East 18th Street, where she has shown her work many times, Satin makes resourceful use of the special characteristics of the studio space: a deep, narrow, high-ceiling rectangle, its upstage wall punctuated stage left by a pair of doors. The performers' entrance and egress is limited to this un-heroic portal or to a sort of birth canal that runs from the dressing rooms in the rear alongside the audience seated on risers. In this program, Satin makes abundant use of the floor, and the walls especially seem to exert a siren-like attraction, drawing her to all three walls for individual, group, and unison movement passages. The striking and affecting lighting design for the entire concert was by Chris Hudacs.

Multiplication is manifest here in movement invention. It is also an apt term for this particular genre of independent avant-garde performance that endures in modern dance but has no real parallel in the other performing arts. This somewhat punishing and Duncanesque tradition, beset by financial constraints, requires the artist-choreographer to take on the multiple additional roles of booking agent, casting director, rehearsal director, publicist, underwriter, fund-raiser, and dog's body. In her third decade of dance-making this is still Satin's way, part of the everyday reality of independent downtown dance.

NICOLE PLETT is a dance critic and arts editor for *U.S. 1* Newspaper in Princeton, New Jersey.