

Inside the Knot that Two Bodies Make

Steven Spier

The film *From a Classical Position* (1997) is a fully collaborative work between a notable dancer and performer and a notable choreographer, being danced, directed, and edited by Dana Caspersen and William Forsythe of the late Ballett Frankfurt. By looking closely at the film, its origins, and its process of creation, we gain an understanding of Caspersen and Forsythe's way of collaborating and their interest in working with other media and formats. Uncompromising if not difficult for a general dance audience, it is also somewhat didactic and offers insights into some of the Ballett Frankfurt's methods of generating movement, choreographic structures, and the importance of classical technique to a distinctive movement vocabulary:

[The film] was also a little message to the British, who I'm sure were curious about us. It was a little missile to them, saying yes we are the Frankfurt Ballet, yes we perform before so many seats in the Opera House. We are the same people and this is what we do. . . . There is the obvious classical training and this is how we are dealing with it.¹ (Forsythe 1999)

The Ballett Frankfurt scrupulously avoided a formal hierarchy among its dancers, often listing them in a program alphabetically, but Caspersen was unmistakably a prominent performer and contributor. Since joining the company in 1988 after leaving the North Carolina Dance Theatre, she had been a dancer, actress, author, director, choreographer, and film editor both with the company and on her own.² She won many awards as a dancer. She was nominated in 2001 for the Laurence Olivier Award for Outstanding Dance Achievement; won a Bessie, the New York Dance and Performance Award for Outstanding Creative Achievement, in 1999; and was named "Best Dancer" by critics in *Ballett International's* annual poll for 2000–2001, 1996–97, and 1994–95.

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Forsythe was artistic director of the Ballett Frankfurt from 1984 to 2004 and has long been recognized as one of the world's leading choreographers. (He is also acknowledged to be an exceptional lighting designer.) He dances when he is teaching in rehearsal but rarely performs publicly.³ He has a long history of working with people in other fields, including literature, music, architecture, and film, and has frequently worked with a dramaturge. Similarly, he has involved company members in choreography, costume design, making videos, and writing texts and music. While working collaboratively with dancers is not a new idea, it is unusual in a ballet context; and through his extensive collaboration at the Ballett Frankfurt, Forsythe has sought to break down the traditional hierarchy between choreographer and dancer. Program notes from as early as *Pizza Girl (Ninety One-Minute Ballets)* (1986) have credited the choreography to the dancers and himself. He has often referred to the Ballett Frankfurt as a choreographic ensemble.⁴

The idea of Caspersen and Forsythe dancing with each other and making a film came from the creation of *Tight Roaring Circle* (1997), an installation in London by Caspersen, Forsythe, and Joel Ryan commissioned by Artangel. Over the four years from the first conversation to inception, the installation changed numerous times, but the ideas of making a film and of Caspersen and Forsythe dancing together were recurring (Caspersen and Forsythe 1997).⁵ This was a period of extremely active collaboration between them. As full collaborators they made the installation *Tight Roaring Circle* (1997, with Joel Ryan), *the the* (1995, Ballet Frankfurt), and *Firsttext* (1994, The Royal Ballet, with Antony Rizzi). Caspersen also contributed significant parts to pieces by Forsythe. She directed and choreographed him in part one of *Endless House* (1999); choreographed parts of *Small Void* (1998), *A L I E / N A (C) T I O N* (1993), and *Quintett* (1993); and wrote texts for *Endless House* (1999), *Sleepers Guts* (1997), *Eidos: Telos* (1995), *Of any if and* (1995), *the the* (1995), and *A L I E / N A (C) T I O N* (1993). She danced or performed in all of these pieces except for the first part of *Endless House*.

The making of *Tight Roaring Circle* took a form of collaboration that is as complete as in the film, and Caspersen's description of creating *Tight Roaring Circle* equally applies to *From a Classical Position*:

There is the kind of collaboration where people work on different aspects of one project to create the whole, there is the kind where someone organises the seminal parameters of an event and enables others [to] move into this field to find their own version of it, and then there is the kind of collaboration which is the coming together of two or more minds with the intent to carry out the difficult and lovely work of letting something take root and form in the expanded and complex space of minds thinking together about one task. (July 13, 1997, fax to the author)

The installation also displays some of the preoccupations of the collaborators that are taken up again in *From a Classical Position*, even if it is, as the world's largest bouncy castle,⁶ rather more populist. The most important impetus was to recapture authentic impulse, the joy of moving, the sheer delight with one's body that everyone has as a child. These may sound like obvious starting points for a choreographer and dancer, but they are often subsumed: "Choreography should serve as a channel for the desire to dance.

Often, when I [Forsythe] make ballets for other companies, I sense a loss of the joy of dancing. . . . I'm not talking about being on stage, I'm talking about *dancing* . . . not at how they perform 'the choreography'" (Sulcas 1995). The use of a bouncy castle makes all this simply fun if not silly as one is literally destabilized and thus forced to move in a way that makes one aware of one's body in space and its relationship to gravity. Through heightening one's sense of proprioception, the awareness of what one's own body is doing, it hints at the sophisticated spatial awareness that trained ballet dancers have. The installation also uncovers the existence of rules or systems that define spatial relationships with other people or choreographic structures, though in this case through an instinctive order that prevented people from colliding. These themes of collaborative making, the joy of movement, and uncovering means for organizing bodies and movement in space are also central to *From a Classical Position*.

Another important reference for *From a Classical Position* is *the the*, a piece that looks at how the body moves under different parameters: "*the the* is a richly articulate knot, wound by two women. Thinking intently through the curves and tensions of their bodies, the women engage in a conversation of limbs, spoken in a precise, tangled dialect of beauty" (Caspersen, May 26, 2003, email to the author). In each of four stagings between 1996 and 2000 *the the* opens with two people (a man and a woman but two women in the latest staging in Brussels) downstage sitting next to each other, still for the first minute or so. They dance while seated in a complex counterpoint with each other. (*the the* soon became the first piece in an evening's performance entitled *Six Counterpoints* [1996].) As the piece continues it is punctuated by meditative periods and a dancer's display of a hip, rib, or sole of a foot. Occasionally the dancers stand up to move to a different part of the stage and continue there. Sporadically Caspersen calmly calls out words that sound like cues, "one," "together," "two," "stop" to the faint background of traffic noise. In it some of the same physical coordinations and theatrical means as those in *From a Classical Position* are explored. There is an interest in isolating certain upper torso coordinations—shoulder-hip and rib cage—shoulder. The limbs sometimes seem cadaverous, other times brittle; generally they react to the actions of the torso and not the other way around, as in *épaulement*.⁷ The scale of the movement (that it occurs while the dancers are sitting), the absence of music, and the bare stage all demand that the viewer concentrate his or her gaze.

From a Classical Position has Caspersen and Forsythe dancing on a bare sound stage for twenty-five minutes. Though shot in color, it looks black and white. The editing is crisp, and the music by Forsythe's long-time collaborator Thom Willems comes and goes, as does the sound of the dancers themselves. The lighting is generally even. There are solos, pairings, extreme close ups that resemble landscapes or hyper-real sculpture, and sound that not always corresponds to what one sees (Figure 1). A close look at the first fifty-five seconds shows the film's complexity. Forsythe encircles and twirls around a stationary Caspersen for about ten seconds before the title comes on the screen, then a thumping sound begins as Caspersen and Forsythe repeatedly tumble to the floor; the sound, however, is subtly out of sync with the movement apparently generating it. Then they are sitting next to each other, looking for a point on each other with which

to continue: Caspersen with her hand on Forsythe's forehead, his hand on her knee, he then taking her finger and leading her hand away from his forehead. This fades to them dancing upright to piano music; the sound of them dancing comes in; jump cut to them sitting on the floor dancing; a rhythmic banging noise that is asynchronous but clearly represents Forsythe's elbow hitting the floor as he collapses; jump cut; Caspersen solo with piano music; sound of her dancing and then slapping noises; Caspersen falling to the ground; the frames of her falling to the ground repeated; Forsythe entering the frame to reposition her. Soon afterward we have the first of eighteen extreme closes ups, this one of his hand wrapped around one of her limbs as the camera slowly pans up his forearm, accompanied by the sound of a rhythmic thump, then piano music, an ear, Caspersen's hands gripping Forsythe's arm, the creases of Caspersen's arms against her upper body. At the very end Caspersen and Forsythe are entwined.

The primary nature of their relationship in the film is spatial; it is about the shape of another body from the interior, defining the space between them, making visible "the interior of the knot" (Caspersen 1999) that two bodies make. Forsythe's description of the process of using drawings by Tiepolo in the making of *Hypothetical Stream* (1996) shows this interest in the space of two bodies entangled: "There are all these human knots that Tiepolo had floating about as sketches. . . . And so *Hypothetical Stream* is simply people trying to solve these problems, unravel these knots" (Cook 1999) (Figure 2). In the same interview he says he understands ballet as a "geometric inscriptive art form."⁸ His instructional CD-ROM, *Improvisation Technologies [interactive multimedia]: A Tool for the Analytical Dance Eye*, is the culmination of such explorations with its origins in

Figure 1. An extreme close-up resembling a landscape or a sculpture. Image captured from video. Used with permission.



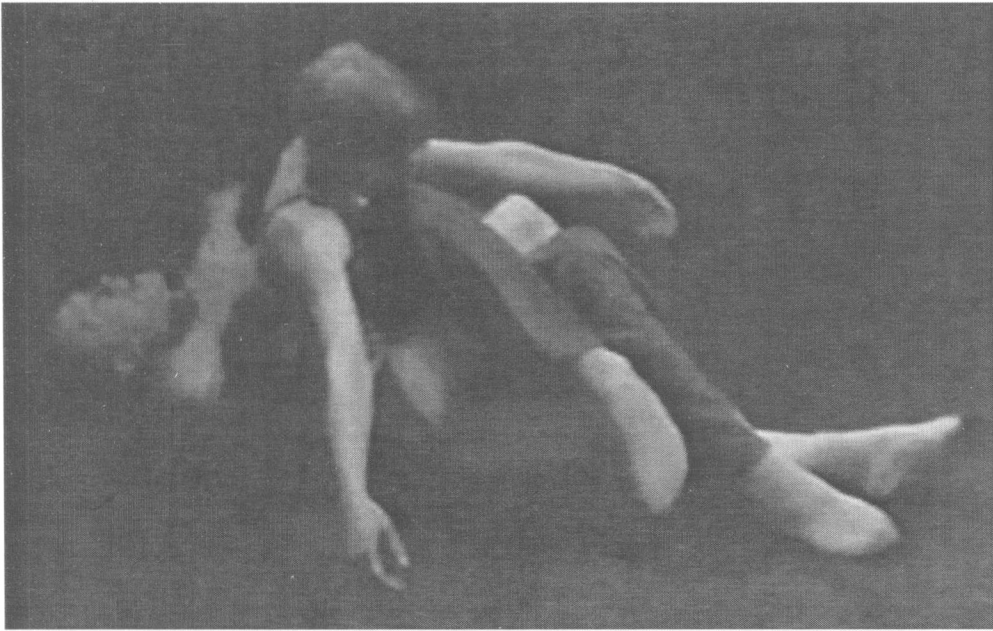


Figure 2. Caspersen and Forsythe entwined on the floor. Image captured from video. Used with permission.

teaching dancers new to the company how to understand his way of understanding the body in space.

The obviously strong physical understanding between Caspersen and Forsythe, however, helps make their exploration of the space between two bodies not only formal but personal as well. This ambiguity can be seen especially in the instances where one body is rearranged by the other person. Forsythe, for instance, sits down panting, and Caspersen takes his chin in her hand. This becomes the point with which to begin the next movement. Similarly, Forsythe lies down and Caspersen takes his wrist to swing him around so that he is prone and lays her arm across his back so her hand is on his shoulder. He then twists around and up with Caspersen's hand on the back of his neck and then jumps back; the music comes in, and he is alone dancing (Figure 3). Forsythe may say that, "Here is a man and a woman who obviously have a very connected relationship but . . . without any kind of innuendo. There's no other thing going on except a man and woman dancing together, [which] can compose a relationship. And that's what it is." (Forsythe 1999), but certain scenes are emotive as well as geometric. Caspersen understands that her training as a dancer allows her to see the world geometrically but admits a viewer might also see other kinds of relationships:

What is interesting about dancing is that we come to live in a physical world which understands the geometry of space. . . . You can realign a partner, for example, in some way to help them; or, not to help them. [Dancers] can put those kinds of internal psychological activities into space. I might see Bill [Forsythe] as himself, but I also see him as a collection of curves and lines. I might realign him

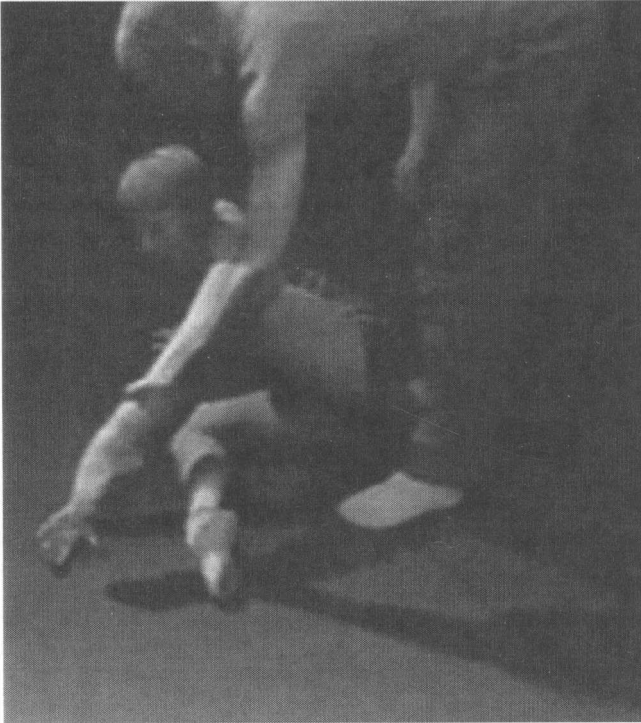


Figure 3. Forsythe repositioning Caspersen. Image captured from video. Used with permission.

on a purely geometrical level, from my point of view. But humans understand intuitively that it has another level. (Caspersen 1999)

The methods used to generate movement for the film were some of the many methods used at the Ballett Frankfurt. For example, a dancer generates a movement alphabet: small, short, gestural movements that are intuitively associated with a letter (Caspersen 2000). These become the basis of a phrase, and the physical configurations or operations that make up that phrase become what the dancer's body remembers. They become the building blocks for further choreography, duos, or group dances, or they become altered to inform the choices dancers make in a structured improvisational setting. Caspersen and Forsythe worked with their phrases off and on for about five weeks. They created duets not in order to learn steps but as a process of becoming entrained to allow them to improvise successfully together (Caspersen 1999).

What we were doing was improvising all sorts of combinations we had made. So we had a big database in our brains of . . . relational positions or relational movement directions. . . . [A]fter a while, if I did this he could sense that I was basing it on some part of some phrase and he would react in some appropriate way. . . . That's one of the benefits of having endlessly rehearsed those combinations: your body then has them. There's a kind of body awareness which functions very quickly, almost faster than your thoughts. . . . You intuitively understand how one connection connects with another connection, and how those timings might

hook up with something else. . . . It's an intellectual activity, but it's not something that you stand around and consider. (Caspersen 1999)

Caspersen describes this process as "a simultaneous building of counterpoint." Forsythe comments that,

Even at my age, more than the physical part, it was the intellectual part that required keeping that amount of information flowing at that speed and not getting habitual. It's really an unbelievable intellectual task. Dancers, it's perhaps a good thing that they're distracted from it, because if they started to acknowledge it, it's really a giant task. I think perhaps in our case it's a big task because our dances are hyper-complex. (Caspersen and Forsythe 1997)

While some of the same methods for generating movement in live performances were used, performing for a film required a different kind of presence than that needed for the stage, which they had not expected:

We got in there on that first day and did it all. It was exactly like every horrible film we had ever seen. [They had watched all the dance films they could find.] We did all those bad things. It was amazing. Film is different for sure. It has to do with focus, I find. The kind of performance focus, dance focus you use on stage doesn't work with films. . . . What we found worked best was to keep our gaze in a smaller sphere than we were used to. (Caspersen 1999)

They were so surprised by the difference of dancing for film that after they watched the first day's rushes they threw out all the material. They then "took two days off, contacted the Royal Ballet who gave us their studios, rehearsed there for two days, [and] structured all the material as improv as opposed to choreographed sequences. Although there are some [vestigial] choreographed sequences in there too" (Forsythe 1999). As Caspersen puts it, "We threw out the actual choreography, the steps we had worked out . . . I think seven different duets. A lot of work, a lot of time was spent going, 'Okay, your right arm . . . no!' And then . . . we had to redo everything . . . and had four days to shoot, which is not very much time for a half-hour film. We went in there . . . and just did take after take . . . and improvised" (Caspersen 1999).

Caspersen and Forsythe danced without a final sequence in mind, and so the editing process involved finding a structure in order to reduce four days' footage to the precise length required for a film made for television. Forsythe likened the editing process to the choreographing of *Hypothetical Stream*, "where you have material, with no agenda except making sense out of the material" (Forsythe 1999). They had early on decided that the film should concentrate on the movement and so avoided special effects, which led to the use of a simple camera strategy of lots of steady cam work and straightforward editing techniques like cutting on the motion. (Forsythe, though, had been interested in using desynchronized sound for some time, and they agreed to use that technique.) "We didn't have any problems deciding on what materials would go in, just how it would go together, the sequence, because we had nothing set up at all. We just picked out the

material that looked good. Then we picked out sound. A lot of it was based on different kinds of sound and also desynchronised sound” (Caspersen 1999).

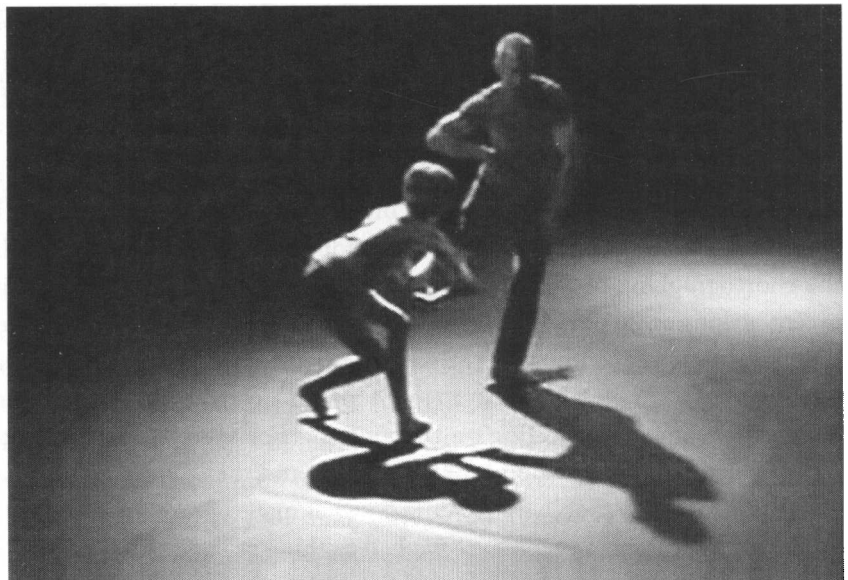
Though the film was not scripted or storyboarded and did not have a traditional cinematic structure that would allow it to be cut together (Kaplan 2002), there is a logic to the way Caspersen and Forsythe move with each other (Figure 4). What had remained from the first day’s shooting was their sense of entrainment (Caspersen 1999) and a coherence based on their classical training: “When we were making the film we discovered that when we didn’t use classical systems it became harder to read. They’re very useful as an orienting tool, for the eye” (Caspersen 1999). Forsythe adds, “They’re very good for counterpoint. The work we were trying to do at that point was very contrapuntal” (Caspersen and Forsythe 1997).

An issue in the editing process was finding a way to collaborate, for Caspersen and Forsythe work very differently:

We’ve got a very strong physical understanding of each other, how we move and how we dance. So the dancing by itself was just delightful to do. . . . The editing was very difficult and maybe that does have more to do with how we each think about choreography. We agreed on a lot of things but we disagreed about the process because we work very differently. I like to set up a lot of larger structures and then move into the work and see what happens. Bill likes not to know what’s coming, he likes to let things go. I like sometimes to take more time and stick with something if it’s not working, to work on it. He’ll just, well, if it’s not working he’ll throw it right out. (Caspersen 1999)

As Forsythe says, “I think the problems are probably methodological. I’m quick. Da dee,

Figure 4. Space between two bodies. Image captured from video. Used with permission.



da duh. I'm very impulsive. Dana's very methodical. I'm entirely instinctive and Dana is far more, she makes things minutely, step-by-step. I tend to instinctively throw things out there, and then deal with them afterwards" (Forsythe 1999). Caspersen agrees, saying,

Bill gets frustrated sometimes because he can't choreograph as quickly or as intricately as he can dance because it comes from his body, it's an intelligence in his body. . . . So for him, choreographing is dancing, it comes right out of him like you turn on the tap. . . . But for me choreography is completely different. . . . I think of the whole thing as bigger than me. I don't feel it all in my body. I feel it more in the room, the choreography as a whole, as a piece. (Caspersen 1999)

They interviewed a number of film editors and chose to work with Jo Ann Kaplan. Not only did she have a greater knowledge of editing techniques than they did, but she is also a filmmaker. Her role was not only technical but also to help find a logic for the film; this often meant getting between Caspersen and Forsythe with her own ideas.

As a truly collaborative work the film cannot be pulled apart into its constituent contributions, though one can find characteristics in it of both Caspersen's and Forsythe's own work and influences. Caspersen had worked with film techniques and paradigms previously, but unlike Forsythe she had not actually made a film before. It can be convincingly argued that Forsythe has been drawn to film and its techniques more consistently than other cultural stimuli (Sulcas 2002).⁹ Indeed, his interest in collaboration with dancers can be likened to the role of a film editor. Caspersen and Forsythe have continued to collaborate with each other and to work with some of the elements of film and editing. *Endless House* (1999) physically forces the viewer to choose between the numerous things happening around him or her, to edit together a coherent performance that has different emphases depending on what one sees and hears as moveable screens and lighting, like on a sound stage, physically alter what is in view. Forsythe's own *Kammer/Kammer* (2000) is even more obviously filmic, with movable walls forming rooms and dance occurring live but mostly out of sight and projected onto screens hung over the stage. In his *Decreation* (2003) the theater at the Bockenheimer Depot resembles a sound stage in its vastness and is set with keyboard, microphones, video cameras, and a screen on which are shown various performers, often in almost unrecognizable close up.

Arguably one of the greatest influences of film on Forsythe has been that of editing, for instance in structuring the choreography of *The Loss of Small Detail* (1991): "I envy the idea in film that you can edit several different versions of the same action, then choose the one you like, so in part two I simply put more than one version of certain sequences onstage" (Sulcas 2002, 99). While Forsythe's work is well known for having multiple centers of interest, of often being so busy that the audience does not know what to concentrate on, film allows one to have almost complete control of what the audience sees, even if, as in this case, it remains fragmented: "Basically it's a dance you never see . . . completely. You're always given a piece of it. You can't see the whole thing, you build motion and a dance out of the art of editing as opposed to stringing steps together or motions together" (Forsythe 1999).¹⁰ But the extremely focussed nature of *From a Classical Position* is not only inherent to film but characteristic of Caspersen's choreography, and

the use of the sounds of dancing—breathing, squeaking of moving feet, hands slapping the floor—give the film a presence that is almost contrary to the usual distance of dance on film. Forsythe's description of *Kammer/Kammer* could apply to parts of *From a Classical Position* and gets at its finely perched ambiguity between narrative and abstraction, intimacy and pure form:

Initially I knew that I wanted to use film, but as I was working on the piece it became clear to me that it was going to be a live filming, a sort of hybrid. I wanted to bring film into the theatrical medium, like a fabulous magnifying glass. The piece is partly about intimacy, and film allows you to go up close, to get that thing that people miss in the theatre. (Sulcas 2002, 102)

Notes

1. *Firsttext* (1995) for the Royal Ballet was the first piece by Forsythe (with Caspersen and Rizzi) to be danced in Great Britain. The company did not dance there until November 1998, at Sadler's Wells.

2. Her own choreography consists of *Solo for One Man* (2003, Ballett Frankfurt); *The Use Of* (2001, Ballett Frankfurt); *Work for Three* (1999, commissioned by Klapstuck Festival); *Endless House*, part 1 (1999, Ballett Frankfurt, directed and choreographed by Caspersen); *Prelude 17* (1998, CaDance Festival, Den Haag, commissioned by Korzo Theater); *Work #2* (1998, Ballett Frankfurt); *Work #1* (1998, Holland Dance Festival, commissioned by and for Sylvie Guillem); and *'86 Years* (2005). See also her collaborative work with Forsythe and others discussed in the text.

3. He has performed publicly in Wanda Golonkas's *An Antigone* (2002), part one of *Endless House* (1999), *From a Classical Position* (1997), *Human Writes* (2006), and *Solo* for Sylvie Guillem's film *Evidentia* (1996). He joined the Robert Joffrey Ballet School in 1969 and danced with the Joffrey Ballet until 1973, when he joined the Stuttgart Ballet under the artistic directorship of John Cranko. The company had a policy of developing new choreographers, and Forsythe created his first professional work there in 1976: *Urlicht*. He subsequently made more pieces for Stuttgart Ballet and for other companies and by 1980 had stopped performing.

4. For instance, from "A Conversation between Dana Caspersen, William Forsythe and the Architect Daniel Libeskind" at the Royal Geographical Society, London, March 7, 1997. Peter Cook substituted for an ill Libeskind.

5. Among earlier ideas was a giant camera obscura, giant turntables, the installation of a huge red circular staircase, dancing on that staircase, and them dancing on a strip of sand, leaving their traces and filming it with sequential video cameras.

6. The work was installed in Frankfurt in December 1999 at the Bockenheimer Depot, in Vienna in September 2003, in Frankfurt again in December 2003, and has since been installed elsewhere. The company now refers to it as *White Bouncy Castle*. For a thorough description of the piece and the issues of collaboration and ordering movement, see Spier (2000).

7. "The slight twist in the torso, from the waist upwards, which tilts one or other shoulder slightly forwards, thus giving an extra three-dimensional quality to a pose" (Craine and Mackrell 2000, 166).

8. For an extensive description of Forsythe's relationship to geometry and drawing see Spier 2005.

9. Sulcas traces his interest in film, its effects and techniques through *Gänge* (1983), *Berg ab* (1984) (whose original title was *Three Orchestral Pieces—a Motion Picture*), *die Befragung des*

Robert Scotts (1986), *Slingerland* (1990), *The Loss of Small Detail* (1991), *As a Garden in this Setting* (1992), *Alie/na(c)tion* (1992), *Pivot House* (1994), *Eidos: Telos* (1995), *Endless House* (1999), and *Kammer/Kammer* (2000). The author attended the interview that formed the basis of her piece.

10. This interest is picked up in *Endless House* (1999), where portable walls physically prevent one from seeing parts of a dance within the multcentred performance.

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