

A Path to Extreme Dance

Karen Greenspan

At the Gallim studio in the landmark, red-brick Church of St. Luke and St. Matthew in Brooklyn, Andrea Miller rehearses her dancers for the upcoming Chutzpah! Festival (February and March 2016) in Vancouver, Canada. Miller – founder, artistic director, and choreographer of Gallim Dance (in Hebrew *gallim* means “waves”) – is restaging *Wonderland*, a sixty-minute work that premiered in 2010 at The Joyce Theater. The piece, inspired by Chinese-born Cai Guo Qiang’s installation called *Head On*, which depicts ninety-nine wolves charging into a glass wall, is a searing commentary on pack mentality with an irreverent exhibition of social behavior when ethics lapse – a perfect pick for a chutzpah festival.

Even the treatment of the studio space is a bit irreverent. Below the dark-paneled, vaulted, barn ceiling; the stained glass windows; and the organ pipes presiding over the balcony, Chinese paper lanterns are strung – to bring the space down to size. “It’s more human and intimate that way,” explains company relations manager Nicole Zee.

Miller is rehearsing a section for four women. The dancers – dressed in gym shorts, T-shirts, and knee pads – leap, crouch, pace, and gaze, alternating between animal energy and a pensive human quality. They eventually mold themselves into a kinetic sculptural mass. Miller provides feedback with calm dispassion, occasionally demonstrating a movement with powerful physicality and ownership of the choreography. The women continue – now loping like African gazelles and then transforming into stately dancers in a frontal approach with progressively growing *développés*. Suddenly, an audible slap of the chest heralds a hopping retreat backward. The dancing is qualitative, highly technical – never predictable.

In another section of the studio the men rehearse themselves. They are perfecting a maneuver in which they roll from a yoga bridge to a headstand, spin around on the head, and stand up to walk out of it with total nonchalance. Just afterward, one of the male dancers goes flying through the air, passed from one pair of strong arms to another. It’s all part of a raucous trio – a spoof of a drag queen act. Dancer Paul Vickers is swung, tossed, lifted, and promenaded – all while lip syncing. He pulls another dancer’s foot up to his mouth as a microphone and then twirls the dancer’s entire lower leg around as if it’s his feather boa or phallus. It’s pure chutzpah!

Gallim breaks for lunch and Miller and I take a walk to a neighborhood spot to converse. I want to know how she snagged this jewel of a permanent home for the company. The building exerts a dignifying force as you approach the recognizable sacred structure and again as you enter its solid, calm interior. A space you can call your own is a mark of establishment, an exceptional step for such a young dance organization. Miller acknowledges, “That actually was one of the gifts of my mother. She was totally clear that jumping around from studio to studio was not a dignified way to have a career as a choreographer. Whereas, that was something that I just accepted as the reality of New York. Mom hit the pavement in Brooklyn and looked and looked and looked. She connected with the Historical Landmarks Conservancy. They gave us a list of historic landmarks that were looking for partnerships in order to help keep their space and revive it, because a lot of Brooklyn landmarks have limitations about what they can do to keep relevant to their communities.”

In 2012 Miller met the priest of the Church of St. Luke and St. Matthew, Father Michael Sniffen. He had just been appointed to the position a year earlier and he and Miller immediately clicked. They worked out an arrangement where Gallim rents the space and has an exclusive residency in return for providing community programming that’s free or low cost – in other words, offering the communi-



Wonderland. (Photo: Yi-Chun Wu, Gallim Dance)

ty access to the arts. Miller elaborates, “We have free open rehearsals, subsidized rehearsal residencies for artists so they can have a week or two at a time to do their own work, classes in the morning that are open to the dance community, and an afternoon class for nondancers.” In addition, they have raised \$100,000 for tech improvements to enhance the space for performance use – another notable accomplishment.

My introduction to Gallim and Miller’s choreography was just a few months earlier at the premiere of *Whale* at The Joyce Theater. The eighty-minute work is an exuberant, raw, unbridled, physical, and theatrical encounter with the human impulse to love and be loved. The flood of moving images, amplified by Nicole Pearce’s lighting and set design, form a landscape of the subconscious.

Illustrating this surreal, dreamlike quality is an unforgettable Gomorrah-like sequence

of orgiastic grasping and clasping to driving disco music under intense strobe lighting. As the dancers sexually engage and disengage with mounting sinister aggression, a female dancer parades across the back of the stage like a sex monster queen. Wearing a gigantic plastic sheet (that had been the stage backdrop) as an encompassing skirt, she tramples across the stage, each foot atop a metal folding chair as if it were a gargantuan, platform, storm trooper boot. She is finally brought down from her high perch and swallowed by the plastic skirt which morphs into a roiling ocean. The strobe-lit abyss churns until it spits out a completely naked man (or child). This is not your typical Saturday matinee fare.

As I probe into Miller’s dance roots, it soon becomes clear; she was mentored by a distilled cadre of artists. Born in Salt Lake City and raised in Connecticut, Miller grew up studying dance in a rather intimate setting. She was

one of four students to whom former Humphrey/Limón dancer Ernestine Stodelle dedicated herself to training. Miller admits that because of this intense formative relationship, for years her notion of dance was defined by the period of the 1930s through the 1950s. Miller always knew she wanted to make dances – even back then. And Stodelle supported that inclination in her student.

While in high school, Miller performed with the Limón Company. When Benjamin Harkarvy (then director of the Dance Division at Juilliard) came backstage to say “hi” to Carla Maxwell (artistic director of the Limón Dance Company), Miller introduced herself and basically begged him to admit her to Juilliard in spite of the fact that she would be auditioning without any ballet training. Stodelle had insisted on the purity of her students’ bodies and minds and did not welcome the infusion of other ideas (such as ballet). Miller recollects, “I did whatever I could to get some ballet in my body. I think he [Harkarvy] just took a chance on me. Then he spent the next two years trying to get across that I had to get out of the 1930s and would say, ‘You have to figure out who you are as a dancer. You are not the reincarnation of Doris Humphrey.’”

Miller struggled with feelings of responsibility for carrying on Stodelle’s work. She was passionate about it. Miller recalls, “And then, at some point, I stopped feeling that way. I started getting excited about what was around me.” I ask if this occurred because of a master teacher at Juilliard. Miller replies, “Ohad [referring to Ohad Naharin, Director of Batsheva Dance Company and innovator of the Gaga dance method]. Ohad came and he said things that related to the qualitative human experience that I recognized in some of the work I was doing as a dancer. He had new ideas about moving, improvising – breaking these things I was holding onto so closely. But I didn’t lose them. I was able to get other ideas and update them. He was just very exciting to me. Then I wanted to go dance there [with Batsheva in Israel].”

Miller continues, “I auditioned, got into the

Ensemble [junior company from which Batsheva dancers are hired], and I went to Israel. At the time I auditioned, none of Juilliard had been there. Nobody spoke English in the Ensemble when I was there in 2004. I was the only international [dancer]. And rehearsals were run in Hebrew. They would turn the music on and I would just guess what we were supposed to do. While there, I was learning Hebrew and I was also learning about Gaga, which was very new. It was a very exploratory time of Gaga – where the basic things were being defined. We would be teaching each other. It wasn’t just his [Naharin’s] own research, but a lot of the dancers were teaching and owning that process. Now it has been codified and there is a pedagogy.”

At the end of her two-year contract with the Batsheva Ensemble, there were no openings in the regular company. Miller recalls, “I came to New York and I wasn’t very excited about the dance going on here. It was 2006. I was dancing with Buglisi-Foreman – thankful for the opportunity, but I didn’t feel that it was the place for me. I thought I would go to Europe and audition for other companies. But while I was waiting, I took a Doug Varone workshop. I watched a dancer for about a week in that class. At the end of that week I asked her if she would spend some time in the studio with me. And we built the company together.” The dancer/muse was Francesca Romo. She and Miller founded Gallim in 2007 and worked together for almost seven years.

Miller chose the name Gallim because while in Israel she had already been pondering starting a company there. She would walk along the Tel Aviv beach watching the surfers carve their own paths within the indomitable force of the waves. For Miller, this illustrates her own creative process of finding a path – her voice – as the momentum of events and issues shifts around her.

Within one year of starting the company, Miller realized she was running a business and needed an executive director. She recounts, “My mom worked as the executive director in 2009 because I got to a place where I could no



Pupil Suite with Caroline Fermin, Francesca Romo, and Troy Ogilvie. (Photo: Hilary Johnson, GD)

longer do it all. I was not at rehearsal anymore because I was just applying for grants and trying to raise funds. We had a few disasters, so we hired somebody who was a professional executive director – Max [Meredith] Hodges. At that time I had developed a Board of Directors. One of the first board members was the CEO of First Republic Bank. He had, up to that point, participated on the boards of large arts organizations and was looking to help grow an emerging company into a larger institution. He came to rehearsal, I gave him a clear business plan, and I asked him for money. He saw that I had the motivation to be an entrepreneur and he connected with that. He has been a mentor ever since. Through him we hired a fabulous executive director when Max Hodges left to work with the Boston Ballet. Our current executive director, Katie Enna, is advancing the business of the company at the speed of the artistic work.”

Back in the studio, Miller and her dancers sink their teeth into new work. This season they have three commissions – Carl Orff’s

Carmina Burana with the Gay Men’s Chorus of Washington, D.C., to be performed at Lincoln Center and Kennedy Center; a piece to organ and choral music by Arvo Pärt they are calling *Boat* with the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia; and a premiere for the Atlanta Ballet. The two commissions to big pieces of music are atypical for Miller because in both cases the music was preselected and the producers of the *Carmina* project approached her with a dramatic concept already in mind.

I am curious to know how working with big music affects the process and outcome. “It’s rough,” Miller replies. But not for the reasons one might imagine. Miller does not usually walk into the studio and choreograph in response to music. “I haven’t done this since I was in college,” Miller admits. She tends to work from visual art images or social/political concepts, with “the music always changing until we find the right match that best pushes the feeling forward.” For Miller, the challenge of choreographing to big music is “not to be seduced into imitating it – to work



Whale with Austin Tyson and Daniel Staaf.
(Photo: Yi-Chun Wu, GD)



Whale with Georgia Osborne and Matthew Perez.
(Photo: Jim Coleman, GD)

against the tendency to dance everything large, but instead, to stay the size that you are and try other possibilities.”

Miller may not have harbored dreams of working with big music, but she certainly lusts after big and alternative spaces. She dreams of performing in large opera houses and concert halls as well as museums and natural landscapes. And she is doing exactly that – performing *Boat* at Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center in the 2500-seat Verizon Hall to music played on the Fred J. Cooper Memorial Organ – the largest concert hall organ in the U.S.

Like an answer to Miller’s desire to see her work in a large venue, the organ commission just fell into her lap. She admits, “Although I don’t like being told what music I’m supposed to use, that’s how the universe works.” Miller recounts, “When I was first approached about the project, I said, ‘Look, I’ll listen to this music – but I don’t really have a connection with the organ.’ So I spent a lot of time listening to Dracula music. I found out that there is a lot of organ music that I think is beautiful that I did not know. I feel like this is my opportunity to go learn, experiment, and grow with it.” She reminds me that she actually does have a connection to organ music: “I danced in Limón’s *Missa Brevis*, which was to organ and choir. And I think that I kind of want to do my own [mass]. And I will one day. Next time they call me I’ll say, ‘Are you ready for that mass? We’re going to do it now.’”

Today they are working through some basic movement phrases the dancers generated a few days ago in response to some art images Miller selected for *Boat*. Miller explains that this is just a skeleton and now she will fill in the details and the overall narrative for the piece. Images of sixteenth-century renditions of *Christ Carrying the Cross* followed by cherubs, seraphs, and a semidivine sea

nymph swirling in the turbulent waters of *The Triumph of Galatea* jump out of the choreography. Miller calls up these archetypes plunging from the depths of suffering to transcendent transformation in a three-dimensional, audacious orgy of motion.

Miller and the dancers flesh out a large group section of fluctuating, torqued clusters of bodies that seem to be clinging to each other for survival as they are yanked through stormy seas. It verges on total chaos and challenges normal notions of trust and interdependence. Then people start trickling into the studio for the monthly public showing of works in process. Minutes after “filling in the details” of this new section of daredevil choreography, the Gallim dancers integrate the information, split-second timing, and essential spatial interrelationships and perform it before an awestruck audience.

I question Miller about what form of training within the framework of company class prepares her dancers for this type of work. She explains that the one-hour and fifteen minute class focuses on waking up the core, balance, mobility, and strength – but also works on “exploring the imagination and the senses, opening up the emotional channels, and making sure we have access to our complete beings – our bodies, our alertness, and our awareness of other people in space. We do a lot of things that are quite risky and we need to know where everybody is at all times – including one’s own body – so that when we take those risks it is not endangering people. In the last two years I’ve been taking class in this direction. It has been a huge process. We’re still not Jediis.”

Miller offers that the overwhelming response to their latest work, *Whale*, gave validation that built trust in this process. She discloses, “*Whale* changed everything. For *Whale*

I wanted to start with nothing planned. We had a week of research at Jacob’s Pillow where I had no idea what this dance was going to be about. Then I decided I’m going to investigate four things that I’m totally afraid of: nudity, rage, love, sex.”

I ask Miller what she expects her dancers to bring to this process. She answers, “I expect them to let me in . . . to their lives, their strengths, their weaknesses, their stories. We do a lot of talking – about experiences. And after, we’ll move and find out: what did that bring up? What memories come into play? They bring their vulnerability and authenticity. They don’t walk in thinking, ‘What role am I going to play in this dance?’ A lot of things we do have no form or dance-like movement. The second they start dancing, we stop. I don’t want to see any general movement that I ever did in a Juilliard class. We talk about an emotion, a narrative, a topic they have to put themselves through physically – and then a language of movement comes up from that point.”

Miller is committed to making work that is universally accessible and meaningful – not just for a dance audience. She spells it out: “I’m not any more dependent on or interested in an ‘insider language.’ The language of movement and the body can be a universally understood language or experience. While they [movements] might be things that you haven’t seen before, they are recognizable from life, society, history, ancestry – from being human.”

It is Miller’s disciplined process of plumbing the depths of her creative core that produces an original, highly physical, emotionally honest, extreme dance language that pushes the envelope of artistic expression. And that is what keeps me riveted and coming back to see what she and Gallim will do next.