

Casting About #1

What I remember about my first year in New York with Warren gets mixed up every time I try to establish the timeline. Every time I do the internal reckoning, the actual months and events don't add up. I end up with a skipped year. Certainly that year and the next happened. Certainly I lived through them. And what I felt about being in the City--struggling to connect, thrusting my body into the places and professional relationships that I hoped would really fit--is also a tangle, albeit, one I look back on with a smile now that I can believe there was much inner learning going on. But there were so few successes of the kind I was hoping for, the kind I then thought I wanted and deserved.

For Warren, getting used to showing up for work each day, and being wrung out from the stress of life at the firm was almost, but not quite, overwhelming. As predicted, he did fall into my arms every night, our lovemaking just as sweet, conscious and satisfying, if less frequent than it had been while he was a student only beholden to his own demands on his time. Our nightly conversations about the struggles of the day proved, in the long run, to be the more important platform for our connection, and we turned to each other over and over, with a reliable honesty.

I could hear the urgency of his voice when he said, "Baby, I need to go out dancing to shake off the intolerable stillness of this lawyerly life. I need to twist and jive, to re-inhabit my body again--every weekend."

"You don't feel like yourself, do you, if you haven't been able to take the pent up erotic charge boiling all week in your pelvis and spread it up and out through your muscles and bones." His only response was a resigned grunt and nod.

At first I went out dancing with him every week. I pointed out to him that this weekly dance club ritual was "coming out" for him again, in a new sense. Week after week, on the way to or from the clubs, I helped him identify the source of his movement impulses as coming from his African roots and not his American upbringing. I could not have articulated it then but sometimes I felt honored to be allowed entry into this viscerally alive source of kinetic power by mirroring him "getting down". It felt a bit dangerous and alien to me, as if I were being allowed, by my movement skill alone, to gain entry into a subculture to which I could never truly belong.

By Christmas, I began to encourage him to go out alone or with other dancing buddies. He'd discovered a strong preference for clubs that welcomed and attracted an ethnic crowd full of men who looked like him--a crowd that did not feel so welcoming to me in deserted downtown streets at 2:00 am.

More importantly, my body's daily need for movement was being met in my manic rush through the maze of downtown modern dance studios. Exhausted from traipsing all over lower Manhattan, carrying my heavy dance bag from studio to studio, exploring class with different teachers, trying out for any and all modern dance performing gigs, no matter how little they paid--all this left me spent at the end of the week.

I lost interest in wiping myself out even further in a late night dance club surrounded by a crush of muscled shoulders and jabbing elbows in a thickening haze of smoke. It also bothered me that so many of the partiers needed to be high on some drug or other to finally feel free of their stifling day jobs and the internalized homophobia they closeted. I didn't like taking "disco naps," just to arrive at the clubs during their most popular after midnight hours.

The way my body felt after a night like that, bobbing for hours in a sea of slippery bodies, wasn't worth it. The heaviness, the thick head, the need for two days of recovery from just one decadent night of bumping and grinding and cathartic wildness, was too deep a trough to resurface from, and counterproductive to my intention to show up fresh and alert and energized for Monday morning classes. My pulling back from weekly blowouts with Warren was the first significant rift in our relationship.

As soon as my involvement with Concert Dance Company was over that fall, I'd begun in earnest to find just the right technique class to start my day. If nothing else, I had learned through my years in Boston that I needed daily re-grounding in what my body had already learned as well as constant improvement on my technique. I began searching for just the right combination of teacher, style, location and time that would provide comfort and challenge, along with a deep down warm up for whatever the day demanded.

Getting my dancing life re-established in NYC also meant meeting other dancers, seeing and being seen in the professional circles I hoped to occupy. For all us free-lance dancers, this happens in dance class. So I went to some class somewhere in the morning, and if there was no rehearsal or audition, I found an afternoon class, too.

The previous year CDC had invited Beverly Brown to teach us her dance, "Life in a Drop of Pond Water." When I let her know I was moving to the City, she asked me to join her company for performances she was preparing the following spring. That first fall in NY, a couple afternoons a week, I went to her studio in Soho for rehearsals. Unless something more interesting came along, I also took the classes she offered there. They intrigued me.

Beverly was exploring primitive sounding--singing, sighing, vocal articulations, harsh breaths, rhythmic humming--as the energetic basis for dynamic movement sequences. In her technique classes, she had us chant our own accompaniment throughout the repetitious floor sequences that warmed us up even as they established efficient loops of movement initiation and follow through. As we crossed the floor, two by two, gaining more and more fluency with the old familiar phrases as well as with new and more challenging dance phrases she invented for us, we emphasized the downbeats with guttural howls or hoots and found lighter consonant twitters for the upbeats. From time to time, she would have us repeat phrases coupled with entirely different sound patterns. It was sometimes complex, and at the same time, deeply satisfying in a primal way. I liked that her work and her teaching were rhythmically challenging, often more challenging than even she could convincingly demonstrate.

When I confided to her that I was not only willing to go into the depths of what she called "Body-Voice Theater," but also authentically excited by that aspect of her explorations, she began to design movement and sound experiments with me in mind. I took them on with gusto, showing my hunger for passionate expression as well as my skill at maneuvering through countless variations of musical complexity. She made it clear she valued my involvement in her next projects. Already that first fall, she began to treat me as both a competent and reliable member of her company and as her dance partner and eventual collaborator.

Those roles, however, were not an easy fit for either of us. Sure, she appreciated my stage presence, musicality and movement finesse. She told me she really liked that I made her choreography personal. But she had to balance that, she said, with my not being the tall, broad shouldered, commanding leading man she imagined would look better with her on stage. She was, after all, quite tall herself.

For my part, in some ways I found her work immediately satisfying. The Hawkins dance technique she was steeped in fit my body and personality well. Without challenging the range of movement in the joints, classes focused on clear initiation of movement from the pelvic center of weight, and a fluid, sequential follow-through with the arms, legs and spine. This sort of patterning made it easy for me to skillfully round away from full leg

extensions and camouflage the places in my body that were still too tight (largely from lack of training in my pre-teen years before my bones hardened and my joints found their structure). This technique also made intellectual sense to me, built, as it was, on principles of efficiency and anatomical alignment.

The sound improvisations we worked with in classes and rehearsals gave me a chance to challenge a vocal talent I had longed to develop. They also offered more theatrical expressions along the lines of what I had done for my senior project in college five years before--a genre of creation and performance that was sometimes called "physical theater." And I started envisioning a new production of my own from my own improvisations.

In other ways, though, I found Beverly difficult to work with--temperamental, interior, needy. Her small, deep set eyes squinted warily at me in rehearsal, assuming the worst in my questions or confusions over the many as-yet undefined aspects of whatever we were working on. Her words of encouragement were laced with thinly veiled accusations of distrust. The unspoken hunger in her for me to be a different sort of man, a different size and temperament--essentially, a disappointment with my being gay, a disappointment she even spoke aloud from time to time in an uncomfortable half-kidding sort of way--kept me on edge with her.

Despite our always slightly prickly connection, she gave me occasional free access to her studio to use on my own. The dancers she gathered around her formed the nucleus of a new home base community for me. My association with Beverly also gave me my first work in the City, and opportunities to accompany her on a couple out of town residencies the following summer.

Through her, I met other dancers, and received an unexpected and unlikely invitation to join the New York Baroque Dance Company. To get that gig, which included paid rehearsals and a short out of town tour, I'd have to learn the intricacies of the highly stylized vocabulary of 18th Century French Court dancing in only a few rehearsals.

When I showed up for a trial run led by the company's director, Cathy Turocy, I was awful at it. This movement style was exactly the opposite of the free-flowing, loosely-structured, athletic and exuberant style I related to and which was so prevalent in modern dance techniques. My spine was used to long swoops through space. Baroque Dance required an erect "royal" carriage in order to reproduce the movement and expression described in the 200-year-old notations. It felt stiff to me, and the precise and delicate Baroque hand and foot gestures were a frustrating brain twister. Whoever had been my predecessor in the company must have been even more clumsy than I. Or perhaps they had no other choices at late notice. In any case, I got the gig.

That first gig led to others. And to be truthful, what helped me stay with the group was the nothing-to-lose attitude I brought to this foreign movement territory. The fact of being paid a bit for rehearsals as well as performances helped, too, of course. The light-hearted rapport that quickly developed with the others in the company felt like an emotional relief for me and carried me through that winter of rehearsals and the spring out of town performances. I never could have guessed how important this connection would become to me in the next few years.