

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kate Raines/Plate3Photography

Other Lives

by Carolyn Merritt

"It has been said that there is an intense similarity in people's biographies. It's our dreams and visions that separate us."

-Jim Harrison, in *The Ancient Minstrel*

Imagine a voice inside your head that isn't your own. Pleasing, it speaks with calm equanimity. Tells you where to go and what to do. Reminds you there is plenty of time, no need to rush. Encourages you to observe your surroundings, to notice others, to feel your affinity with them. Awakens you to your solitude.

If it told you to follow someone, would you? Would you give them your hand? Let them trace the lines in your palm? Count the stars with them? Move with them?

In Nichole Canuso Dance Company's *The Garden of Forking Paths*, audiences of six wander through a gauzy labyrinth of sound, image, and movement. Radio transmitters velcroed around our biceps pump voices, music, and ambient sounds into ear-covering headphones. Unique vocal prompts and a smiling, silent cast of dancers guide us away from one another onto a path deliberately crafted to heighten awareness—of self and other, of seeing and being seen, of connecting and being alone, of the fuzzy contours of memory and emotion. Located in the girls' gym of the [Bok](#) building—former South Philly vocational school repurposed into spaces for arts, non-profits, and small businesses, with a trendy rooftop bar—the work also functions as a meditation on place, community, and history.

That woman seated across from you. (...) She is leaving. Follow her.

I follow Andalyn Young along a path lined by filmy white curtains, orange tape marking our footpath. We meet another audience member, who is being guided by Eun Jung Choi.

Place your hand on the wall... Turn and rest your back on the wall... Take a step forward... Turn around and face the wall.

These instructions repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat... in both of our headsets, I imagine, since we move in unison, while the dancers weave in and around us, building a dance that is larger than our simple moves.

We round diaphanous corners, stand back to back. *Look down.* Young is at my feet. *Offer your hand.* She is already reaching for it. I gaze out the window, see sky, rooftops. My back turned, I don't feel anyone leave, but as soon as the voice tells me, I know I am alone.

We talk about the weather like it's the only thing that happens to all of us. The voice speaks of all that we share yet hide from one another—and all the lies we tell one another, and the feeble communion they create.

Zooming out from the maze, I note rusted single-bulb fixtures and basketball nets of the girls' gym overhead, and the old Bok Wildcat, half court, free throw and three-point markings underfoot. I ponder a time when gyms were sex-segregated, the changing waves of immigrants that have filled the neighborhood, what gentrification means for its poor and working class residents. Will they rub elbows with the slick white hipsters, millennials, and yuccies who line up out the door to imbibe in style at the rooftop [Bok Bar](#)? Will the [repurposed school-chair bar seating](#) charm them? I marvel at the sly wizardry of real estate developers, [snatching a \\$17.5 million historic school for a mere \\$2.1 million](#). What if public education were as ["nimble,"](#) spinning young lives into so much gold?

Crickets chirp in my earphones. I imagine a rope swing, card games, flashlights, backyard camping. *Position yourself exactly where you want to be now.* As I lie down, my headphones fall off and I giggle.

An envelope holds a question: *When was the last time you cried?* I pencil my response on a blue post-it, but it's hard to be sure; parenthood is a minefield of emotions. Later, in a room covered with blue post-its, I want to remain, reading.

Earlier today

In rehearsal

Not long ago, when I sneezed, my eyes teared

When I cheated on my girlfriend

Can't remember, don't do it often

When I lost mom

I trace yellow post-its along walls with Annie Wilson. As if they were constellations. As if the walls were the sky. *Here is Cassiopeia,* I say. The headset muffles my voice, like in a dream. She pours water through my hands, into a basin full of post-it stars. We clump them, wind up like baseball pitchers, toss them at the wall. I feel like a kid. I remember throwing rocks at a fence, the big one that bounced straight back at my head. Canuso slides into the space, prone at our feet. *Sometimes I lie here.*

In a living room of time gone by—paisley carpet, easy chair, mementos, and memory boxes—an old postcard from Paris rests alongside tiny leather gloves. Aging photos of different sizes, many curling at the edges, each fade to their own particular filter. These are not my memories, yet they touch me, recall the distance between original paint and shabby chic. Borges' *The Labyrinth*, Anna Quindlen's *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, a world atlas—the spines call even as movement in the adjacent space draws my gaze, the gossamer dividers reminding me that other lives lie beyond.

An audience member sits with me. *Offer your hand.* She flips my palm open. *Laugh line. Love line. Life line. Fate line.* Her fingertip glides. Amidst its ever-renewing surface, these lines will remain, deepen, change. Like water through stone.

Canuso, Choi, Scott McPheeters await. Different versions of me. *Position yourself like your other bodies.* I approach. *See what else you can do.* Our arms swoop, curve, slice. We turn, duck, run. I feel awkward, dancing with the dancers, even as I want to chuck the headset and radio, and get to know my other selves, my other lives, if I'd taken any number of other paths. Curtains billow as I move against them. The maze breathes. They are gone, and it is just me. This life, here and now.

The Garden of Forking Paths, Nichole Canuso Dance Company, The Bok Building, May 8-June 17.

By Carolyn Merritt

June 5, 2017