

Seven Minutes of Silence – OBT: Man/Woman

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In James Canfield's *DRIFTED IN A DEEPER LAND*, movement is the music. By GAVIN LARSEN

Ballets evolve. Like any live art, dance, which can only exist when dancers' bodies take on its steps, inevitably breathes with new life with each performance. But not only do dancers themselves translate the choreography according to their unique physiques and psyches, frequently a choreographer will deliberately "tweak" his or her work, well after the painstaking process of creation. George Balanchine, famously ready to amend elements of his works that others considered sacred and untouchable, easily changed his ballets to fit changing times, different dancers' strengths or weaknesses, or his own whim. (Hence, the many so-called "original" versions of Balanchine ballets: each dancer feels protective of the particular version that they danced).

Sometimes, however, a choreographer does more than alter a few steps, revising a piece of work to significantly change its overall effect. And that's what happened when James Canfield prepared to stage his 1990 ballet *Drifted in a Deeper Land* for OBT. "As I revisited the ballet, I saw how it had worked from a musical standpoint for the time and place it was created, but I struggled with the music's relevancy for today," Canfield says of the original Ray Lynch score. "I'd been challenging myself in recent years by working in the studio without music, seeing where movement alone would take me, and I had a strong feeling *Drifted* should be reintroduced in silence."

So he stripped the music away. "I went into rehearsal and didn't even tell the guys (in the OBT cast) that there ever had been music at all. And then I came to (OBT Artistic Director) Kevin Irving and said, 'I have this really great idea: I want to try the piece in silence.' He watched us run it in rehearsal, and said he loved it."

A musical score does more than provide a structure by which dancers align their movement: it sets up the audience's interpretation of the piece, helping them "understand" the choreographer's intent and encouraging them to feel and respond a certain way. Music is an invisible third party in the theater with the audience and the dancers. It's a buffer, providing cover for ambient auditorium noise (rustling programs, whispered conversations, fidgety children) and acting as a sort of vehicle on which a dancer presents their offering. Without the music's atmosphere, the dancing itself becomes the observers' sole guidance. Neither dancers nor audience have the support of the music—movement itself is all there is.

Dancers typically rely heavily on beats, phrases, and notes to stay in unison, coordinate partnering, and show us fantastically precise waves of movement. Students, trained from their earliest days to learn exercises with musical counts and execute them with accurate timing, practically live their lives in bars of eight. So what happens when dancers are plunged into silence?

"For dancers whose training and careers are frequently connected to music, the idea of dancing in silence is daunting and very challenging, yet the outcome can be very powerful," says Canfield. "They're forced to rely on more of their senses when music is absent. They must remain present and in the moment, and become keenly aware on a whole new level. Their movement and awareness of each other makes them the work's composers." The dancers establish a beat between themselves, without speaking. "Your sight becomes very important, your ears, your sense of touch and air," Canfield explains. "It's being able to articulate breath, so not only can you hear it, you can almost see it as well." For group sections in *Drifted*, he designated "leaders" from which the others took cues, but there is no room for complacency. "You can't be on automatic, you can't anticipate anything. The dancers are even more alive because they're not relying on anything else but each other—they develop a deeper, more disciplined sense of musicality."

Canfield describes watching OBT's men in an early rehearsal of *Drifted*, as they were still feeling out their mutual dynamic: "They were being very careful. I kept thinking 'it's going too slow, it's going too slow,' but then all of a sudden, it just took off—it just swirled, the movement started jumping, and I just had to sit back. They didn't plan it that way, they were just watching and feeling each other. It was beautiful." Canfield feels that performing *Drifted* in silence allows for a wider interpretation of the ballet he created in response to the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s, but which also reflected a confluence of personal events in his life. "I never said, 'this is my AIDS ballet.' People were drifting through life as it ended for them, and my partner and I drifted together. It's a very tender piece," he says. "That's another reason why the silence works. When you pay homage to people in your life, it's in silence. In a way, this is like that."

Perhaps the novelty of absence highlights the expected elements of dance. Our senses, like the dancers', become sharper, focused more intensely on the rhythm within the dancers' bodies and the melody they create. The line between dancer and audience member is direct, and yet the sense of community throughout the theater is heightened.

Canfield believes watching the ballet in silence will be as cathartic for the audience as it was for him. "I don't want to make the audience uncomfortable; that's not my point. I want them to realize it's an extension and continuation of why the work was done in the first place. I believe using the power of silence around the beauty and strength of movement will speak to each individual in a way that allows a moment of inner reflection. It's a prayer, a moment of silence." Oregon Ballet Theatre's *Man/Woman* ticket and schedule information here.

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