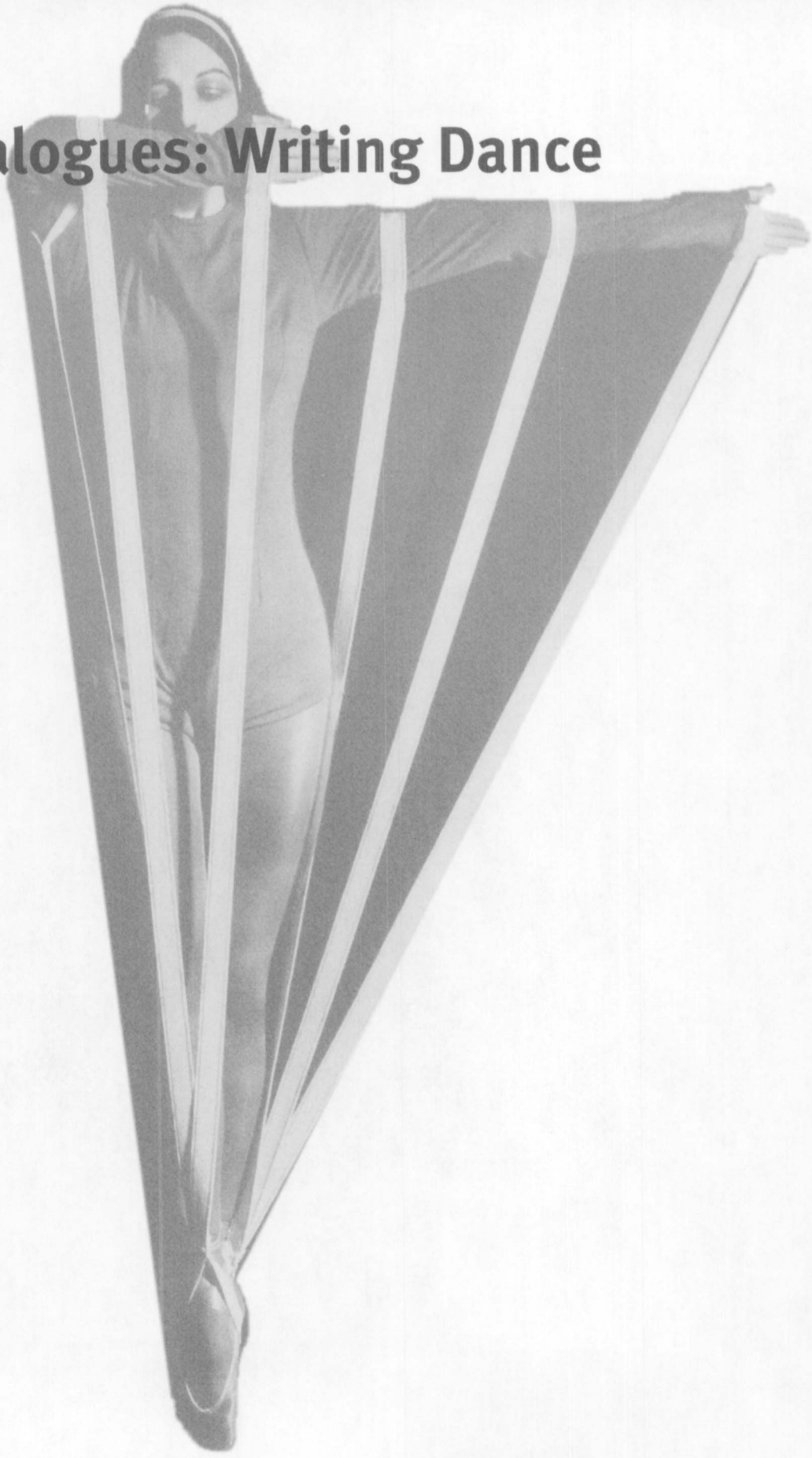


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Dialogues: Writing Dance



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Dialogues: Writing Dance

Julie Malnig, Ann Nugent, and Leslie Satin

The articles that follow in this section developed out of an improvised dance and papers presented by a panel of scholars based in the United States and the United Kingdom at the Society of Dance History Scholars (SDHS) 2008 conference at Skidmore College

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Julie Malnig is an associate professor in the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University. She is the author of *Dancing Till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dance* (New York University Press, 1995) and most recently editor of *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* (University of Illinois Press, 2009). She has written extensively on twentieth-century social and popular dance in numerous publications. She also publishes in the area of feminism and performance; one of her recent essays is "All Is Not Right in the House of Atreus: Feminist Theatrical Renderings of the *Oresteia*" in the collection *Feminist Revisions of Classic Works* (McFarland, 2009). She is a former editor of *Dance Research Journal* (1999–2003) and has also served as editorial board chair for CORD. Malnig holds a Ph.D. in performance studies from New York University.

Ann Nugent is a dance critic and senior lecturer in dance at the University of Chichester, where she specializes in criticism and European dance. After more than a decade of writing about William Forsythe's work—a doctoral thesis (University of Surrey, 2000) and some forty published articles and papers—she is finalizing a manuscript for publication entitled *Writing William, Reading Forsythe: A Critical Approach to William Forsythe's Choreography.* She is British correspondent for *Shinshokan Dance Magazine* in Japan and was previously editor of both *Dance Now* and *Dance Theatre Journal.* She is a board member of the Society of Dance History Scholars and chaired the Selma Jeanne Cohen Award for three years. She began her career as a dancer with the company now known as English National Ballet.

Leslie Satin is a choreographer, dancer, writer, and teacher living in New York. Her dances and interdisciplinary collaborations have been presented at many venues in New York City and elsewhere. Satin holds a Ph.D. in performance studies from New York University. She is a member of the Arts Faculty at New York University's Gallatin School; she has taught at Bard College and State University of New York/Empire State College. Satin, who recently co-edited *Movement Research Performance Journal* 34, was a long-time member of the editorial board of *Women & Performance.* Her performance texts and other dance writings have appeared in *Performing Arts Journal, Dance Research Journal, Theatre Journal, Dancing Times, Women & Performance,* and *Gesto* (Brazil), as well as the anthologies *Moving Words: Re-Writing Dance* (ed. Gay Morris, Wesleyan University Press, 1996) and *Re-Inventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything Was Possible* (ed. Sally Banes, University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

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in Saratoga Springs. It was a panel that fell into place following a chance meeting at the 2007 SDHS/Congress on Research in Dance (CORD) conference in Paris and the discovery of shared academic concerns over the problems of writing about dance. Team building continued at the CORD conference later that year at Barnard College, moving to a series of email exchanges and conversations about these concerns; finally we came together in a panel at SDHS.

What we had, and have, in common is our interest in developing new writers, and in teaching writing and criticism to students studying dance at the university level. We see many students engaged in the pursuit of different kinds of dance knowledge; some of them are focused on performing and choreographing, and all of them have some level of visual awareness—that is, a sense of what it means to look at, to see, dance. Some students have grown up in a world dominated by visual imagery and are comfortable with that imagery yet unable or unwilling to bring it together with language. Some are afraid that applying language to dance may destroy its essence and inhibit their creativity. Others lack both visual comfort and the ability to use language concretely.

Of course, university students have to write essays as part of their degree, but often they come to college without a clear sense of how to structure language or organize and articulate critical thought. For students experienced in dance, in particular, there is the added challenge of describing and writing critically about a famously elusive practice. As academics, we need to engage and acknowledge the circumstances in which our students see dance and write about it: a world of YouTube and the Internet, a world where dances and responses to them are available in the time it takes to press a computer key—and in which skepticism over traditional printed matter is widespread. We would like to find a way to harness students' seeming love of the image with a close attention to the form, rhythm, structure, and stylistics of language. What we wanted to explore at the Skidmore panel was the experience of teaching writing about dance, the ways that students learn about dance and writing through their joint practice, and the attitude of dance students and dancers about professional dance writing and criticism. We wanted to address these areas through perspectives opened up by our own academic and professional experiences as writers, editors, processors of the text, and dance artists who also write.

How might students be helped to navigate that difficult journey between seeing the dance and thinking about it and then communicating that experience to others? How might they, in the process of developing their writing, become better critical readers? Might they, then, even develop a passion for writing? We decided to incorporate both dance and language into our panel to foreground their interaction. Leslie Satin began the session with a scored improvisation, moving while answering Julie Malnig's unscripted questions about everyday life, dancing, and thinking. Then all three of us presented papers drawing on our own reflective research and empirical experiences, while a DVD of two of Ann Nugent's students engaged in a studio improvisation played. Nugent's paper focused on bringing together the theoretical and historical with studio work; Malnig proposed a range of approaches to teaching critical dance writing; Satin addressed the relationship of intellect and dance, particularly in contemporary

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choreography. In addition to these papers there was a fourth presentation by noted dance studies editor Barbara Palfy on the precepts and mechanisms of editing and their value to emerging writers.

Ultimately, we sought to raise questions about students' relationship to critical writing about dance—indeed, to consider contemporary approaches to dance criticism. Our audience for the panel included two noted dance critics, Deborah Jowitt and Marcia Siegel, who pointed to the integrity needed for writing about dance and spoke to the value of dance writing as an essential discipline. Our long-term goal is to continue this conversation with publication here, which we hope will prompt reader responses about new initiatives for teaching dance writing and, more broadly, the relationship of dance and writing in and out of the academy. We would like to open up a world in which dancers and dance students could be encouraged to articulate their experience of dance and in so doing become exhilarated.

"But How Do I Write about Dance?": Thoughts on Teaching Criticism

Julie Malnig

For the past several years I have taught an advanced writing seminar at New York University's Gallatin School called Writing About Performance. While dance is not the only focus—we write about various forms of live art—it is indeed a central component. The students are from a range of backgrounds; many are dancers, but not all. Most have some interest in the arts; some are journalism students, others anthropology and art history students. The mix is refreshing, if sometimes challenging, as many of them are unschooled in various forms of contemporary performance.

I have discovered a curious phenomenon in these seminars. At the beginning of the course, as we review the syllabus and I discuss the assignments, there is invariably one student, if not more, who either boldly raises her hand, or quietly approaches me after class, to say that she is terrified of writing about dance.[1] One student (who turned out to be a fairly strong writer), went so far as to plead with me—"I'll write about virtually anything, but please don't ask me to write about dance!" Others tell me that they are willing to try writing about dance but declare they know nothing about it—or don't understand it (more on that later). Then there are the practicing dance students who are usually curious, if a little wary, at the prospect of translating their kinesthetic understanding of dance into prose. But they labor under a slightly different constraint in that the forms of dance they feel most comfortable writing about, and which they feel they "know," are those they have studied—usually ballet or some type of modern dance—and *not* postmodern dance (more on that later).

My syllabus explains that the course aims to help writers train their "eyes" to enable them to become more critical viewers of performance and then translate that "looking" into descriptive and analytical prose. Easier said than done, for sure. As it turns out, by the end of the semester many a student has accomplished just this,

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