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“RENEWING THE DISCIPLINE: WILLIAM FORSYTHE’S *BLAKE WORKS I*”

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# "Renewing the Discipline: William Forsythe's *Blake Works I*"

ADELINE CHEVRIER-BOSSEAU

## **Keywords:**

*discipline; Forsythe;  
American dance;  
ballet; literary theory*

*Presque trente ans après la première de In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated au Palais Garnier, Blake Works I de William Forsythe vient bousculer les codes et les conventions du ballet classique en son temple. Dans ce ballet, Forsythe utilise l'expertise technique et l'agilité des danseurs du ballet de l'Opéra de Paris et se sert de leur discipline, de leur niveau de virtuosité atteint par les années d'entraînement pour renouveler la discipline du ballet classique. Blake Works I joue des structures traditionnelles des ballets classiques comme le pas de deux ou la dynamique du corps de ballet, de la musicalité, et du mélange des codes et des disciplines, allant jusqu'à intégrer une battle hip-hop à la fin du mouvement intitulé "Two Men Down", du nom du titre de James Blake – dont l'album The Colour in Anything sert de fil conducteur au ballet.*

*Cet article se propose d'examiner de quelle manière Forsythe renouvelle le ballet classique, entre discipline et indiscipline, entre hommage à la tradition et à l'école française et déconstruction de ses codes. Utilisant les outils de l'analyse littéraire et des références critiques habituellement employées dans l'analyse textuelle, cet article souhaite également questionner la notion de 'discipline' en interrogeant la porosité des champs disciplinaires entre danse et littérature. Blake Works I est une œuvre intellectuelle, littéraire, qui déploie un intertexte chorégraphique complexe et remet profondément en question la notion de discipline.*

Throughout his career, William Forsythe has continually striven to deconstruct ballet—by investigating and interrogating its codes, its language, its conventions, exposing its structure and picking it apart to produce pieces that are as much choreographic masterpieces as they are a

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reflection on the discipline of classical ballet. Generally eschewing elaborate sets, plots, and costumes, his ballets focus on pure movement, and on the discipline of ballet itself; works like *Artifact* (1984), *Steptext* (1985) or *The Second Detail* (1991) are called "ballet ballets"—ballets *about* ballet. These profoundly self-reflexive pieces, whose aim is less to tell a story than to investigate ballet itself as an art form and a discipline, can be met with either delight or perplexity, as it was the case for Forsythe at the beginning of his career.<sup>1</sup>

Through the study of one of Forsythe's latest "ballet ballets," *Blake Works I*, this paper wishes to interrogate the notions of discipline and indiscipline by investigating the nature of a "ballet ballet"—its relation to narrative structure, as well as its intertextual construction, weaving in interballetic references to produce a discourse on ballet. Taking my cue from the title of his ballet *Steptext*, which invites us to see ballet as a text of steps, *Blake Works I* will be analyzed in the same way as a literary text would be—paying attention to style, structure and figures of speech. Forsythe's own perception of his work is very similar to the way we—as specialists of literature—approach texts.<sup>2</sup> *Blake Works I* is a highly intertextual<sup>3</sup> ballet, weaving in different steptexts from canonical ballets of the classical repertory, but also famous exercises and structures from the ballet classroom and references to specific styles and periods. In this piece, Forsythe explores the intrinsic intertextuality of ballet, the "layering of significance"<sup>4</sup> ("*feuilleté de la signifiance*"), as Roland Barthes would put

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1. As Mark Franko reminds us in his article "Splintered Encounters: The Critical Reception to William Forsythe in the United States 1979-1989," Forsythe's work was heavily criticized in America in the 1980's, and there were subsequently fewer productions of Forsythe's works there than in Europe in the 1990's. Franko explains the critics' hostility by a distaste to Forsythe's intellectual style and his "iconoclastic, historically and critically informed relationship to the classical ballet tradition" (Franko 2011, 38): Forsythe's engagement with renewing the discipline, investigating and redefining the ballet tradition was seen as "nihilistic and an outright threat to the art form. Critics reproached Forsythe for betraying or undermining ballet as a discipline." (Franko 2011, 38). For Franko, this strong reaction from the critics was due to a "rejection of intellect in dance, and most particularly to the rejection of intellect in ballet" (Franko 2011, 40).

2. The program provided by the Paris Opera for the premiere of *Blake Works I* on July 4, 2016 also orients our perception of the piece in this way, stressing Forsythe's intellectualism and affinities with Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida.

3. I shall use the adjective "intertextual" to designate an interballetic reference to another "steptext," another ballet, and the term "interchoreographic" to designate a reference to exercises or structures existing outside a given "steptext" (for example, movements or structures that refer to another genre of dance, or to exercises performed in the ballet classroom).

4. I am using Richard Miller's translation of "*feuilleté de la signifiance*" from the 1975 edition of *The Pleasure of the Text*.

it, as well as the “chain of receptions” at work in the reading and in the new production of a ballet piece. Applying reader-response theory to ballet leads us to question our discipline and our relation to disciplinary studies: can a dance piece be read as a text, using the same critical tools? How could dance be integrated within the realm of American literary studies, alongside literature or the study of historical texts, rather than confining dance, performance studies or literature to their disciplinary fields? This paper will examine the repertory of the ballet text in *Blake Works I* as well as the many ways in which Forsythe renews the discipline of classical ballet in this piece.

### **Applying Reader-Response theory to a “Steptext”**

*Blake Works I*, which premiered at the Paris Opera in July 2016, is joyful and upbeat,<sup>5</sup> but it is nonetheless a (playfully) intellectual piece. Thirty years after *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, *Blake Works I* prolongs the choreographer’s investigation into the codes and conventions of the genre that he started with *Artifact* in 1984. Classical ballet is a discipline ruled by a number of conventions established in the eighteenth century, when Jean-Georges Noverre published his *Lettres sur la danse* in 1760; almost a century later, Carlo Blasis published his *Code of Terpsichore* (1830) in which he delineated all the basic principles of the discipline, from technique tips to dancers on the positions of the legs, arms, torso, *épaulements*, etc..., to the way dance instruction should be done and the structure of a proper ballet class. Among the sacrosanct principles established by Noverre is the necessity for dance to be expressive, to tell a story: in his *Lettres*, Noverre laid out all the guidelines for the *ballet d’action*, or *ballet narratif*, which are still applied today. However, when considering “ballet ballets,” it appears clearly that this founding principle is challenged; “ballet ballets” do not tell a story in the conventional narrative sense, since they are plotless—contrary to the great ballets of the classical repertoire, or to more contemporary creations that embrace this narrative convention (we can think of recent productions like Cathy Marston’s 2019 *Victoria* or *Jane Eyre*, which respectively tell the story of the

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5. Critics Roslyn Sulcas and Laura Cappelle both underlined this joyful dimension in their reviews: “Sheer joy. That’s the effect of William Forsythe’s new *Blake Works I* for the Paris Opera Ballet, which had its premiere at the Palais Garnier here on Monday night” (Sulcas’ review for the *New York Times*, July 5, 2016). Cappelle notes that “*Blake Works I* provides a vivid contrast with the chilly rigour of the earlier works. Forsythe’s first “ballet ballet” [...] in more than 15 years reclaims the form with galvanising lightheartedness” (*The Financial Times*, July 6, 2016).

Queen and Brontë's heroine). The only story "ballet ballets" tell is the story of ballet itself: the twists and cliffhangers in their "narratives" are not meant to move a plot along, but to showcase the dramatic potential of the language of ballet in itself. In this sense, "steptexts," or "ballet ballets," are very close to Modernist literary experiments.<sup>6</sup> Like Gertrude Stein in works such as "Sacred Emily," Forsythe essentially plays with language—with the self-referentiality of ballet language, the endless possibilities of reversal and play within that language, as well as its variations in texture.

Though he is by no means the first American choreographer to embark on such experiments, his project differs from his predecessors' in its scope and its degree of engagement with another disciplinary field—literary theory. Earlier in the twentieth century, George Balanchine renewed the discipline of classical ballet by developing a uniquely American aesthetics: he used references to the classical tradition of ballet, to Romantic ballet, and put his own spin on it to make ballet American. Ballets like *Serenade* or the triptych *Jewels* pay homage to the discipline of classical ballet while showcasing Balanchine's signature style. While *Blake Works I* starts out on the same premises (renewing the discipline, exploring what "American style" means in ballet), Forsythe goes one step further by paying homage not only to the classical repertoire, but to the discipline of ballet as a whole, and he explores in depth the discipline's inherent self-referentiality in a much deeper and comprehensive way that Balanchine did with *Serenade*. *Serenade* was choreographed for the students of the School of American Ballet when it was first created in 1934: it incorporates both references to the classical repertoire and anecdotes from the creation process and the rehearsals<sup>7</sup>—something Forsythe will

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6. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, Pericles Lewis explains that "many Modernists embraced the idea of the literary work as a particularly sophisticated sort of language game, in which the relations among words were more important than the relations of words to nonlinguistic reality" (Lewis, 10).

7. In Balanchine's ballet, the number of dancers, the falls, the mishaps and asymmetries are all inspired by actual events that took place during the rehearsals. In his biography of Balanchine, Bernard Taper writes:

"The first evening he worked on it, seventeen young women were present, so he choreographed the opening scene for seventeen, demonstrating how that awkward number of dancers could be arranged on the stage in an interesting manner. The next evening, only nine were present, and the third evening six; at each session he simply choreographed to the music with whatever students he had. Male students began attending the classes, and he worked them in. At one point, where the women were supposed to rush out, one fell down and began to cry. He choreographed the incident right into the ballet. Another evening, someone showed up late. That went in, too." (Taper, 156)

take to the next level with *Blake Works I* by integrating ballet class references and exercises by renowned ballet masters and mistresses of the Paris Opera School of Ballet and adopting a collaborative approach with his dancers—therefore not just drawing inspiration *from* them but *involving them actively* in the process, and challenging thereby the traditional authoritative posture of the choreographer in the ballet world. Forsythe highlights the self-reflexive dimension of ballet by alluding to *Serenade*, and more generally, by extending the process of *mise en abyme* to the entire ballet and by leading a reflection on the discipline which owes much to literary theory.

Reader-response theory will therefore be very useful in this endeavor to delineate how Forsythe “responds” to the tradition of classical ballet and how he dissects (as well as pays homage to) the discipline to produce a ballet about ballet. We will see how Forsythe applied principles of reader-response theory like meaning as a collective process or the repertory of the text to investigate ballet as a discipline during the creative process for *Blake Works I*. In *La Seconde main ou le travail de la citation*, Antoine Compagnon compares the process of quoting and borrowing to a child’s game of “scissors and paste” and emphasizes the playfulness of the process. For Compagnon:

La citation tente de reproduire dans l’écriture une passion de lecture, de retrouver l’instantanée fulgurance de la sollicitation, car c’est bien la lecture, sollicitieuse et excitante, qui produit la citation. La citation répète, elle fait retentir la lecture dans l’écriture: c’est qu’en vérité lecture et écriture ne sont qu’une seule et même chose, la pratique du texte qui est pratique du papier.

(Compagnon, 27)

While the material differs—the human body, muscle memory and choreographic writing replace paper—the same could be said for Forsythe’s practice of borrowing and quoting in his weaving of an intertextual and interchoreographic fabric that is the “ballet ballet” *Blake Works I*. His practice connects being a student of ballet, a spectator of ballet and a creator of ballet, in one collective creative practice that constantly (and playfully) renews and revitalizes the discipline. The following part will attempt to answer questions such as: how can the French origins of the discipline be revisited and what type of discourse about ballet can be produced in this process? How does highlighting the differences between the French style and the American style contribute to this celebration and reappraisal of the discipline? How can the application of reader-response principles help renew our vision of the discipline of ballet—and of literary theory? In the final part, a micro-reading of the interballetic references weaved in the stext of *Blake Works I* will show how Forsythe

worked on the very notion of reception (as defined by Jauss) in the creation of his latest "ballet ballet".

## **Deconstruction and *Différance*: Using Discipline to Reinvent the Discipline**

One of the key notions of reader-response theory is the interactivity and dynamic dialogue between the text and the reader: meaning is a collective process, built through this text/reader interaction, as Iser has shown in *The Act of Reading*.<sup>8</sup> The dynamic interaction and the game of creativity that Iser describes when he delineates the reading and writing process is echoed in *Blake Works I* in the collaborative approach and collective enjoyment at work in the creative process. In a December 2016 interview he gave to Roslyn Sulcas,<sup>9</sup> William Forsythe explains that he spent the first three weeks "trying things out" with the Paris Opera Ballet dancers: "My first three-week rehearsal period with the company was essentially a three-week workshop trying things out, which is something you don't usually get to do with big ballet companies." Forsythe was set on highlighting the French academic ballet training in this new piece, and started a collective investigation of what the French ballet technique is all about with the Paris Opera Ballet dancers, working together to see how they could deconstruct and reinvent it. The term "deconstruct"—and deconstructionism in general—has often been associated with Forsythe, although he distances himself from that tradition. For Mark Franko, considering deconstruction as a form of destruction—which is the aspect Forsythe rejects—is improper; instead, he suggests that:

deconstruction is not a dismantling or pulling apart. Deconstruction leaves its object intact yet changed through the lifting of the object's self-imposed interdictions. It acts, as Derrida specifies, from a certain inside and from a certain outside: the inside is faithful to the tradition; the outside is implicit in but unavowed by the very same tradition.

(Franko 2011, 40)

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8. For Iser, the reading process is "a dynamic interaction between text and reader", not "a one-way process"—on the contrary, it is "creative" and comparable to a game: "Thus author and reader are to share the game of the imagination, and, indeed, the game will not work if the text sets out to be anything more than a set of governing rules. The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play" (Iser, 107-108).

9. The interview hasn't been published, and I am deeply indebted and thankful to Roslyn Sulcas who has kindly given me access to all her notes taken during that interview with William Forsythe.



A change from the inside, a combination of respect, homage and renewal is precisely what *Blake Works I* is all about. The collaborative approach Forsythe adopted also participates in that form of deconstruction as defined by Franko, inspired by Derrida's *différance*: this is quite unusual in the discipline of classical ballet—especially since William Forsythe used mostly young dancers and very few principals for this production. Usually, the ballet world relies heavily on hierarchy, and younger dancers are rarely asked for their opinions, especially in such a major ballet company, steeped in a tradition that dates back to the reign of Louis XIV... Forsythe also worked with students at the Paris Opera Choreographic Institute and started a dialogue with all the dancers about their training process and what they learned from their teachers at the Paris Opera Ballet School during their formative years. Forsythe researched the French ballet discipline in depth, spending time with students and teachers of the *École de l'Opéra de Paris* to explore the French technique, the methods of teaching, the way the entire discipline of classical ballet is taught and learned by those who carry out the legacy of the French ballet tradition. Therefore, one of the elements that compose the repertory of the ballet are the exercises taught to the young dancers during their apprenticeship by dance masters like Gilbert Mayer or Christiane Vaussard—exercises which are also practiced in the company classes taken every day by the Paris Opera Ballet dancers. References to the French school of ballet abound in *Blake Works I*, from the choice of costume—the blue leotards, which recall the standard class outfits worn by ballet students at the *École de l'Opéra de Paris*—to the combinations of steps, which are inspired from ballet class exercises.

In her “Primer for Action” destined for dancers, Martha Graham explains: “freedom may only be achieved through discipline [...] your years of training and discipline in your craft and in the cultivation of yourself as a human being have made it possible for you to be free” (Graham 1941, 178-87). This seemingly contradictory statement, associating rigorous discipline with freedom—almost an oxymoron—is particularly accurate when considering *Blake Works I*: with this ballet, William Forsythe explored all the aspects of the discipline (both the disciplinary field of classical dance and “discipline” in the sense of the study, the practice and the training regimen dancers go through), dissecting its intricacies, to come to a better understanding of the language of dance and achieve extreme freedom in its articulation. Because it has been studied with so much attention, the movement in *Blake Works I* is extremely articulate, and although it is a “ballet ballet,” an extremely intellectual piece with many levels of reading, a complex ballet intertext and a myriad nuances, the freedom in the expression of the dance translates to the

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audience in a way that very few ballets can. When watching *Blake Works I*, it is very apparent that the dancers are having fun,<sup>10</sup> and the ballet was extremely well received by the audience as well, even by people who are not familiar with all the complexities of ballet. *Blake Works I* transcends the discipline to present pure joy on stage, and offer a moment of collective enjoyment in the celebration of the discipline.

With this ballet, Forsythe honors the ballet tradition, and these "years of training and discipline" which Graham claims allow extreme artistic freedom for the dancers. In the interview with Sulcas, he explains:

I said, let's use what you know to honor your teachers and your own efforts. I explained to them what I learned from my teachers and that one style doesn't necessarily muddy the other one; it gives you more ideas about timing and coordination.

I explained how I learned to work backwards from Mme Boskovitch, who had worked with Preobajenska back in the day. I did classes with her in the 1970s before I went to Stuttgart, and it was from her that I learned there was a lot of potential for reversal within ballet technique. [...] There is a line of poetry going through our practice that is absolutely beautiful.

While talking with the students and company dancers in the preparatory phase—when they were, as Forsythe says, "trying things out"—the names of major ballet masters of the French school, like Gilbert Mayer or Christiane Vaussard, came up frequently. William Forsythe incorporated the language and articulation of some exercises by Mayer<sup>11</sup> and Vaussard in the choreography: for example, he used combinations by Mayer in the jumps, and channeled Mayer's teaching in the shifts of positions side to side and front to back, but where Mayer's influence is most visible is in the use of beaten steps—the *pas de batterie*, codified in the seventeenth century by Pierre Beauchamp at the court of Louis XIV—which takes on a very playful twist at the end of the movement entitled "Two men down". After a series of poses recalling what is usually done in voguing—but with a ballet twist—the piece ends on a dance-off between Ludmila Pagliero, Jeremy-Loup Quer and Pablo Legasa: the men do combinations of turns and beaten steps derived from the exercises usually done by men in the classroom (in the pure French tradition, with lots of shifts in body weight from one leg to the other), and Pagliero comes in with a series of beaten *jetés*, *gargouillades*, and *entrechats*. The three dancers dance in

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10. Laura Cappelle notes in her *Financial Times* review that "It is the best—and the happiest—the French company has looked under Millepied, who departs in August".

11. Forsythe had seen Mayer teach when he was in Paris choreographing *In the Middle* 30 years ago, and Mayer actually came to the rehearsals of *Blake Works I* to talk with Forsythe and the dancers about the *batterie* technique.

turns in the middle of the stage, while the rest of the dancers stand back, clap and cheer them on, forming a half-circle behind them, which recalls the organization of hip-hop battles.<sup>12</sup> It is obvious that Forsythe draws here on the intrinsic playfulness (and even comic potential) of the steps: in a ballet class, *petite batterie* exercises are done towards the end of class, before the *grand sauts*. In a ballet class, the jumps—especially the high jumps at the very end—represent a moment of release for the dancers, but the intricacy of the footwork during *petite batterie* is the choreographic equivalent of a tongue-twister, and therefore contains (like its verbal equivalent) a highly comic potential... In the ballet, Forsythe alludes directly to the discipline—and potential indiscipline—of these exercises by inserting them *as exercises*: there is no story-line here, just series of exercises and combinations executed by these three dancers who try to outdo each other, as if they were blowing off steam at the end of a difficult class, or simply enjoying the freedom of articulation that their “years of training and discipline” have given them.

Forsythe also incorporated references to exercises by Vaussard—who was a master of *épaulement*: Vaussard’s exercises usually feature a series of *épaulements* (and necessarily, shifts in body weight from one leg to the other) done in a fast sequence (she was famous for giving one count, one different *épaulement* exercises). In her article “Watching the Ballett Frankfurt, 1988-2009,” Roslyn Sulcas notes that “repetitive ensemble sequences such as variations upon *tendu* with *épaulement* [are] a recurring motif in Forsythe’s work to this day” (Sulcas, 7); in *Blake Works I*, the references to Vaussard’s exercises and combinations are particularly apparent in “Put that Away and Talk to Me,” where the choreography plays with speed and *épaulements* in an homage to the teachings of Vaussard.

*Blake Works I* is framed with references to the ballet classroom, as shown by the position the dancers adopt at the beginning and at the end of the piece—the *quatrième croisée derrière* with arms in first position<sup>13</sup>—which is the position students take in the classroom before the beginning of an exercise. In this piece, Forsythe celebrates the discipline while reinventing it, deconstructing it by picking it apart and shaping new

12. This reference to hip-hop brings a touch of modernity and pop culture to the piece, but it can also be read as another intertextual or interchoreographic reference, since it refers to the circular structure frequently used in African-American dance, from the ring dances of the plantations to their most modern avatar, urban dance (hip-hop, break dance, etc...).

13. This first position is actually another interchoreographic reference, since it refers to the Bournonville tradition—where the arms are not closed but rather slightly open.

choreographic possibilities. The genre of the "ballet ballet" pays homage to the discipline by placing the choreographer, the dancers and the audience in the role of an eternal disciple, constantly learning, dissecting and reevaluating the intricacies of ballet: *Blake Works I* invites us, precisely, to think about how ballet *works*—how its language is articulated, which amount of discipline is required to understand and master that language, but also how its infinite potential for *différance* allows the production of new idioms, new combinations and sequences. In *Blake Works I*, the ballet intertext is constructed as an intricate game—a playful set of references to the discipline and training of the dancers, and a collaborative game in which the choreographer, the dancers and the audience collectively take part, in the deconstruction, weaving in and reinterpretation of ballet class exercises and in the intertextual game of finding all these references in the ballet during the reception process.

### The Ballet Intertext in *Blake Works I*

*Blake Works I* is a highly intertextual piece which explores the process of reception and creation as much as it dissects and deconstructs the discipline. By weaving in different elements and different references to create a new production, as well as through the deliberate collaborative approach, Forsythe echoes the way Jauss describes how reception works—from passive reception to active reception, from simply reading to having a critical approach to the work and finally producing new work.<sup>14</sup> In Forsythe's ballet, the choice of the music also participates in the complexity of the intertextual construction. When explaining to Roslyn Sulcas why he chose James Blake's *The Color in Anything*, William Forsythe said:

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14. As Jauss explains in *Pour une esthétique de la réception* :

« La vie de l'œuvre littéraire dans l'histoire est inconcevable sans la participation active de ceux auxquels elle est destinée. C'est leur intervention qui fait entrer l'œuvre dans la continuité mouvante de l'expérience littéraire, où l'horizon ne cesse de changer, où s'opère en permanence le passage de la réception passive à la réception active, de la simple lecture à la compréhension critique, de la norme esthétique admise à son dépassement par une production nouvelle. L'historicité de la littérature et son caractère de communication impliquent entre l'œuvre traditionnelle, le public et l'œuvre nouvelle un rapport d'échange et d'évolution. [...] Déjà l'accueil fait à l'œuvre par ses premiers lecteurs implique un jugement de valeur esthétique porté par référence à d'autres œuvres lues antérieurement. Cette première appréhension de l'œuvre peut ensuite se développer et s'enrichir de génération en génération, et va constituer à travers l'histoire une « chaîne de réceptions » qui décidera de l'importance historique de l'œuvre et manifesterà son rang dans la hiérarchie esthétique. » (Jauss, 49-50)

I remember that when I listened to it for the first time, I didn't really understand what I was hearing. My musical brain was slightly perplexed. He has very interesting harmonies, an idiosyncratic style. It's very classical in the way he combines materials; he calls it "stacking," but what I was hearing was counterpoint. His sense of rhythm comes from his classical background, which you hear very strongly on the album, "The Colour in Anything." But there is something in these stackings or layerings that produces an entirely new kind of oral event. It spans musical cultures—from the U.K. dance scene to classical music, to pure electronic abstract composition—but everything is at the service of rhythm and structure. And by rhythm, I don't mean compulsively hearing the meter; I mean different rhythmical organisations.

It was the first music of that kind that really suggested classical ballet to me.

James Blake and William Forsythe both come from a classical background, and they share this common interest in revisiting classical codes. The "stacking" or "layering" in James Blake's music inspired Forsythe to use the same technique, creating visual layering in various ways. One of the very noticeable moments of layering/stacking, or to borrow Roland Barthes' term, *feuilletage*, in *Blake Works I* is the layering of various types of movement in various directions in "I Hope my Life," where dancers perform different combinations on different lines and in different directions, which allows them to collectively catch all the different accents and nuances of the stacking in the musical score. This stacking/layering of movement evokes a playful ballet class, where each line has a different exercise to execute, in a layering of different exercises by different dance masters—but it is also a layering of various ballet references. In *Blake Works I*, Forsythe integrates a lot of references to ballets by Petipa, and he also refers to Balanchine and the American school: for example, the color of the costumes, as well as the ballet class reference and the indiscipline, can be read as a reference to Balanchine's *Serenade*: Balanchine's famous ballet opens on a group of seventeen female dancers in blue tutus who perform a series of slow, ballet-class inspired preparatory *adagio* movements (*port de bras*, opening the feet from sixth to first position and a couple of *tendus* with *port de bras*) before the *allegro* begins. This is all very disciplined until the soloist arrives late and flustered at the end of the movement.<sup>15</sup> In the beginning of "I Hope my Life," the energetic and almost defiant *port de bras* the lead ballerina and the men execute before they start dancing can be read as a playful hint to the opening of *Serenade*—especially since, as in Balanchine's ballet, it is repeated throughout the piece, like a leitmotiv. More generally, in *Blake Works I*, the *port de bras* alternate between the French style and the Balanchine style, and

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15. The indiscipline continues in the ballet when one dancer falls and her ballet bun goes undone, leaving her hair loose for the rest of the piece.

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allude to the American school of ballet through minute details such as the angle of the wrist, the hand positions or the curve of the elbow.

The intertextuality in *Blake Works I* is a deliberate construction and reflects Forsythe's intellectual engagement with the classical repertoire. When he was conducting his collective investigation of ballet with the Paris Opera dancers, he invited them to adopt a critical perspective toward their discipline, as he explained to Sulcas:

[T]he classical repertory is full of anomalies. Once you leave the classroom, everything is up for grabs. In *Giselle*, the Wilis have a crossed arm over a straight arm, which I used in *Blake Works I*. In the final duet, the arm positions actually all hark back to positions used in a number of the Petipa *pas de deux*. It's saying, let's show what you know, what your experience consists of.

We talked about stylistic affinities. What do the English, American, French schools have in common? In the opening section of *Blake Works I*, they keep their arms and legs low in arabesque, like Margot Fonteyn in *Sleeping Beauty*. Then they do the American thing, stepping into arabesque across the diagonal, with the arm pushing through. The amount of detail and knowledge needed to express a specific school, or choreographic style, requires a tremendous amount of conscious differentiation. Ballets always talk about other ballets to some extent.

In *Blake Works I*, Forsythe makes deliberate use of the self-referentiality of classical ballet in a complex and subtle way. In the interview with Sulcas, he also adds that after hearing dance historian Mark Franko talk about the farandole, he worked towards integrating this type of folk dance in *Blake Works I*—showing once again the affinity between his perspective on ballet and an academic outlook on this art form, and a similarity between the choreographic and the academic investigative approaches. The beaten steps discussed previously can therefore also be read as an interchoreographic reference to the farandole, as well as the playful group dynamics on stage, but Forsythe's use of the farandole also refers to the use of folk dance (*danses de caractère*) in ballet, and it is also an intertextual reference to Petipa, who integrated a farandole in the second act of *Sleeping Beauty* as a reference to the French tradition and to the history of dance: there is therefore a complex stacking, or rather a *mise en abyme*, of the inherent self-referentiality of ballet. One could also argue that the very notion of a *steptext* is also rooted in the French tradition, since in the origins of French theatrical dance, choreography was clearly made explicitly analogous to a written text, with figures, symbols, that carried meaning which translated to the audience, as Mark Franko reminds us in *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the baroque body*: "dancing became identified with highly rhetorical forms of late Renaissance culture [...]. The choreographic figure presented bodies as physical metaphors of written characters or symbolic designs" (Franko 1993, 15).

In the many references to the classical repertoire and to Petipa in particular, one can for example notice the side tilts of the torso with arms *à la couronne* in “Forest Fire” which refer to the entrance of “the Shadows” in the penultimate act<sup>16</sup> of *La Bayadère* or the Wilis’ entrance in *Giselle*,<sup>17</sup> and the *pas de deux* in “The Color in Anything” strongly recalls the *pas de deux* between Odette and Siegfried in *Swan Lake*: the tentative touch, the *port de bras*, the partnering, and the emotional charge echo the fragility and delicacy of the lakeside *pas de deux* in Act II. In *Swan Lake*, although she is frightened and appears as a typical damsel in distress, Odette commands Siegfried’s attention in the pantomime in Act II and orders him to let her speak and listen to her while she explains the curse she is under; in *Blake Works I*, Forsythe revalued the gender roles in his intertextual references to the classical repertoire, placing male and female dancers on an equal footing and blurring the habitual gender lines in ballet. For example, the “swan arms” *port de bras* that is used several times throughout the piece is equally performed in the original production by Léonore Baulac (in the duet “The Color in Anything”) and by Hugo Marchand in “Two Men Down”.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the gender dynamics in the “Color in Anything” *pas de deux* are not as polarized as they usually are in ballet, since the choreography in the female part is as authoritative and delicate as her male partner’s. Throughout the ballet, women perform the same steps as men in a joyous ensemble—and in the *pas de deux* and *pas de trois*—this gender revaluation culminating in Pagliero’s victory in the dance-off at the end of “Two Men Down”: the ballerina shines, but not to the detriment of her male partner(s),<sup>19</sup> and the women are just as powerful as the men in their dancing—something that Forsythe feels strongly about<sup>20</sup> and has done repeatedly in his choreographic career

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16. Technically, “The Shadows” (“*le Royaume des ombres*”) is the penultimate act of the ballet, but since the last act, The Destruction of the Temple, is rarely performed in France, The Shadows is the last act of *La Bayadère* in the Nureyev version danced at the Paris Opera.

17. This particular tilt of the torso is also used at the beginning of Balanchine’s *Serenade*.

18. This particular port de bras is also used in *Serenade*, during the *pas de cinq*, which itself also refers to Jules Perrot’s famous 1845 *pas de quatre*—another example of how Forsythe uses the self-referentiality of ballet in this piece.

19. In the first half of the nineteenth century, “the age of the ballerina,” the male parts were largely underwritten, the male dancer’s role being chiefly to partner and show off the ballerina.

20. In his interview with Sulcas, Forsythe explains that the reason why he has always used “big arms and big positions” is because “[he has] always given women things that might be done by men”.

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(as visible for example in his other piece which premiered at the Paris Opera in 1987, *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*, in which the choreography highlights the extraordinary abilities of legendary ballerina Sylvie Guillem).

At the core of the revaluation of the discipline in *Blake Works I* is a joyful *différance*, based on playfulness, joy and enjoyment—on a “will to bliss” as Roland Barthes would put it (Barthes, 13). For Barthes, “the brio of the text [...] is its will to bliss: just where it exceeds demand, transcends prattle, and whereby it attempts to overflow, to break through the constraint of adjectives—which are those doors of language through which the ideological and the imaginary come flowing in” (Barthes, 13-14). *Blake Works I* invites us to join in this joyful investigation into the codes and techniques of ballet, to “break through the constraint of adjectives”; because it constantly sways between the old and the new, the familiar and the unknown, *Blake Works I* is both a *texte de plaisir* and a *texte de jouissance* as defined by Barthes.<sup>21</sup> According to Barthes, a “texte de plaisir” is comforting in the sense that it alludes to well-known references that the reader enjoys recognizing, while a “texte de jouissance” is even more enjoyable because it is unsettling; *Blake Works I* does both—comforting the spectators by referring to recognizable references from the repertoire and unsettling them by the complexity of the intertextual “step-text,” which forces them to engage with the piece on an intellectual level, instead of just passively enjoying it. For Steven Spier, “[s]ome early critics mistook Forsythe’s investigations of ballet, which fascinated him as a system that lends itself to multiple analyses, as an attack. In fact, he saved ballet from itself by demanding it deal with the same nuances and issues that every other contemporary art form did” (Spier, 2). Ballet is treated as a contemporary art form in Forsythe’s *Blake Works I*, and not just because it uses contemporary music, but mainly because it reinvents the discipline, uses its endless potential for self-referentiality and reversal to make it new and vibrantly alive. Forsythe’s critically-informed outlook on the discipline of ballet also invites us to consider ballet outside of its disciplinary boundaries and in connection to other disciplines like literature and literary theory. Ballet is a language, to which the critical tools for studying verbal language can also apply.

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21. Translated by Miller as “text of pleasure” and “text of bliss” (Barthes, 14).



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