

2002

Profile 2: Genesis of a Dance

Rohan Preston

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cap_vistas



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Preston, Rohan, "Profile 2: Genesis of a Dance" (2002). *Democratic Vistas Profiles*. Book 2.
http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cap_vistas/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Arts Policy at Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Vistas Profiles by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago.

CENTER FOR ARTS POLICY
COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO



DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

GENESIS OF A DANCE

by Rohan Preston

NUMBER
02

CENTER FOR ARTS POLICY
COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO



DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

GENESIS OF A DANCE

by Rohan Preston

A BOOKISH MOLECULAR biologist stands on a half-lit stage at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, gesturing excitedly. He is describing, in a torrent of words conducted by maestro hands, the repetitive energy of enzymes—how they form polymers that stay true to their structure, how they can go from a relaxed, neutral position called *hysteresis* to an agitated state only if propelled by some outside energy, and how they communicate and move.

He sounds like someone sharing scientific findings at

Rohan Preston is the author of a poetry collection, Dreams in Soy Sauce (Ti Chih Ch'u Pan She, 1992) and co-editor of the anthology, Soulfires: Young Black Men on Love and Violence (Penguin, 1996). He lives in Minneapolis, where he is lead theater critic at the Star Tribune.

a conference. Yet the scientist, University of Chicago professor Aaron Turkewitz, is not reporting on the behavior of molecules viewed through an electron microscope. He is describing the movements of Margot Greenlee, a principal performer with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. He watches and comments as Greenlee delivers an excerpt from a dance suite on the human genome, whose secrets and applications will likely alter the very existence of humanity—from extending lives to made-to-order designer babies, from potential cures to potential curses.

A lyrical dancer, Greenlee renders phrases that include gripped hands vibrating and one hand circling her head like water running down a wide-brimmed hat. As Turkewitz continues the scientific soundtrack, she moves her hands up in steps, from chest to neck to fore-

head, and her head turns skyward as if to faint backwards in resignation or prayer.

The impromptu duet of word and movement—it is the first time that the scientist and the artist have met—is brief but inspiring. Palpable electricity ripples through the audience of funders, scholars, doctors, artists and,

ing collaborative techniques in communities across the country. Through story circles in which she has communities express their histories, and through her well-researched and sensitively executed choreography, Lerman has empowered many, providing a space in the culture for the voices of the elderly, teenage mothers,

PALPABLE ELECTRICITY RIPPLES THROUGH THE AUDIENCE OF FUNDERS, SCHOLARS, DOCTORS, ARTISTS AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, RESEARCH SCIENTISTS.

most importantly, research scientists. The onstage magic is unexpected by many of those in attendance but it should not have been. The demonstration is from the work of pioneering choreographer Liz Lerman, a humanist who uses dance to investigate complex issues and to plumb subjects of universal concern, giving voice to histories, fears, and celebrations.

Lerman is honoring her chosen subject by doing creative and scientific research so that each movement in the final work will have scientific provenance, so that each step or slide or shake will be informed by a base of knowledge. The work begins with a huge foundation of research that will eventually come off like training wheels, letting the dancers fly.

“The reason I’m pursuing this is not just because I think it’s good for an educational conference,” Lerman says after the demonstration. “There are so many discoveries that we are making and so many things that we will know about ourselves, it’s exhilarating and scary. There’s a body of knowledge here, of instruction, that is exciting, that is mind-blowing, that affects all of us.”

Known for community engagement, taking risks, and demystifying art, Lerman convened this group—one of several cross-disciplinary conclaves for which she will excerpt this work—to test ideas, attract new stakeholders to the piece, and to do creative research. A recent winner of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellowship, Lerman has taken on a behemoth subject unlike any other she has tackled in a thirty-year career as a dancer-maker. The dance suite, which she calls *Ferocious Beauty: Genome*, crystallizes the decades she has spent pioneer-

and immigrants from Seattle to San Diego, Maine to Miami.

Lerman believes deeply in the power of art to educate and transform, to ennoble and heal. She also believes that virtually anyone is an artist. She makes it her job to elicit the genius from those whom she engages in community collaborations.

“Dance is not just for dancers, and it’s not just for movement’s sake—it belongs to everyone,” she says. “These partnerships aren’t exactly about art and democracy, but about a corollary. Dance has gotten so distant, minimalist, uninteresting, separate. There is a whole experience of the field itself that led me to feel that by bringing real bodies to it, there’s a chance to reinvigo-

LERMAN BELIEVES DEEPLY IN THE POWER OF ART TO EDUCATE AND TRANSFORM, TO ENNOBLE AND HEAL. SHE ALSO BELIEVES THAT VIRTUALLY ANYONE IS AN ARTIST.

rate the form.”

Lerman is a self-described “applied” artist, not a “pure” one. Her work is meant to have clear meaning, to communicate as it interrogates ideas, histories and, in this case, the genome. Where many make dances that are about themselves, viewer be damned, Lerman uses dance not as an end in itself, but as a way of connecting to people. This approach, at odds with the mainstream of “pure movement” for its own sake, opens her up to the charge that she is literal-minded and pedantic.

“The Dance Exchange *is* on the *literal* end of dance,” Lerman admits—its dancers move with concrete meaning. “But for so many people, dance is [too] abstract.”

She reflects on the heft of *Genome*, and the value of her approach, asking the questions: “How can there be

er cannot be understated. “My father saw his activism in the world as a sacred duty of our shared existence,” she says, sipping water during a rehearsal break. “He brought people together to talk, to break down barriers. He loved regular people, finding the genius in the ordinary.

“WE ARE AT A COPERNICAN MOMENT, WHERE INSTEAD OF TURNING A TELESCOPE TO THE HEAVENS, WE ARE TURNING IT TO OUR BODIES, OUR CELLS,” SHE SAYS

any art, at this momentous historical dawning, that has no meaning? How can you have art that, at such a liminal cusp, does not ask hard questions?”

“We are at a Copernican moment, where instead of turning a telescope to the heavens, we are turning it to our bodies, our cells,” she says, referencing an image that plays out in the show. “It will reorder our understanding of ourselves and the universe.”

The “Lerman Principle”

Born December 25, 1947, in Los Angeles, and raised in Milwaukee, Lerman grew up in a home environment that cherished both social justice and artistic excellence. Her parents practiced an activist embrace of Reform Judaism and had a deep appreciation of the arts, values that combine in Lerman’s work.

Philip Lerman, her father, was active in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, marching for fair housing. Both parents encouraged her interests from an early age. “My father would say, ‘They’re dancing on TV, come watch.’ I love him for that,” says Lerman. Her mother, Anne Louise Levy, signed her up with dance teacher Florence West, who had trained with modern dance maven Martha Graham as well as Ruth Page.

Lerman studied with West until she was fifteen, gaining exposure to all the luminaries who came through town, including Merce Cunningham and Jose Limon. She then attended Bennington College in Vermont for two years, but quit it, and dance—the beginning of her struggles with a form that had chosen her and that she could not escape, no matter how much she tried. Brandeis University was next, where she earned a degree in 1968. She earned her MA in dance from George Washington University in 1976.

The influence of her populist father and elitist moth-

er didn’t believe in high [and] low art. My mother, she was totally different. She wanted ‘excellence,’ which often meant not following the crowd. I think that my whole career is about honoring both of them.”

Lerman also has another legacy from her parents, a philosophy that imbues her work. An appointed official, Philip Lerman served as director of the state labor council. In that role, he often presided over the cases of people charged with violating labor statutes. “When someone came to plead a case, the state may have been right, but if there were extenuating circumstances, if there was a story that explained it well, my father overturned the case,” his daughter recalls. “He would likely as not screw policy in favor of individual stories or need.”

The “Lerman Principle” of the father now helps govern the work of the choreographer daughter, who upends her own field by shucking conventional practices, empowering ordinary movers, and investing dance with clear, communicated meaning. Liz Lerman came of age in an arts world where abstraction was the dominant convention, and in which greater restrictions prevailed regarding which choreographic subjects were appropriate and who were fit to become dancers. Her attitude, which evolved after suffering through ballet and New York’s modern dance scene, is “screw” conventions and policies in favor of individuals and real world issues. She has become a dance evangelist, combining passion with practice, artistry with activism.

“I think of Liz as a moral artist,” says her fellow choreographer Bill T. Jones. “At a time when the mass media aims to promote consumption for its own sake, intellectuals have the Sisyphian task of embodying alternatives. Liz does that.”

Form and Meaning

The clarifying event in Lerman's career, and in her life, happened in 1975. Her mother, quite young, died of cancer. Lerman had returned and left dance in several fits after college, frustrated with the frippery and froufrou of ballet, the pretensions of many leading practitioners, with the abstraction and, to her mind, the isolated meaninglessness that was celebrated in the 1970s. She taught at a Quaker school, tricking many in the all-boy student body into dance by making it a sport. After she quit that job, she did others, including working as a go-go dancer for a while—to make money, for sure, but

intergenerational duets. It was very erotic, between people in their 60s and 20s—always tasteful but very dangerous somehow. I thought it was important. For me, and I suppose for her, every new work brings up a harrowing set of questions: What is the purpose of this work? Is it to fill the entertainment gap or do I want to get in there and provoke, take sides, run the risk of being called a poor artist and misguided social worker? I haven't found an answer for myself but I'm glad she has a megaphone."

There is a healthy tradition of American artists who not only embrace the nation's ideals, but reinscribe them

SHE HAS BECOME A DANCE EVANGELIST, COMBINING PASSION WITH PRACTICE, ARTISTRY WITH ACTIVISM. "I THINK OF LIZ AS A MORAL ARTIST," SAYS HER FELLOW CHOREOGRAPHER BILL T. JONES.

also to find the spark to let her keep the art she loved. Nothing worked. Her mother's death was a catastrophic catalyst. Within a year, Lerman started teaching movement to the residents at Washington, D.C.'s Roosevelt Hotel for Senior Citizens. The Liz Lerman Dance Exchange was born.

"It began out of grief, out of personal pain," she remembers. "It began as a way to find a way out of loss. I needed to connect to old people. I wanted my mother." That period of her life, when her impulse was to make sense of her mother's passing, would last a decade. Her works from that time are about reaching out to people, honoring their stories. Her grief would lead to a slow change in how she perceived dance, its purpose and its place in an arts ecology. Lerman wanted to take it from the least valued of the arts to something that was "embraced and belonged to everyone."

And she would be excoriated for her tack. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, artists such as Jones and Lerman came under attack for their community engagement and for their choice of subject matter.

"She's very courageous, very principled, taking on issues that are taboo," says Jones. "I remember her show at Jacob's Pillow some years back, when she had these

in their works and become exponents of art and democracy. In the nineteenth century, it was the poet Walt Whitman, who celebrated American heterogeneity in lusty free verse that liberated literature from the tyranny of rhyme and conventional meter. In the twentieth, oral historian Studs Terkel gave the nation back its voice in vernacular poetry, in workmen's cadences and stories. Lerman certainly falls in this category of artists whose works have animated American democracy—celebrating it, challenging it, and questioning the very values that allow her artistic freedom.

"Liz uses dance theater to investigate issues that are of

HER MOTHER'S DEATH WAS A CATASTROPHIC CATALYST. WITHIN A YEAR...THE LIZ LERMAN DANCE EXCHANGE WAS BORN.

critical importance to our society today—in some ways, I can imagine her being a scientist or activist or politician or novelist," says Philip Bither, curator of performing arts at Minneapolis' Walker Art Center. "There are many artists who have followed Liz's lead in wanting to

utilize their art to explore issues. What distinguishes Liz is that she maintains this rigorous artistic standard—a high level of quality of both the inquiry and artistry. She brings people together, sparks their creativity, and inspires them to get below the surface. Her true gift is that she does it in such a compellingly artistic way.”

“I guess when I think about it, the socialism of my father comes up,” Lerman adds. “We are in this together. We share this planet together and we have a lot of similarities.” It is one of the reasons Lerman deemed ballet too narrow a form, too historically bound to social elites, and looked elsewhere for her choreographical lan-

LERMAN SAYS, “WE HAVE TO ESTABLISH NEW FORMS THAT ARE RELEVANT TO CONTEMPORARY LIFE. DANCE IS HOW PEOPLE TELL THEIR STORIES WITH THEIR BODIES.”

Amidst resurgent Cold War tensions in the 1980s, Lerman did a series of dances about national defense build-up and the military. In one, about a controversial new fleet of Abrams tanks, her dancers moved on all fours, banging their heads against walls. Her company has also performed her choreography atop a mothballed nuclear submarine; the dancers came armed with a Geiger counter and outfitted in sanitation suits, gloves and radiation gear. The troupe, nine strong, has also performed in a lot of other nontraditional venues, including nursing homes, prisons, factories, churches and synagogues—“everywhere but the mall,” she laughs.

Although the Exchange has had engagements at many august venues across the country, she prefers to perform in the physical spaces of everyday life. “The stage is where people work and play and live their lives,” Lerman explains. Art should not be an isolated aesthetic activity, she says, but the expression of community ethics. Paraphrasing a quote from Robert Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community*, a book that has had a seminal influence on her thinking, Lerman says, “We have to establish new forms that are relevant to contemporary life. Dance is how people tell their stories with their bodies.”

Such community engagements, in which Lerman takes non-dancers and trains them, have been likened by her critics to social work. It is an old critique, really, one that has confounded artists from the time of the Greeks. As artists have tried to become scientists, with specialized argot and the sense of inquiry, their forms have often become insular and remote. Even now, as she takes on a scientific subject, Lerman bristles at attitudes that restrict the practice or appreciation of art to a coterie of those in the know.

guage.

One of Lerman’s most successful collaborations was on a piece called *The Hallelujah Project*. That work, originated and performed in fifteen American cities, sought to answer the question, “What are you in celebration of?” In putting together *Hallelujah*, Lerman did what she is so passionate about; she and her principal company members—Greenlee and Elizabeth Johnson are versed in her communication shorthand and often take the lead on residencies—went into communities, conducted interviews, led roundtable discussions and gathered stories. They also trained dancers.

“When we work in a community, most of the work is offstage—in classroom seminars, in master workshops, in rehearsals, in lectures and demonstrations, and in meetings with local arts leaders,” she says. “In every profession, they seem to be dealing with this education piece—people want to be involved, they don’t want to just watch. They want to participate, to be hands-on.”

Hallelujah was performed in places as varied as a fishing village in Maine during a near-zero stretch of cold weather, and in Minneapolis in the summer, in a light drizzle. In Minneapolis, Lerman and company worked with groups of teen mothers, abuse victims, retirement home denizens and Hmong immigrants.

Such projects quicken her imagination and sense of commonweal, she says. They also give her the kind of depth she longs for in a form. “It’s not interesting all by itself to just enjoy the aesthetic and kinesthetic of dance,” Lerman adds. “I need more gravitas.”

This is not to say that she does not exult in movement. Lerman performs in her piece *Flying into the Middle*, a word and movement number set to Tchaikovsky that muses on what it means to be middle

aged and middle class. Performed at George Washington University and in Houston, *Flying* features a lot of lyrical, graceful dances. But *Genome* is different and has different aims. Its February 2006 premiere at Wesleyan University will mark both a culmination of her work and a departure.

“This sounds egocentric, but I would love to see if it has impact, if dance can be something to make more people think about this or read about the possibilities and the horrors confronting our world,” she says. “In other dances I’m satisfied if people cry or laugh or think, but in this piece, there seems to be an additional element.”

“What should an audience person do after seeing this piece?” Lerman wonders aloud. “The closest I can get is hoping that they would be less afraid of difficult ideas, of something that might be scary.”

During a workshop at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), Lerman finds the visual arts students with whom she is working resistant to the idea of making an audience literate about their works. They want to work in abstractions. So she asks them, “Is abstraction a tool to bring people in, to engage people, or is it an end in itself?” Everyone answers that it is a tool. “The question of how much do you let people know, how many clues you give people in a piece, is a constant,” Lerman observes.

Lerman tells the students a story. “My first teaching job was at a Quaker boarding school. We lived near a pond and the faculty children were out there one morning shaking with excitement. I went out to the dock and

LERMAN SAYS THAT SHE TIRES, CERTAINLY, BUT NEVER GETS WEARY.

saw that the kids had caught a fish and it was flapping. As soon as I saw the fish, I had this flashback of fishing at dawn with my dad in Wisconsin. I sometimes say that choreography is putting out some fish to flap like that. It lets you say the thing in an immediate way that it can be received, felt, absorbed. It lets you access your memories and your dreams.”

Lerman’s throat tightens later as she recalls the work-

shop. Abstraction, to her, is often meaningless meandering. “Twyla Tharp was my teacher for a minute—she taught me what I didn’t want to be,” says Lerman frankly. “She has an exquisite talent for movement invention that may or may not know what it means. I don’t have that talent.”

Power to the Movers

Lerman runs from early morning to late night with a focused tenacity that makes one marvel. During the residency in Baltimore—one of the thirty-two weeks that she will spend on the road this year—she pushes herself and her company so hard, she seems to be risking her

“I SOMETIMES SAY THAT CHOREOGRAPHY IS [LIKE] PUTTING OUT SOME FISH TO FLAP.”

health and theirs. And yet the stress fractures, if there are any, do not show. While her brain crackles like embers, her body is that of a fifty-seven-year-old, albeit one who has danced all her life. Lerman says that she tires, certainly, but never gets weary.

“I get energy from the people around me,” she says, talking with her hands, her eyes dancing animatedly. “I don’t think I’m stealing it because it’s not finite. I find ways to get inspired, to take pleasure in small accomplishments and not get bogged down in the impossible.”

If Lerman gets a lot of inspiration from the talent she has hired, it is because they also get a lot from her. Dance is a very old-world form of transmitting knowledge. Hero choreographers and master teachers rule, each with their own cults of personality, some long after their deaths. Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Jose Limon, Alvin Ailey, Katharine Dunham, Arthur Mitchell—these are all luminary names with legacies created by dint of hard work, yes, but also through larger-than-life ferocity.

Lerman is known for not just her passion about the form, but also her compassion. She truly believes that dance belongs to everyone and can be performed by almost anyone, not just the highly trained. And she has employed dancers in whom she has found such grace, working with performers aged eight to ninety, with all body types. Currently, Lerman’s company ranges from twenty-something movers to seventy-year-old Thomas

Dwyer, a virile former radio communications officer with the foreign service who started dancing, at Lerman's behest, at age fifty-three. Like Lerman, he is an engaging raconteur.

"When I was growing up in Providence, there were a lot of cotton mills that used to feed their chemicals in the Providence River," says Dwyer. "On any given day,

Baltimore, where company member Johnson has composed a provocative and instructive dance for *Genome* that uses scientific language and that explains a DNA sequence that is involved in transmission of proteins and messages. She comes onstage in ordinary clothes under the live projected image of a scientist on a large screen. As an image of a scientist plays on the screen, gesturing

"ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS THAT LIZ DOES WITH YOU IS SHOW YOU HOW TO USE DISCOMFORT AND LEARN FROM IT."

the river would be a different color, and you could see dozens of rats swimming in the water. I was back there a year ago, and there were swans in the water. It was so incredibly clean. I was so fascinated by what you can do if you set your mind to it."

"When dance found me in 1987, it was like a calling for me," Dwyer continues. "For me, it was a nice opportunity to flirt with the ladies. It was also a powerful way to promote respect for men, to give us an opportunity to do things we ordinarily wouldn't do instead of just being stereotypical grandfathers. Liz likes the way I move, and I don't know why." Dwyer pauses. "She is a genius. She knows where and when to put me to make it alright."

Dwyer is both physically and verbally articulate about his work and intentions. Many of Lerman's dancers can speak at length about the complex artistic, social, and aesthetic underpinnings of what they do, passionately walking dancers and non-dancers alike through their process and methods.

Much of this is credited to their respective gifts. Dwyer, for example, is a natural performer who is well-connected to his intense physical presence. But there is something else. Lerman encourages her dancers, frees them to be the best spokespeople for her company and themselves. She does this in several ways. In every city or town that the company enters, the dancers take a lead in organizing and running residencies.

"Liz gives a lot of self-direction, she wants us to have the room to make mistakes; that's what we grow from," says Johnson. "One of the first things that Liz does with you is show you how to use discomfort and learn from it."

This delegation of creativity is very evident in

with his hands, Johnson mimes his very expressive gestures, reflecting his passion. Her fingers point to the screen. Her hands cross, then shake.

"This section is called 'Everything You Wanted to Know About Genetics But Were Afraid To Ask,'" she says in the performance. "Wanna see my picture?" she continues, before launching into a striptease and taking off her top to reveal a red bra. "This is what I keep in my black book—a picture of transcription, how genes copy themselves." Johnson eventually strips to red skivvies, drawing attention to herself, yes, but also to the genomic information on the screen. It is funny, informative, and compelling.

Other performers create work as well, including the students at MICA. Lerman obliges the aspiring dancers, who get to work with a legend, even if their ideas will not necessarily show up in the final product.

Lerman's residencies reflect the accomplishments of her company. They spread her encompassing philosophy, to the delight of communities across the nation. They demystify dance. And they empower dancers and communities to tell their stories with heroism and majesty.

This sense of empowerment is important to her on many levels. She developed a four-step "critical response" process for artists and non-artists to get constructive feedback on their work. The process begins with an assertion of what is meaningful about a piece of work followed by what the artist finds meaningful about the work and, if the artist wants to hear it, suggestions for improvement. Lerman's axiom is to turn discomfort into inquiry, into a source of knowledge. This method is also the way she moves through the world.

The genome project fits into Lerman's career-long exploration of how to combine dance, emotional con-

tent, and storytelling with new informational sources. Ever since her work at the retirement home, Lerman has sought ways to reanimate ordinary bodies and lives. She has been on a campaign to make dance a democratic vista, an art form, educational tool, and animated activity that is practiced by the layperson and that can be appreciated by everyone, not just by dancemakers.

Where some artists take license with their stories, trading fact for fiction in order to move a narrative

“One thing that’s really distinctive about how Liz works and thinks is figuring out, at the outset, what the right questions are,” says John Borstel, humanities director at the Dance Exchange and Lerman’s writing partner. “She’s looking to refine the questions, and out of the questions come the structures for pursuing the answers in terms of the artistic content. Her work doesn’t pose final answers.”

“It’s incredible when you think about what we’re

STRETCHES OF TEXT ABOUT HOW GENES EXPRESS THEMSELVES...ARE REDUCED TO VERBS—DOCK, SLIDE, SNIP, SPLICE, TWIST, AND FOLD.

along, for example, or interpolating data to remove nuance, Lerman is different. She wants to show the whole complicated shebang. In *Genome*, she has wrestled with how much scientific knowledge to relate.

“There is always a balance in the creative process between the information you want to transmit and a kind of artistic exuberance,” says *Genome* sound designer Darron West. “Liz has this great history of educating with flair, of dancing with purpose, and the tension is to find the balance between information and joy.”

Where some directors and choreographers are known to impose their visions on work, driving them through with the artistic equivalent of drills, Lerman uses a Socratic approach to problem solving. She asks a lot of questions, both in her life and in her work. “I find that it opens up creative space to not have all the answers,” she says.

With *Genome*, she has a built-in reason to be open-ended about the questions, which are being raised through a multimedia presentation that includes silent-movie type lettering and video projections. Still, Lerman is unsure about what she wants audiences to take away.

“There isn’t a single question here, but a series of questions,” she says. “What is the genome and who owns it? What will be the quality of your life? Do people then retire at a hundred?” The positive possibilities of this research are enormous. So are the potential abuses. In rehearsal, her dancers ask these questions obliquely as they perform but Lerman is uncertain where she will land on this issue.

going to know and not know about ourselves,” muses Lerman. “I used to joke that you could look at my parents and say I got the best of them but also the worst. My father had thin hair, my mother thick. I got the thin hair. He had the beautiful voice. I can’t sing.”

“There have been other works...that have been more rooted in history and dependent on traditions,” Lerman says. “This feels more about the future than about the past. When they say that physics was the science of the twentieth century and biology the science of the twenty-first, I see why. Our bodies are such battlegrounds, sites of this great combination of awe and inspiration and terror.”

The Dream Sequence

Back in the rehearsal room, Lerman’s dancers have progressed greatly with *Genome*, arranging suites and fleshing out ideas. One performer, Marvin Webb, who will leave the company before the premiere, reads aloud about genetics while Greenlee and Johnson express the ideas through their bodies. At first prosaic and pedantic with turgid stretches of text about how genes express themselves in protein, it gets pared back as the dancers’ cluttered movements become clearer and freer.

The movements are reduced to verbs—dock, slide, snip, splice, twist, and fold. Three dancers go through some fluid, specific movements, twisting and splaying like flowers. They grip their hands together and shake them. All three bend forward, join hands and shake violently. The dancers fold, lowering themselves onto the

floor as if doing push-ups. They spring from one side, to the other, then turn like a screw on one arm.

“We have a big explosion of knowledge going on,” whispers Lerman excitedly as she watches the dancers, her ordinarily stoic face twitching with their movements. “Not only do the proteins fold, they have chaperones to help them unfold. I’m realizing that despite a year of research, I had a misunderstanding about what genetics actually is. It’s not just traits, my color hair, my size hips, but really, genetics makes everything happen in the body.”

At a later residency, the company would refine the pieces even more. The first act, Lerman says, is all about education, about conveying scientific information. This is done through texts spoken by the dancers, and through technology, including the projections of captions above dancers’ heads.

The first act is also wide-eyed, looking in amazement at the scientific advances. In another scene, a couple suffering from Huntington’s disease, which may be cured by genomic research, does some haunting slow-motion movements twisting and bending to a soundtrack of Bob Dylan’s “Knocking on Heaven’s Door.” Lerman has also included two folk stories that deal with human control over genes and life, “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “Johnny Appleseed,” to suggest that such questions have been around for some time. “By the end of the first act, people will know enough,” says Lerman.

Lerman reveals a surprise influence for another scene, this one in a white room where a dancer represents the potential horror of genomic knowledge. Projected letters form a palimpsest over the room. Greenlee’s character is having nightmares and dreams. She is wondering how she’s going to have a baby. We are not sure of the

source of her unease, but feel her agitation. Perhaps she was born differently; her nightmare may be about how her own birth broke the natural chain. Perhaps she is finding out about herself, Lerman speculates.

“[Gregor] Mendel started all of this to reveal the natural laws, not change them,” Lerman says, referencing the nineteenth-century Augustinian monk whose painstaking work cross-breeding peas laid the foundation for all ensuing work on heredity and how genes express themselves. “Maybe she needs to buy a gene, patented of course, and evolve again,” Lerman speculates about the character, “One of the ideas I’m having is that it’s possible all of this takes us right back [to our evolutionary beginnings]. Maybe she wants to be a fish.”

“[That] character was conceived differently because of reproductive practices that are going to change and I’m trying to figure out what the impact is on her—her parents may have enhanced her and she doesn’t like it,” Lerman explains. “I’m reading [a book that says] you have to think about the genome like you think about the computer. The character may get an upgrade—change her genetic makeup so that she can have different dreams, for example. She may not like the traits that were chosen for her.”

Lerman pauses to muse on the brave new world ahead, and on the movements that she hopes can go deep into scientific knowledge and still have a broad resonance. She is telegraphing the promises, possibilities and tensions around who we are. Liz Lerman is investigating the nature of the genome, but also of belief and beauty, of science and spirit. It’s enough to make one, as artist or audience, feel uneasy.

“I’m still wondering if I’m frightened or I’m thrilled,” she says. “In the end, I guess I’m both. ✨