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Amy Seiwert, a
Choreographer in the Time |
By Marie Tollon

A recent article featured choreographer William Forsythe calling out to dancers rehearsing one of his pieces: “Don’t be afraid to love ballet.” Bay Area-based choreographer Amy Seiwert has no such fear. An intricate love for the world and vocabulary of ballet unfolds in the choreography she creates both for Imagery, the company she founded in 2004, and for established ballet companies who commission her work. If her dances demonstrate a deep appreciation and knowledge of ballet, they also constantly explore and reinvent the boundaries of the traditional art form.

After dancing for 19 years with the LA Chamber, Sacramento and Smuin Ballets, Seiwert is currently a choreographer-in-residence at Smuin Ballet and an artist in residence at ODC Theater. When asked about what it is about ballet that she is so fond of, Seiwert answers: “As a ballet dancer, I loved to explore technique, I kind of geeked out on it. I do have a love for [its] physicality and efficiency. What was interesting to me was to try to use [it] in different ways, add another dimension, another physicality to the body.” Take for example the partnering work in many of her pieces: it appears as a laboratory where the choreographer exposes, distills and expands the range of motions and textures that the ballet form offers. The female dancer fanning a grand rond-de-jambe over the head of her partner in *Traveling Alone* (2012), *In the Time* (2012) or in *The Devil Ties My Tongue* (2013) exemplifies Seiwert’s playfulness with the ballet syntax. This signature move creates a dazzling setting where both bodies function as one entity whose parts constantly readjust to find a harmonious setting.

Hungry for deepening her understanding of the body’s mechanics, Seiwert studied Joseph Pilates’ work in depth. “Whenever you look at what you are doing from a different viewpoint, you get a glimpse of something you didn’t see from the other side,” Seiwert mentions. With movements that integrate the mobility and expressivity of the head, pelvis and torso, hints of modern dance vocabulary appear in her phrasing, infusing the classical ballet form with edge and depth: lower backs contract, chests cave in in *Mirror* (2013); dancers engage in hinge falls and pleadings in *Home in 7* (2011) or *In the Time*; hands become eloquent in *Mirror* or in *The Devil Ties My Tongue*, providing further insights into the psyche of their owners.

Seiwert’s curiosity for experiencing her craft from different perspectives takes ballet to places it seldom travels. By collaborating with artists from other fields, she brings multiple voices to her work, which thereby resonates with unexpected accents. For *White Noise* (2010), Seiwert collaborated with German software artist Frieder Weiss. In the piece, dancers evolve in front of Weiss’ real-time interactive video projections. “I wanted to explore the conversation between ballet and technology. I feel it’s not done enough with ballet, it’s done more with modern dance,” Seiwert commented. Video and movements enter in a conversation where both mediums affect each other: at times, the movements seem to reflect the fast-pace and sharpness of the video images and become syncopated, while retaining the gracious fullness of the balletic line. Similarly, the digital pictures on the screen suddenly read as the underlining of the dancers’ skin, recalling photos of cells moving under a microscope.

Another testimony of Seiwert's venturesome spirit is the curation of Sketch, an annual summer series that she created in 2011 as a platform to explore 'risk', specifically with ballet. The relationship between music and dance is at the heart of this year's edition, presented this weekend at ODC Theater. Seiwert commissioned composer Kevin Keller to write a score for her and guest choreographer Adam Houglund. As Seiwert explains, "we were trying not to let anyone lead and instead allow the possibility for everyone to have an input. Adam and I chose three images -we don't know each other's images- and we sent them to Kevin, who is writing the music based on the images. He is writing six movements but we don't know what movement matches which image. We are allowed to put these movements in any order we want."

For a choreographer who most often starts the creative process with music, commissioning a score represents an additional risk. "It's a huge unknown variable. I get scared that I won't be in love with the music," Seiwert explains. Yet the two other times she commissioned music, the score created an electric texture that the choreographer seized and transcribed into a punchy and invigorating choreography. In Home in 7, a collaboration with spoken-word poet Marc Bamuthi Joseph and composer Daniel Bernard Roumain, the sound of pointe shoes hitting the floor partners evocatively with Bamuthi Joseph's distinct elocution. In that piece, such as in In the Time, for which Seiwert collaborated with a cappella group Ramon and Jessica, a tinge of street dance warms up the traditionally cool balletic lines: sinuous movements of the torso and skidding jumps add electricity and a contemporary flair to the work.

Seiwert has an eye for the tiny details that sustain an entire piece, and it is both exciting and informative to see her at work. In a workshop she recently taught, she instructed participants to take a few minutes on their own to play with the material they had just practiced, before showing it to the class. With the swiftness and accuracy of an eagle sighting its prey, Seiwert interrupted some: "Can you do this again?" eyeing the place where a transition was missing and suggesting that here a line could be amplified, there a movement repeated. One could witness a mastered sense of composition in her astute observations.

When choreographing for ballet companies who commission her work, Seiwert adapts her process: "How much we go off on a tangent depends on who I am working with. Sometimes, if you ask ballet dancers who have very little experience working with choreographers who ask them for input, they'll freeze because they are very trained to be right or wrong. A lot of dancers are uncomfortable risking. I'm never going to go home and make up something and come in to teach it. I am just watching [the dancers'] body and following their non-verbal communication. It goes from me subtly following their lead to shaping."

Choreographing has allowed Seiwert the possibility to experiment with and refine her voice, an opportunity that she may not have had as a dancer. In the 19 years that she danced, only once did she dance onstage a piece choreographed by a woman. "As a female dancer, you have to subjugate your own voice so much—you have to be exactly like the other girls in the corps and match everyone around you. There's a lack of empowerment that can happen early in developmental years, and it can really hit on your self-esteem," she stated in an interview with Dance Magazine.

Puzzled by the reasons why there are not more female choreographers in ballet, Seiwert is curious to see how the recent years' economic environment might affect the ballet choreographic landscape. "Because of the recession, there were no jobs and a lot of these beautiful dancers graduated from high school and went on to school [which] have gotten a

larger influx of ballet dancers. They will have to choreograph in college, and they will have to stand there and defend their opinion.” This is different from Seiwert’s and other ballet dancers’ experience: in the past, they would “get an apprenticeship right out of high school and not say anything. You get into the chorus, and you don’t say anything. This is your path. It’s not empowering.” If Seiwert is aware of the gender disparities in the ballet world, her work has no obvious feminist agenda, as “in terms of showing relationships onstage, who is strong or weak in one moment doesn’t have anything to do with gender,” she says.

With a passion for her craft, a command of the technique, an inventive and collaborative mind, Seiwert constantly invigorates ballet with new and vital accents. Far from the aerial sylphs, princes and fairies of classical ballet, the protagonists of her dances are contemporary men and women who remind us that ballet stands as a vital form to question and investigate issues of our times.