

**Empowerment in Motion:
Improvisation as a Tool of Feminist Leadership**

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Charles Darwin once said that the ability to improvise is crucial to the success of humankind.¹ Though Darwin was hardly an expert on dance, his statement raises some important questions: what is the function of improvisation in dance, and how does it contribute to a dancer's experience of movement? In dance, improvisation is understood as spontaneous movement of the dancer's choosing, the steps not predetermined or set by a choreographer. However, it happens often throughout the tradition of Western dance performance that the choreographer of a dance piece holds complete control over artistic decision-making. This authority may be self-granted, or it may come from a more tangible source—a contract outlining the choreographer's commitment to paying his or her dancers a salary for their work, for instance. In such an instance, it is the choreographer, the Martha Graham or the George Balanchine, who creates the movement and decides how the steps will be executed and to what music, controlling who each dancer will “be” in the scope of a piece. However, when the dancer is in control of his or her own representation onstage, the audience begins to see the person behind the role and builds an emotional connection or response to the work.

In improvisation, the movement caters significantly less to the viewer, however, and concerns itself instead with the individual and collective empowerment of the dancing bodies onstage. The discovery of new movement may be motivated by task-based directives the choreographer gives or by the impulses of the dancers in the studio or onstage, but it is the dancers themselves who decide when and how to move—and, ultimately, how they will be

¹ Charles Darwin, quoted in Phillip Romero, *The Art Imperative: The Secret Power of Art* (Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2010) 59.

represented. Key to improvisation is an element of humanity: I understand humanity through the choreographers and movement philosophies I am exploring not as a universal truth but rather as the ability to be a human while dancing, responding to human emotions, perceptions, and connections to which the spectator can relate.

Through the lens of feminist leadership—a term which I will describe in further detail later—as a constant process within the structure of a dance company, I will examine improvisation as a means of acknowledging dancers’ individual identities and responding to the inherent politicization of moving bodies in a prescribed space. I will focus specifically on the formalized, contemporary improvisatory languages of William Forsythe’s *Improvisation Technologies* and Ohad Naharin’s *Gaga*. The goals of this project are twofold: first, it will explore feminist leadership inherent in the pedagogies of *Improvisation Technologies* and *Gaga*, developed by Forsythe and Naharin respectively, both of whom are still living and working today. Second, this project will recognize the impact of various choreographers’ improvisational pedagogies and the ways in which different choreographic processes and specific dance pieces serve to empower the dancers. Because of their use of improvisation—which, one can conclude, inherently shares the tenets and objectives of some forms of feminist leadership—these choreographers create environments, both in rehearsal and onstage, that are consciously concerned with the identity, agency, and empowerment of their dancers.

In *Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud*, Indian women’s rights activist Srilatha Batliwala defines the concept of feminist leadership by breaking it down into its core components: feminism and leadership. Batliwala analyzes the terms as individual entities before describing the concept of feminist leadership itself, an idea she interprets in much the same way as Danielle Goldman interprets dance improvisation in her

book, *I Wanna Be Ready: Improvisation as a Practice of Freedom*. In doing so, Batliwala lays the groundwork for feminist leadership as a transformational practice that strives for equality through constant change, a process of organizational movement—and an improvised dance in and of itself.

The first key component of feminist leadership is, as explicitly stated, feminism. Batliwala comprehensively defines feminists as those who “individually and collectively [transform] themselves to use their power, resources, and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes to mobilize others around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic, and political transformation for equality.”² The keyword in Batliwala’s own definition is “transforming”: feminism—as leadership, as Batliwala goes on to explain—is dynamic and non-complacent, striving constantly to challenge existing power structures and to recognize the identities and experiences in the room. My own understanding of feminism defines the term as the inherent political and social equality between men and women. However, I am choosing to omit gender alone as the central point of my argument because, as Judith Butler writes, “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.”³ I want instead to focus on feminist *leadership* as it pertains to equality across all identities including body type, gender, sexuality, and a diversity of life experiences, all of which are important in and relevant to the creative processes and works of the choreographers I will analyze later. The choreographers of these improvisation-based works are able to acknowledge these identities of their dancers—a feminist act—both in rehearsal and onstage.

² Srilatha Batliwala, *Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud* (New Delhi: CREA, 2011), 29.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 3.

Leadership, Batliwala argues, is a universal quality innate, though not always harnessed, in human nature. Even those who are “followers” should be made aware that they have power, agency, and leadership capacity, should they choose to act on them. This is equally true of improvisation, in which the choreographer—the named leader—gives tasks to the dancers who then perform them with intelligence and bodily agency, exerting control over when and how they choose to act, if at all. Just as leadership capacity is dormant until provoked, educated, awakened, or inspired, improvisation thrives on the potential energy of the still yet alert body. Goldman refers to these moments of quiet contemplation as small dances,⁴ the seconds of stillness in which an individual waits before inserting him or herself into an improvisation. Leadership potential and the practice of leadership itself occur within an organization, “a social arrangement which pursues collective goals, controls its own performance, and has a boundary separating it from its environment.”⁵ This definition accommodates the structure of a dance company in a rather literal sense: first, with the dancers and choreographer striving to create a dance piece that appeals to the viewer in some way or evokes some sort of emotional or visceral reaction; second, by controlling its theatrical performance through the rehearsal process; and third, with the studio or the stage serving as the boundary between the company’s artistic process and the public eye. These elements, in alignment with Batliwala’s definition, ensure that a dance company is a space in which leadership can and does occur.

Implied in the idea of transformational leadership is movement: the act of transformation is the movement of one entity as it morphs into the next. In essence, therefore, the transformational process of feminist leadership itself is a sort of improvised dance. The leader

⁴ Danielle Goldman, *I Wanna Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) 106.

⁵ Batliwala, *Feminist Leadership*, 37.

serves as the choreographer of the situation, directing, advising, and providing suggestions while remaining open to hearing ideas from the group, and trusting in the momentum built collectively by that group toward achieving a goal. At the same time, the “followers” are given the opportunity and responsibility to listen to and empower each other through dialogue.

Both leaders and followers under the structure of feminist leadership must dedicate themselves to transparency. The purpose of this is “to make the practice of power visible, democratic, legitimate, and accountable”⁶ in order to ensure that everyone can engage in open and honest dialogue and “challenge power wherever it operates.”⁷ In a dance company, this is particularly important when that power dynamic results in tension in the studio between the dancer and choreographer. Goldman, too, argues that transparency is necessary in improvisation, stating, “These breaks in flow constitute the often ignored, but crucial, grit of... improvisation. They serve as visible reminders, for those not actually dancing, that negotiations are taking place, even when the fall appears smooth and full of grace or when the bodies seem dangerously passive.”⁸ Transparency exposes the dancers’ thought processes and effort, making visible the problem that the dancers must solve. This problem-solving element segues into one of the central tenets of improvisation: the process of discovering movement takes precedence over the finished product. Similarly, leadership skills serve as tools necessary for creating change. Feminist leadership as an active process is more important than the public display of that process or the finished product.

For Batliwala, feminist leadership is an unending process of responding to change and injustice. Equality is her ultimate goal: every individual is equally important in determining the

⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Goldman, *I Wanna Be Ready*, 107.

organization's trajectory and next steps. The outcomes of this element of feminist leadership, the pushback against inequality—or rather, the final result—can be uncertain. Thus is the nature of improvised dance, which “involves literally giving shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape.”⁹ Within this unstable, ever-changing environment, the processes of both feminist leadership and improvised dance can operate when all individuals involved are empowered to contribute ideas, whether through verbal dialogue while solving a problem or through physical dialogue in rehearsal and performance.

Ultimately, Batliwala argues, feminist leadership is a transformational practice, a kind of improvised dance promoting the agency of the people within the organization and attuned and responsive to inequality. Is it possible, then, that dance improvisation, a form of feminist leadership in action, inherently responds to these factors? At what point does the dancers' empowerment through improvisation register on choreographers' conscious agendas, and what is gained from this conscious objective? I aim to answer these questions by studying Forsythe and Naharin's respective movement philosophies to provide a foundational understanding of the elements of feminist leadership inherent in improvisation, as well as other contemporary choreographers who approach feminist leadership in the studio and onstage from different angles: first, Sidra Bell and her stream of consciousness-inspired process of facilitating improvisation through dialogue; second, Bell's dancers Jonathan Campbell and Austin Diaz who focus less on improvisation and more on a common understanding of feminism through the male lens around which they focus their work; and third, Andrea Miller, choreographer of Gallim Dance, and the conscious goal of empowerment evident in her newest installation piece.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

William Forsythe's Improvisation Technologies and Gaga, the movement language developed by Ohad Naharin and Batsheva Dance Company, are two formalized, codified, and very contemporary forms of improvisation rooted simultaneously in virtuosity—that is, the technical skill of the body to move beyond the physical limits of what the average human body can do—and experimentation. While they differ in approach—one highly structural and geometric, the other deeply sensory—their ultimate goals are similar: to give the dancer a framework in which to approach movement, allowing a safe space for experimentation and heightened exploration within the given parameters of the movement language. The San Francisco Conservatory of Dance (SFCD) is an institution that offers two pre-professional summer intensive tracks in both Forsythe's Technologies and in Gaga, understanding the two forms as “proprietary systems to help dancers expound upon and refine their choices as movers and thinkers.”¹⁰ As SFCD emphasizes, the two improvisatory pedagogies are important in the training and development of pre-professional dancers, offering them approaches to taking ownership of their movement choices.

Improvisation Technologies, made for CD-ROM in 1994, were created through various collaborations between William Forsythe, the former artistic director of Ballet Frankfurt and the current artistic director of his own Forsythe Company, as well as dance educators and media specialists.¹¹ Forsythe recognizes his codified approaches to movement as his major contribution to dance, not his specific choreography. His will stipulates that after his death, his work will no longer be performed.¹² In doing so, he acknowledges the importance of improvisation and its power to keep a dancer focused on the present moment. This move also displays a concern for

¹⁰ “Summer Intensives,” *San Francisco Conservatory of Dance*, <<http://www.sfconservatoryofdance.org/summer-intensives>> (accessed 4 November 2014).

¹¹ “Biography,” *The Forsythe Company*, <<http://www.theforsythecompany.com/details.html?L=1>> (accessed 10 November 2014).

¹² Ismene Brown, “The Body Artist,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 October 2001.

the future of dance itself: without Forsythe's choreography in the repertoires of innumerable international companies, space will be made for new, young choreographic minds to fill in the gaps and advance the art form in new directions.

The Technologies provide a comprehensive explanation and analysis of Forsythe's methods for improvisation broken into over one hundred short videos. In each video, Forsythe, who lectures frequently at universities and global cultural institutions on his Technologies, talks the viewer through each task, sometimes accompanied by a simple animation to illustrate the idea being taught. Much of the work has a geometric or directional focus. For example, in one of the first tasks, Forsythe explains that a line can be drawn between two points in space.¹³ This is a line that one can emulate with a body part—a forearm, perhaps. One can approach the line from any direction, rotate it in space, or introduce a different body part to form it. In this instance, the parameter introduced is the line. The dancer, in the role of improviser, has free reign over how to manipulate the line; he or she is required to maintain the integrity of the shape while also free to exercise creative choice-making. Another Technology that Forsythe describes is torsion, particularly with regard to internal and external rotation of the shoulders.¹⁴ He explains torsion as a derivation of port de bras in classical ballet, giving the dancer a multitude of options for arm positions and allowing him or her to explore parts of the kinesphere untouched in ballet. “That’s why it’s called technologies, not technique,” former Ballet Frankfurt dancer Natalie Thomas explains. “It uses geometry, spatial orientation—concepts in which, when you dance, you live through them and invent them in real time.”¹⁵ Forsythian improvisation becomes

¹³ William Forsythe, *William Forsythe: Improvisation Technologies*, CD-ROM, Karlsruhe: ZKM/Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, 2003.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Carrie Stern, “Bringing William Forsythe’s ‘Improvisation Technologies’ to a New Generation, *Dancewave*, <<http://www.dancewave.org/uploads/Press%20Articles/Dancer%20Magazine%20Forsythe%20Dec%2009.pdf>> (accessed 4 November 2014).

highly focused on the here and now, abstract concepts that a dancer can explore through movement.

Steptext (1985), created originally for Ballet Frankfurt, reimagines the classical pas de deux with three men and a ballerina and allows the dancers to improvise,¹⁶ defying conventions of classical ballet while using the ballet vocabulary as a point of reference for their self-generated movement. Though the piece was created before Forsythe's Technologies were formally produced, the philosophy of the Technologies—that is, a calculated, geometric approach to generating movement in the moment—is present. The piece begins, house lights still up, with one dancer improvising onstage.¹⁷ The ballerina in the work “becomes a powerful rather than passive figure. She decides with whom she will dance and how, even as Mr. Forsythe makes it clear through complex, sweepingly beautiful sequences that partnership is exactly what is required.”¹⁸ The empowerment that results in Forsythe's work is twofold: first, the dancer's agency is recognized, and she is given the creative freedom to improvise and to include the other dancers in her improvisation. Second, Forsythe himself offers structural guidelines through his choreography, taking ownership of his work while still allowing his dancers to exist freely within it, thus exerting agency.

Like Forsythe's Technologies, *Gaga*, developed by Ohad Naharin and the Tel Aviv-based Batsheva Dance Company, is an improvisation philosophy that gives agency and choice-making ability to its dancers. This movement language allows dancers to hone their dynamism, widen

¹⁶ Kevin Ng, “Kirov Ballet Forsythe Masterworks: ‘Steptext,’ ‘Approximate Sonata,’ ‘In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated,’ ‘The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude,’” *Ballet Magazine*, 25 March 2006.

¹⁷ The image of a soloist improvising with the house lights still on also appears in Ohad Naharin's *Minus Sixteen* (1999), which I will discuss later.

¹⁸ Roslyn Sulcas, “At Autumn Festival in Paris, William Forsythe Is Everywhere,” *The New York Times*, 3 November 2014, C3.

their kinesphere, and tap into their maximum movement potential. An instruction sheet on the practice of Gaga provides the following information on its purpose and philosophy:

Gaga is a new way of gaining knowledge and self-awareness through your body. Gaga provides a framework for discovering and strengthening your body and adding flexibility, stamina, and agility while lightening the senses and imagination. Gaga raises awareness of physical weaknesses, awakens numb areas, exposes physical fixations, and offers ways for their elimination. The work improves instinctive movement and connects conscious and unconscious movement, and it allows for an experience of freedom and pleasure in a simple way, in a pleasant space, in comfortable clothes, accompanied by music, each person with himself and others.¹⁹

Unlike Forsythe's modalities, Gaga is taught through a series of prompts or tasks invoking sensation, imagery, and general movement ideas like shaking or floating. By connecting to these concepts, the dancer draws upon personal experience as well as his or her physical and mental state of the moment to generate movement. Unique to the practice of Gaga is the absence of a mirror in the studio,²⁰ forcing the dancer to move based on sensation rather than working toward a specific aesthetic goal or shape. This is one area where Gaga and Forsythe's Technologies diverge: Gaga focuses less on the integrity of shape and spatial accuracy and more on the integrity of sensory knowledge. Without a visual point of reference that a mirror would provide, the Gaga practitioner must refer inward, connecting the mind and body to sensation to solve movement problems.

Sadeh21, a work created by Naharin in 2011, marked a historical moment for the company because, for the first time in Batsheva's history, the dancers were credited as collaborators in the choreographic process.²¹ On the subject of the dancers' creative

¹⁹ "Home," *Gaga / People. Dancers*. <<http://gagapeople.com/english/>> (accessed 2 November 2014).

²⁰ Deborah Friedes Galili, "Going Gaga: My Intro to Gaga Dance Classes," *Dance in Israel*, 25 November 2008.

²¹ Michael Crabb, "Israeli Troupe Goes Gaga: Batsheva Back in Town after 17 Years with the Enigmatic *Sadeh21*," *Toronto Star*, 14 June 2014, E3.

contribution, Naharin stated, “The dancers have always been an important part of the creative process. In this piece, even more so. A large part of the things that happen in this piece are products of their choices and decisions.”²² The choreographer, acknowledging the dancers’ agency, extends this knowledge to whoever might see the piece or happen upon a program from a performance. “Batsheva choreography,” one Gaga practitioner notes, “[has] a way of projecting vibrant individuality.”²³ Thus the dancers are given the opportunity to take ownership of their unique movement and decisions, this time in quite a literal sense, as the audience, too, becomes aware of the dancers’ complicity in creation.

Minus 16 (1995), a compilation of excerpts from some of Naharin’s pieces premiered by Nederlands Dans Theater 2, begins with a solo dancer improvising onstage in front of the curtain. Coincidentally, this image invokes that of the opening soloist in William Forsythe’s *Steptext*. Both dancers improvise within the vocabulary of their respective pieces, the illuminated house lights and continued chatter of the audience adding a casual element to the experience of the work and challenging the traditional relationship between spectator and performer. The dancers in *Minus 16* even exit the stage and come into the house, choosing audience members to join them onstage. This kind of active engagement with the spectator, a relationship which I will examine later in the work of Andrea Miller, can be empowering and allow for audience choice-making: the choice to remain seated, for example, or to follow the dancer onstage and enjoy a moment in the spotlight.

The human relationships that both Forsythe and Naharin allow to develop in the course of their respective works support the idea that at the forefront of their oeuvre is humanity: the

²² Ibid.

²³ Ashley Mathus, “Going Gaga for Gaga (Dance),” *Bushwick Daily*, 17 April 2013.

dancers, while moving their bodies in ways that most people cannot or do not, approach the movement as people. In Gaga, the dancers tune into sensations, allowing both emotional and physical feeling to initiate and guide their movement. In Improvisation Technologies, the dancer's mind works mathematically, focused on the geometry of a shape and figuring out how to manipulate it while maintaining the shape's integrity. Both processes allow for human exploration of movement within the guidelines set forth in the movement language.

Sidra Bell, a New York-based dance maker and artistic director of Sidra Bell Dance New York (SBDNY), maintains an element of exploration in her work while facilitating improvisations with a much less formalized approach than Gaga or Improvisation Technologies. She does, however, acknowledge the Technologies as a “beat” in her dance education, having studied with former Ballet Frankfurt dancer Helen Pickett after college and drawing upon them for inspiration in the early development of her choreographic process. She refrains, however, from a heavy emphasis on the term “improvisation” in reference to her own work. “I still don’t really know what it is,” she says openly. “It’s an evolving medium. We all work with improv[isation] in life. We’re all working with how to assume and perceive; we just don’t know it.”²⁴ This reflects an attention to humanity that Bell also emphasizes throughout her process: an acknowledgement that dancers are people who bring their lived experiences with them wherever they go; the studio and the stage are no exception. “The movement of your life is the movement that you bring with you into the studio. The thoughts of your life are what you bring with you. There is not a separation.”²⁵ The continuity of life as it bleeds into dance (a point which Andrea Miller will echo later) is crucial, Bell stresses, in acknowledging the identities of her dancers in rehearsal.

²⁴ Sidra Bell, interview by Sarah Esser, New York, 17 October 2014.

²⁵ Ibid.

Bell embodies this continuity in the studio by opting to talk through an entire improvisation, using words to spark inspiration and movement invention in her dancers. Bell feels that her leadership role in a rehearsal is that of facilitator. Rather than dictating or directing movement, she facilitates improvisations simply by talking, sharing her thoughts and feelings of the day with the dancers in the room. For the purpose of “engaging and cultivating the next generation of artists,”²⁶ teaching is a major part of Bell’s work both within the context of her company and in the dance community at large. She views teaching as an opportunity to triumph or to fail, providing a space in which either can happen safely, and in leading by example, she allows her dancers to experiment with trial and error as well.

Jonathan Campbell and Austin Diaz, two of Bell’s dancers who have been working with SBDNY for five and four years respectively, speak of her uncanny ability to provoke her dancers with thoughts and ideas that they themselves then translate into movement. Campbell reflects, “It always amazes me because she’s not telling us what to do. She’s not saying ‘I need you to do this.’ She just starts bringing up words and images... and somehow it ignites one little move or one action.”²⁷ In doing so, Bell leaves the ultimate decision of *how* to move up to her dancers and includes them in the dialogue, a method that Campbell and Diaz find empowering because they are asked to take ownership of their movement choices. Bell, Campbell, and Diaz all agree that the current company works extremely closely and is very vocal and honest throughout each creative process. The dialogue that Bell begins in any improvisation becomes more involved as it includes the opinions and ideas of her dancers as well. Through this constant dialogue, she and

²⁶ “SBDNY: Company,” *Sidra Bell Dance New York: The Official Website*, <<http://www.sidrabelldance.org/Company.html>> (accessed 2 November 2014).

²⁷ Jonathan Campbell and Austin Diaz, interview by Sarah Esser, New York, 11 October 2014.

her small core group of dancers develop and maintain mutual trust, which has been particularly important in the creation of their works.

Onstage, the lack of separation between life and dance continues to ring true. Bell strives for her works to “ignite the imagination and explore the complexities of the human condition,”²⁸ a nod to humanity and the experiences her dancers carry with them. Each evening-length work she creates presents a different world that the dancers inhabit and explore fully throughout the duration of a performance. *ReVUE* (2010) expertly demonstrates Bell’s ability to create a highly theatrical world in which her dancers submerge themselves.²⁹ The piece revisits ideas that emerged in a previous work, entitled *Beautiful Beast* (2010), inspired by messages about the representation of women in media.³⁰ The central character in *ReVUE*, one of Bell’s signature “larger than life characters,”³¹ is a sad clown serving as the master of ceremonies, a role premiered by Campbell. This same clown idea appeared initially in *Beautiful Beast*, played then by a woman. In *ReVUE*, donning white face paint, red lipstick, stiletto heels, and a variety of sheer leotards, Campbell is costumed and made up in the same way as the original female interpreter of the role. Bell makes clear in our interview, however, that Campbell’s version is not a drag role; he is not emulating or performing a caricature of a woman. Bell finds that imitation and inauthenticity result in a work appearing cartoonish, which presents a particular challenge for the company in resetting old pieces. Thus Campbell is asked to perform and inhabit a world reconstructed for him in the moment, focusing not on achieving certain aesthetic goals but on representing himself within that world.

²⁸ “SBDNY: Company,” *Sidra Bell Dance New York: The Official Website*, <<http://www.sidrabelldance.org/Company.html>> (accessed 23 November 2014).

²⁹ “ReVUE (A Dance Work by Sidra Bell), YouTube video, 16:50, posted by “Sidra Bell,” November 2011 (accessed 20 October 2014).

³⁰ Bell, interview by Esser.

³¹ “SBDNY: Company,” *Sidra Bell Dance New York: The Official Website*, <<http://www.sidrabelldance.org/Company.html>> (accessed 23 November 2014).

While Campbell's full-body movements in *ReVUE* are extreme and theatrical, facial expression plays a particularly crucial role in the overall impact of the choreography and its provocative nature vis-à-vis the spectator. He smiles, winks, and bats his eyelashes, playfully flirting with the audience. Many of his physical movements take the form of gestures that a spectator can understand, though the function of the movements might not be clear: he points, fixes his hat, and hits himself in the face until he falls to the floor. The facial choreography is also highly theatrical: Campbell sticks out his tongue, pulls the tip of his nose upward with his thumb, and squishes his entire face. Perhaps through this facial movement Bell is commenting on the artifice present in choreography, forcing a dancer to inhabit a character with whom he or she feels no personal or emotional connection. At the end of the piece, Campbell puts on extra-long red false eyelashes with black tips, which produce an effect of sadness even as he smiles. Smearing lipstick across his face with an index finger, he convulses while flexing his muscles, the juxtaposition between his smiling face and writhing body creating a sense of desperation as if he were trapped behind the false display of facial emotion. He manipulates his face with his hands in space as if parts of his skin were attached to strings, as if to suggest that his facial expressions, too, are manipulated and are a false representation of his actual emotion.

In *ReVUE*, as is the case throughout her oeuvre, Bell creates a highly stylized, hyper-real world for the stage and asks her dancers to push the boundaries of their movement and to be physically and emotionally present. Feeling empowered within Bell's work to bring their own lived experiences to the stage, Campbell and Diaz now seek to bring empowerment to the dancers in their own work. Shortly after meeting each other through Bell, Campbell and Diaz discovered they worked well together and decided to create their own choreography. The initial impetus for the founding of MADboots dance co.—of which the two are artistic directors and

dancers—and the creation of their own work stemmed from various dissatisfactions with the New York dance scene as they had experienced it, particularly a lack of physicality, an emphasis on talkbacks and post-show discussions (which, they find, prevent the audience from experiencing a work for themselves), and their personal inability to engage emotionally with the work they were seeing. Thus MADboots was formed, a two-man company founded in 2011 that has since expanded to incorporate new dancers for different projects.

As the directors of a three-year-old company beginning to build momentum, visibility, and success, Campbell and Diaz strive to create work over which they have ownership. Constantly working with different people, they have yet to develop a core group of dancers with whom to create and grow. For this reason, improvisation is not a focus of their ensemble work as it is of Bell's process. Self-described "control freaks" in the studio, Campbell and Diaz find it difficult to relinquish control to their other dancers, thus hindering the development of complete trust. The two feel comfortable improvising with each other, however, having developed trust and understanding of each other's movement in the four years they have worked together as well as with Bell. They do see improvisation in their future creative process, once they can reach the level of trust that Bell and her dancers enjoy. At the same time, they find themselves constantly challenged by the experiences and capabilities of the other dancers, who bring their own physical bodies and lived experiences to the work.

The acknowledgment of identity is built into the philosophy of MADboots. While at first an aesthetic choice and a response to the general lack of men-only dance companies today, the all-male element is now embedded into the philosophy of the company, which reads as follows:

It is our mission to question the physicality of artistic expression and push the envelope of movement invention. By creating complex and theatrical

environments steeped in humor, athleticism, and subtly [sic], the work revels in antithetical aesthetics and uncomfortable realities, often exploring the many facets of masculine identity. As queer artists, we feel the topic is ever-present in our work, but it is not the sole agenda. Regardless of gender and sexuality, a through line of humanity is integral to the work.³²

Campbell and Diaz dedicate themselves and their work to a thorough exploration of masculine identity. They are conscious of a stereotypical or kitschy bent in the representation of men found in many male ensembles today: they mention Les Ballets Trocadero, an all-male company that performs parodies of classical ballet in drag, as an example of a representation they want to avoid. The Bad Boys of Dance, flaunting their quintessential fusion of macho masculinity and virtuoso classical technique complete with high jumps and multiple turns, provide another example of a limited, normative representation of the male dancer.³³ The two understand that the men-only structure of the company excludes women from their process, and they have been approached by women who would like to perform their work and feel fully capable of executing the physicality present in MADboots choreography. However, the all-male format is not meant to be exclusionary or to doubt the physical capabilities of female dancers; it is instead a means of providing a safe space for the exploration of male identity in all of its incarnations and for sparking conversations in the studio and onstage about queer male experiences.

With a conscious understanding of gender and the importance of feminism to men who might not comply with norms of gender presentation, both Diaz and Campbell are conscious of acknowledging the identities of their dancers in each creative process—in other words, they run their rehearsals in the style of feminist leadership. They are aware of how their dancers view them as leaders and, as such, make a conscious effort to establish a balance of respect and

³² “About,” *MADboots dance co*, <<http://www.madbootsdance.com/about.html>> (accessed 2 November 2014).

³³ Lisa Traiger, “Ballet Takes a Leap,” *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2009.

equality between themselves and their dancers in the studio. Diaz expresses the desire to create “an egoless room... without a power hierarchy,”³⁴ which they attempt to achieve by adopting a casual tone during the rehearsal process, rather than acting as authoritarians. Advocates of leading by example, the two make sure to put themselves in the same uncomfortable situations they might ask their dancers to try, risking failure and embarrassment when showing a difficult combination, for example. The dancers, too, are asked to teach phrases to each other. Campbell and Diaz ask with the hope that the dancers will step out of their comfort zones, gain confidence, and feel empowered in the creative process. The risk, though, is necessary for maintaining transparency, the leader asking others to perform only tasks that he would do himself. Another instance of in-studio transparency occurs when the pair creates choreography with the other dancers in the room, which “helps them understand what we’re doing a bit more, so it doesn’t seem so private.”³⁵ They seek various ways to involve their dancers in the creative process, even when the actual development of choreography belongs to the two of them uniquely.

Campbell and Diaz are invested in the growth of their dancers, both as artists and as people, and empowerment becomes a goal in their process as well. “Empowerment creates individual evolutions,” Campbell explains, using his own artistic trajectory as an example.³⁶ In working with Bell and numerous choreographers before her, he and Diaz both found empowerment as dancers, and, as a result, discovered aspects of their dancing that they could not have otherwise imagined. Affected by and incorporated into Bell’s improvisatory process of feminist leadership, Campbell and Diaz, too, dedicate themselves to the empowerment of their dancers.

³⁴ Campbell and Diaz, interview by Esser.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Among the lived experiences that concern Campbell and Diaz in their work is the desensitization of male youth. Men are told from a young age that in order to be a man in society, one must meet certain criteria. Men do not cry, for example, nor do they publically display their feelings, and they must always act tough. To the piece *ACADEMY* (2013), the dancers bring their experiences with masculinity to the forefront in a work that explores the emphasis on normative “masculine” presentation in sports culture today. Crucial to the understanding of *ACADEMY*, one must recognize the importance of feminism to men and male bodies. While historically one might understand feminism as applicable only to women, Campbell and Diaz do not shy away from self-identifying as feminists as men; in fact, they intend to share this with their audiences following the December 2014 reprise performance of *ACADEMY* at Brooklyn Academy of Music. They plan to promote the HeforShe campaign, an initiative of United Nations Women to include men in the discussion of feminism, at the end of their show. “Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong... It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, not as two opposing sets of ideals,” says Emma Watson, actress and HeforShe spokesperson.³⁷ This spectrum of which Watson speaks, the vast array of gender presentations that exist, is what Campbell and Diaz portray and challenge in their work, and, as vocal feminists, they hope to draw their audience into the discussion.

While Campbell and Diaz are eager to claim feminism as central to their work as well as to their individual expressions of identity, Andrea Miller, artistic director of Gallim Dance, expresses discomfort with the qualification of her process as one of “feminist leadership.”³⁸ This is largely due to the historical connotations of feminism as working for the advancement of

³⁷ “Home,” *HeforShe*, <<http://www.heforshe.org/#take-action>> (accessed 9 November 2014).

³⁸ Andrea Miller, interview by Sarah Esser, New York, 23 October 2014.

women only, rather than empowering people of all genders. I argue, however, that precisely because she treats her dancers as equals and concerns herself with recognizing and empowering each of them individually, regardless of gender, Miller's process is indeed one of feminist leadership, to which her philosophy in the studio and her new work, *eight by eight* (2014), can attest.

Miller founded Gallim Dance in 2007 after a two-year tenure with the Batsheva Ensemble, Batsheva's junior company. Miller views the company's ebbs and flows over its seven-year history as a challenge but, more importantly, as an "opportunity to update myself as a leader."³⁹ Guided by this developing self-knowledge, she made the conscious decision to provide structure and stability for her dancers. While she speaks fondly of her dancers as friends, Miller acknowledges that a large part of the stability she creates for them stems from maintaining a professional relationship, which includes contractual agreements and a salary. She also mentions that she and her dancers "get a lot of pleasure from being on the same page,"⁴⁰ acknowledging the importance of the ensemble as a cohesive unit in her work with Gallim; but while there is an emphasis on the group dynamic, empowerment of the individual within the group is a conscious and constant objective in Miller's work as well.

Gallim's newest work, an installation in the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center entitled *eight by eight*, provides a useful lens through which to understand Miller's process and its emphases on empowerment and individual identity.⁴¹ The physical closeness between the dancers and the audience presents a new and more intimate way of experiencing dance from both their points of view. The use of various mediums—dance, film, and set design—adds dimension

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The description and analysis that follow are based on Gallim Dance's performance of *eight by eight* at the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center on 10 October 2014.

to the piece, presenting the audience with the opportunity to overload themselves with sensory information or to disengage, either partially or completely. The piece asks performers and spectators alike to be themselves and allows them to use their emotions to guide their actions within the installation, similarly to the way in which Gaga improvisers are motivated by feeling. Through the display of various mediums, the influence of geometry and structure, and the audience's close physical proximity to the dancers, *eight by eight* makes a point of empowering both the dancers and the spectators by offering them opportunities for improvisational choice-making and for defining their own experience within the work; so, too, does it speak to Miller's own effective leadership style through the facilitation of empowerment.

Contradicting the bodies in rigorous physical action, a film projected on two walls of the Atrium represents disembodiment, zooming in on body parts, furniture, and the architecture of what appears to be the inside of a home. One sees a brief clip of a hand and forearm resting on a table, an upper thigh and left buttock in a sink, and legs and feet perched against a wall, to name just a few of the images. The projected picture of the person as a whole is incomplete, rendering all the more striking the contrast between the fragmented body on screen and the full, active bodies thrashing and falling within the space. A similar effect occurs through the live footage projected on one of the walls. As the piece begins, one can only see the dancers' jumping feet; though the feet do not have a relationship to a whole body in the projection, the audience can see how the feet relate to the music and the musicality of the live dancers. When the piece is viewed as a whole, the detached body parts are given context and render the full picture of the active dancer even more striking and powerful, speaking for itself in three-dimensional real time. The spectator, too, is given the choice of where to look: at the dancers themselves, at either of the two projections of the film, or at the live close-up footage of the dancers.

In the film, the geometry of the still body parts and their surroundings as well as the line drawings that comprise the second half of the film is prevalent, and this concern for geometric design recurs in the layout of the Atrium. The dancers, organized into three trios, dance on eight-by-eight foot squares of AstroTurf with two papered walls forming a corner in the space. These physical barriers frame and define the space, prescribing an area in which the dancers can exist. The static geometry of the space and the components within it provides a contrast with the anti-geometry of the bodies in motion. The geometry present in the construction of the space mirrors the choreographic construction of the dance itself: while the set pieces provide structure and an empty space that can be filled, the “choreography,” guided by musical cues, provides just enough information for the dancers to come up with their own movement ideas to fill in the gaps. This works in the same way as the improvisation languages of Gaga and Forsythe’s Technologies, providing structure while leaving room for artistic choice-making.

As the dance loops three times, the dancers have the opportunity to embody each of the three roles throughout the work. Miller, in constructing the piece as such, acknowledges the identities of her dancers in a nonrestrictive manner; that is, a dancer’s movement potential is not limited by his or her gender, height, or body type. For example, if you are a short woman, you still have the capacity and strength to lift another person. Likewise, if you are a man who towers over every one of your fellow dancers, you can still be lifted. Though the women wear dresses while the men are clothed in shirts and pants, the movement itself is not gender-specific. Instead, it demands trust and extreme physicality from each dancer, evident in the moments of tension built through counterbalance and an extended series of improvised lifts.

The audience is close enough to the dancers to observe the real, undisguisable effort they exert; one can see the individual muscles in a dancer’s foot trembling as he takes slow steps

along the walled border, the stumbles of another as she struggles to keep a six-foot-tall body off the ground. The sweat and heavy breathing become visible; the gasps for air and feet against the turf become audible. By exposing the dancers' struggle, the piece emphasizes transparency, rendering the active processes of dance and of improvisation more important than the finished aesthetic product. This in and of itself appears to be a source of empowerment for the dancers: they are allowed to access their physical and emotional feelings and experience their struggle to its fullest extent. This transparency reflects the idea transparency as a tool of feminist leadership, exposing the leader's actions and serving to equalize the power of leader and follower alike, a tool that Miller uses in her own process.

In the particular layout of the space, the agency of the spectator becomes as relevant as that of the dancer. Constantly making choices, the audience becomes an improviser as well. Some of its decisions are basic: when to enter or exit the building; where to look, whether to watch the live dancing, the live video footage, or the prerecorded film; whether to sit or stand and risk blocking the view of the other audience members, among others. Some people from the audience are selected to join the dancers on the turf and, standing and watching in the space, become performers themselves; but they also have the choice to decline the invitation and remain sitting or standing where they are. Those who agree to stand in the dancers' space have the freedom to move when they want. The dancers extend a hand to the audience members whom they wish to join them—sometimes accompanied by a verbal request. A smile or nod from a dancer cues the spectator-turned-performer to return to his or her place in the audience. Trust of human intuition and body language cues becomes central to the presentation and experience of the work. One man chosen during the beginning of the second loop stays standing on the turf for an extended period of time, taking his cue to leave from the two dancers engaged in a violent

wrestling match treacherously close to him. Perhaps sensing danger, he exits and returns to where he had been standing. His choice to act when he does suggests that he is aware of his role as an agent in the work. Though traditionally a spectator behaves simply as an observer, here he or she has the agency to respond to situations that the dance creates and to take action.

Miller's work beautifully exemplifies the layers of empowerment that can happen within an improvisatory work. First, the choreographer herself is empowered, taking ownership of the formal aspects of the work: the choreography, the music choice, the layout of the space. Second, the dancers exist within the guidelines the choreography provides, but they improvise their own movement and timing. Third, the audience becomes agentic and is asked throughout the work to make choices. Such is the power of improvisation when the bodies involved can look to each other for cues and inspiration and find empowerment individually and collectively to achieve goals as the dance develops. The processes of Miller, Bell, and Campbell and Diaz all reveal an emphasis on trust, which can be attained once a level of understanding is established between the choreographer and the bodies asked to improvise. This reflects Batliwala's view of feminist leadership: when a leader and his or her followers listen to and respect each other's choices and ideas, the organization as a whole becomes empowered, and the individuals within it can work together to achieve goals.

It is relevant to note that all of the choreographers mentioned also commit themselves to teaching. Not only do they teach their own companies, but they are also dedicated to imparting their knowledge to a new generation of dancers, largely through an improvisation-based curriculum. If dancers learn to seek empowerment in the work they do, they will seek to empower their own dancers if and when they begin to make their own work. Campbell and Diaz exemplify this idea most directly, having been given a voice through Bell's creative process and

using their experiences with her to inform their own leadership styles and to set a precedent for trust and communication within their own company. As these choreographers illustrate in their commitment to education, empowerment can be taught to a young dancer, particularly when improvisation is embedded into the pedagogy.

Feminist leadership is important in dance because it places a strong emphasis, inevitably, on humanity—that is, it concerns itself with the dancers as people whose lives in and out of the studio are indistinguishable. Improvisatory work in particular, created through a process of feminist leadership, allows the dancer to take part in a situation of empowerment, facilitated consciously by the choreographer. It grants agency to dancers, trusting the stores of information that individual bodies possess. Within each company and philosophy is a dedication to this humanity; in fact, the words “human” or “humanity” are found in the mission statements of SBDNY, MADboots, and Gallim alike. This commitment traces back to Improvisation Technologies and Gaga, who place trust in the human mind’s ability to reason and the human body’s ability to feel, harnessing both to create innovative movement experiments in the studio and onstage.

Each of the choreographers I interviewed describes a self-perceived change in leadership style as they hone their respective creative processes. Working with the medium of improvisation gives choreographers the space in which to hone their leadership skills in addition to their choreographic style, and the conscious transformations in their creative process and in the relationships they build with their dancers reveal that their leadership styles are decidedly feminist. In this sense, feminist leadership operates *as* an improvisation, aspiring to achieve equality between leader and follower by constantly responding to changes in the environment and listening to the feedback given. These choreographers also illustrate the ways in which

feminist leadership can exist *in* improvisation, moving a choreographer to commit him or herself to giving dancers equal voice both physically and verbally in a process and to emphasize transparency, equality, and human progress both in the studio and onstage. Progress is the goal that both improvisation and feminist leadership seek to attain, consciously and constantly changing and responding to the people involved, and empowering all bodies to move as they please.

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