

## **The Black Dancing Body: An Interview with Seán Curran**

Brenda Dixon Gottschild

BDG: Seán, I want to start with something that you said yesterday about never having been able to do Bill's [Bill T. Jones's] movement the way he did it—or was it the way he wanted it done? Could you talk about that?

sc: The way he did it. Bill has a very inventive, deeply personal, and unique way of moving, perhaps because he didn't come up through the sort of modern dance training sought by many African-American dancers. People in college told Bill that he should go to New York to be "finished" by Alvin Ailey and he really did not have an interest in that. Bill studied dance with Percival Borde and contact improvisation with Lois Welk and was a track star in high school and college. He did a lot of musical theater in high school with an English teacher he loved very much. Bill was about dancing his own way.

I always wanted to do the movement more like Bill. We're built very differently and have very different bodies. I tried. It was part of the challenge, part of the joy, part of the terror, of trying to do Bill's work: to do it like Bill. I was hired into the company to do Arnie's parts. I moved a lot like Arnie. Bill is African American. Arnie was Jewish Italian. I'm Irish American. Why do I immediately say I couldn't do Bill's movement? I thought to myself, I did Arnie's. Arnie's costumes fit me, anyway, and I did move a bit more like Arnie than I did Bill. Moving like Bill was this elusive thing I chased.

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husband, choreographer Hellmut Gottschild. She interviewed Curran in March, 2001.

**Seán Curran**, choreographer and performer, began his training in Boston with traditional Irish stepdancing and attended New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. He has performed with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and was a cast member of *STOMP!*. Known for works such as *Folk-dance for the Future*, Curran formed his Seán Curran Company in 1997. He is a Bessie Award winner.



*Seán Curran. Photograph by Leticia London. Courtesy of Seán Curran.*

Bill was really interested in a diverse company. He was famous for saying he wanted one of everything. He would put his arms out to the side and say, "How many types, how many peoples, how many dancers can I fit into these arms?" With that spirit of inclusiveness and interest in diversity, he wanted to hold a mirror up to the audience. Of course, he had to change the audience, too, to have one of everything in the audience.

I tried really hard and I never felt that I had the articulation and—a word I'm using a lot now—the fluency. At an interview with Bill, the journalist looked at me toward the end and asked, "What is it like to work with Bill? What can you tell me about the process?" I was aware of Bill's incredible capabilities and capacity for making really new, never-before seen sort of movements. They just flowed through him. I said, "Bill is like a kinetic transchanneler." Bill gave me a wonderful compliment: "Well, if that's true, Seán is my catcher." After that, this idea of catcher became part of the process. He's had many catchers. We would watch him move in the studio, try to imitate, spit back, as it were, to him, or he would improvise long passages on videotape and we would take it home or work with it in the studio. In the documentary *Dancing to the Promised Land*, there's a brilliant section where Bill is snapping his fingers and moving. That was how Bill was warming up then. He would go into the studio, put on his sweatclothes, and just go. Imagine trying to copy, remember, and give it back to him.

BDG: Was he pushing for this? Did being a catcher mean to catch it in his way?

sc: I wouldn't say pushing, maybe coaching. If there was some very specific movement that we weren't doing right, he'd show us and he'd say, "Can you do it more like this?" When Andrea Woods joined the company, there was something in her way of moving that was really akin to his so he finally had someone to catch the movement and play it back to him. He could then say, "Try it more like this," and eventually it would look more like him. We had two models, two paradigms, to take from. I think it has to do with his blackness. She was the first black woman, not the first black member of the company. There were others—Woody McGriff—who looked, felt more like the way Bill moved. Andrea had an authenticity that I think some of the others lacked.

BDG: Including some black members of the company?

sc: Yes.

BDG: What is authenticity? Can you be specific about what you saw that Bill and Andrea had in common?

sc: I think authenticity is connected to spirit and soul. It has to do with the articulation of limbs in a literal, physical way, an articulation of the spine, a moving from the joints, a freedom. I started dancing very late and was very concerned with technique. I was in ballet class. It was rigid, upright. I was an Irish step-dancer as a kid; I have a very high center. Bill's center is much lower and there's a flexibility in his pelvis, in the hip sockets.

BDG: You know, Bill began late.

sc: He began late. He didn't go through the ballet mold, but his mix of African

forms with Percival Borde, that rough and tumble, robust, close to the earth contact consciousness, and then his own unique abilities. One of Bill's many gifts is a ceaseless invention. I saw this really clearly in his new solo show, *The Breathing Show*. I thought, This man is forty-nine and he's still dealing with movement invention. There were lots of old Jonesisms, phrases I knew from back in the day, and yet. . . . Since I left, he's gone to Susan Klein for Klein technique, release technique. That was a new color in his movement.

BDG: Did you see a change of body?

SC: I don't know how he would feel about it, but I feel that it comes from somewhere else. It's a creative thing, like when a jazz musician is just playing—or maybe when you're writing—there's something about flow. Bill taught me about flow in life and in dancing. When Bill is just moving, it's flow.

BDG: Can you be more specific about moving more like Arnie than like Bill?

SC: Abruptness, sharpness, punctuatedness came more naturally to Arnie. I think it has to do with physiology, a quick-twitching muscle fiber. We have more than Bill does, maybe. It's a filmic, stop-start, brittle way of moving. I know mine is from Irish stepdancing—very quick and precise. Arnie was all nerve endings. Bill is long, sinewy flowing muscles. In the press, Arnie was compared to things like a little hand grenade; Bill was always compared to a cat or a panther. Arnie was a little shorter than I am; Bill is a lot taller than I am.

BDG: But Bill is not really tall.

SC: No, but Bill dances tall. My dancing is not about line, and Bill's isn't really either, but it's about a far reach.

BDG: You used the word fluency. Can you talk about that?

SC: Yes. Bill's abilities are so far ranging, it's almost like his movement vocabulary is so full that there are more capabilities. In a way, it has to do with the black dancing body. In terms of joints—shoulder joints and hip joints—there's more movement possibility. The whole idea of back space, something Ron Brown is really playing with, is an African thing. My body—I don't know if it's the white body—just doesn't do that. Looseness. Freedom. A lower sense of center—something you spoke eloquently about yesterday [at an American College Dance Festival Association showing]. A facility in the hips. It's the same idea as being fluent in a language.

I am more fluent now than when I danced with Bill. Part of it was dancing for Bill and Arnie, where we had to emulate two choreographers who moved very differently. The interesting thing about Bill is that he does all this beautiful moving and he doesn't remember it. I build phrases that are very precious to me. I come up with an order. Bill just goes. Literally—without overpraising him—he can go for twenty minutes and there will be twenty minutes of usable material. In a section of *Animal Trilogy* he just went for fifteen or twenty minutes in a very long series of jumps—throw an arm, jump, arm, leg—and we learned it from the videotape. It was very confusing. It wasn't what you would call African movement, black movement; it was more an intellectual problem. We learned it from

the tape and we had to teach it to the Ailey company. They had a hell of a time with it because it was so heady and intellectual. That has to do with the fluency. Bill wanted us to do entrechat and multiple pirouettes and also wanted us to get down into the earth and move through space—a contact consciousness. It's a real postmodern idea: any two movements are available. Interestingly enough, we weren't dealing with any African forms. It's in vogue now. The collective unconscious is really working that angle. It wasn't so prevalent then. It was almost a novelty to go take an African class.

BDG: Now, they're filled with white people.

SC: Yes.

BDG: It seems very right to me.

SC: Oh yeah.

BDG: In the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, did you ever feel yourself as a white dancer in a black company? Any examples? Stories?

SC: Traveling with Woody McGriff, in the South, there was outward hostility toward Woody and his blackness. Nobody said or did anything. It was more an attitude, an energy.

This is kind of a funny story. Bill hurled it as an insult originally, I think, out of frustration. It became a joke. Maybe it has to do with not doing it like Bill. He referred to us as "Namby pamby white children." We were a little hurt and insulted. Of course, it was just tossed off. He didn't mean it to stick. It became kind of a joke if we were trying to do some of Bill's movement. You can feel like a white person, you know.

There is something attractive and sensual about black movement. For me, it's a connectedness to soul and to spirit. Not just how African-American people move, but the African-American experience: being survivors. There's a musicality and a profound understanding of complex rhythms, stuff that is desirable and you get a hunger for. As the company got blacker, we joked. I used to say, "My soul is black," and then people in the company who smoked would say, "Well, my lungs are black." I never felt a whiteness or a blackness in the studio. It didn't really matter.

BDG: As a performer, I can understand this thing about wanting to get the movement like the person who is teaching you or getting the way they want you to move. Hellmut and I are totally different: male and female, German and American, white and black. I also have a high center—the way my voice and body are; he's so grounded. He choreographs a lot of what we do. There's that real frustration for me. Sometimes I get angry: "Don't try to make me." Any of that?

SC: I got frustrated but I always kept trying. I wanted to look that way and I thought, Oh boy, that looks like it feels good. I wanted that feeling. It's a sensual quality.

BDG: Can you talk about any particular dance of yours in which you were aware of your Irish-American, Seán Curran shape, size, or color affecting either how you choreographed or how you performed?

sc: *Secret Pastures* was the first piece of Bill and Arnie's where my part was choreographed on me. (There was a piece before that called *Freedom of Information* where I learned Arnie's part.) Bill asked me to choreograph an Irish stepdance solo, which means moving pretty much from the legs down. I had learned an arm phrase when I first met Bill at New York University—I still know it. He came into the room and, as Bill would without introducing himself, said, "Learn this arm dance." We all learned it. It's a series of about twenty gestures, a very cryptic, visually abstract, gestural phrase. He gave me the problem of putting my Irish stepdancing legs with those arms. It was a great solo. I won a Bessie Award for my performance. In New York I just did it as a solo, but as the piece grew and we toured it more and more, Bill would come out and shadow me. I was giving [the audience] authenticity—I used that word earlier, it's coming back—from the waist down and doing Bill from the waist up; Bill was behind me doing Bill—authentically—from the waist up and then riffing on my Irish stepdancing legs on the bottom. It was pretty wild.

My company is working on something right now that relates to your question. My dancers love taking Ron Brown's class. They love Doug Varone's work too. I make most of the dance phrasing and material in my company, but I do ask them to make up different phrases and it's usually from a problem. I think Ron Brown is one of the most handsome people on the planet, so I came up with a funny problem: "Let's make a phrase that the illegitimate love child of Seán Curran and Ron Brown would do if Doug Varone was their dance teacher." A woman named Omagbitse Omagbemi, who is an African American member of my company, and a guy named Tony Guglietti, a white Italian guy, got together and made a beautiful phrase. But you know, I can't get it. They look great doing it. I've never been lucky enough to take one of Ron's classes; they have done quite a bit of it. They've seen a lot of Doug Varone's work. They know what I try to do. So that's our joke now, this phrase.

BDG: Tell me about a specific work—yours or work danced with the Bill T. Jones /Arnie Zane Company—that gave you particular information about dancing in a black dancing body?

sc: Bill made a duet called *Soon* for himself and an Englishwoman—African English, her mom is Scottish and her father is from an island—named Bunty Mathias. The music is Kurt Weill and Bessie Smith. It has been subsequently done by a lot of members of the company in same sex and opposite sex pairings. Bill made *Soon* after Arnie died. It wasn't the first piece Bill made after Arnie died, but I think it was, for Bill, an exploration of working with a partner who was black, female, and small. He'd worked for all those years with Arnie, who was white and small, but another man. It's about love and loss and a very beautiful duet. There's a fairly traditional setup: introduction of the two characters, a little conflict duet, the woman has a solo, the man has a solo, and then there's a resolution. The man's solo, Bill's solo, is danced to Bessie Smith's "Had a dream last night that I was dead," you know, this wonderful song? "Evil spirits all around my bed" and I felt black doing it. I relished and I reveled in it. Looking

back on it, not having done it for ten years, I tried to be black. I didn't try to be Bill. It had something to do with Bessie Smith's singing, her voice. The song is about having a nightmare. There's a lot of running, with your arms on the diagonal, dragging a foot, and very low. She's singing about evil spirits and flame and of being possessed by the devil. When Bill asked us to learn this phrase, we would do it in a dance studio with the lights on bright in a mirror. We'd try to copy Bill, but as I think about it now, the music is what gave me my blackness.

BDG: Black music in America is everybody's music: blues, jazz, gospel. We see that as a source we can draw upon. But this seems very intimate, like you were inside it. You felt black inside.

sc: I loved the feeling and pushed it. I was doing it with Maya, who was a Filipino-American woman. It didn't have to do necessarily with a partner; it had to do with the music.

As a kid, I was very lucky. We'd go shopping once a week and my mom would let us buy a record. The Jackson Five had cool clothes; I bought that record. The Temptations had cool matching, bell-bottom, outrageous, over-the-top outfits; I bought that record. I also bought Simon and Garfunkel. Music was very important in my house. It goes back to that. I think the music connected me with spirit and soul. Yeah.

BDG: What comes to your mind when I say black dance? White dance? You can play it either from the black perspective or the white perspective. I'm asking for perceptions from both sides: what you imagine, what you know, what you've heard.

sc: Black dance is dance that is made by or performed by a black person. I think I did black dance when I did Bill's dance. It's not just about who's making or doing the dance. I think it goes deeper than that. Twyla Tharp has made black dance, or maybe has appropriated black dance, as Elvis did with musicians in the South.

I'm black Irish. That term has to do with Spanish people who came to invade England. When they weren't successful, they went to Ireland, to be in a Catholic country. Their descendants have dark hair, but light skin and usually blue eyes. My mom is very black Irish. There's some Spanish ancestral memory that gives me rhythm and, I think, informs stepdancing. Stepdancing has to do with a more fleet, complex, clickety-clackety rhythm; African or black dance rhythms are more polyphonic and complicated, pitting one rhythm against another. That's what I found beautiful about black dance; you pit one part of the body against another: right arm flying back while the left leg is flying back, a very complex set of synapses firing.

White dance is ballet, ballroom dancing, and Bobby and Sissy on Lawrence Welk. I watched that every Sunday night as a kid. I have such a specific idea about black dance and yet, white dance . . .

BDG: But there was no reason to define white dance. That was the norm. It was the aberration that had to be defined.

Where did you grow up?

sc: Outside of Boston—Watertown, a kind of working-class, blue-collar town. In

high school we moved to Belmont, which is a little more affluent, upper scale. It was the time of busing in Boston and kids were really resistant. We didn't have violence or problems in my school. The only black kids who went to the school were bused in and I was friendly with one of them, a girl. I feel so lucky that my parents were immigrants, hard working, and looked down upon a little bit. Irish.

BDG: I want you to close your eyes, to associate. When I say black dancing bodies what do you see?

sc: Articulate, automatic, fluent, free, sexual—that's been imposed—feet that don't stretch. I have the same kind of feet. Sweat. You see sweat on black skin better than on white. An ability to channel negative emotions; because I worked with Bill so much, anger. Bill described himself as a man on fire, and I saw that. A love of dancing. That comes back to automaticness. Flow. Spirit. I think of the whiteness of the soles of the feet, and the darkness or the blackness of the tops. The palms too. It's not a fetish thing, but I always loved looking at the black dancer's bare feet. Yeah.

BDG: Looking into a place of association, what comes to your visual screen when I say white dancing bodies?

sc: Upright. Round arms. Port de bras. Proper. Stuck in the head a bit. Constructed rather than free or flowing. Something imposed. Virtuosity. There are different brands of virtuosity. I'm thinking of tricks, double air turns to the knee, multiple pirouettes, and high legs. The Rockettes. Whiteness values precision and unison: the Rockettes, Broadway dancers. Less freedom than when I think of a black dancer. Shoes. I'm thinking again of the feet. I guess I have a foot thing. Dancing in shoes as opposed to bare feet. I see people in costumes. When I see black people dancing it's more about the movement. Makeup. The African-American people in Bill and Arnie's company didn't necessarily wear the makeup that the white people did.

Different kinds of power. Black power comes from a channeling of anger, rage, or frustration, and white power is more caught up with musculature and the action at hand. This is a jump, this is a leap, rather than this is a movement. Trisha Brown is really connected to a blackness, especially in her more recent work, that freedom. I think she readily admits it, too. Lucinda Childs is a very white choreographer. Dance Theatre of Harlem does white dance, but in a black way. Creole *Giselle*. Stephanie Dabney in *Firebird*. It's funny, I see more when I see black than I do when I see white.

BDG: I think it's because the white is not even questioned; everything else has to be defined. Where do you see differences in regard to these two categories: "black dancing bodies," "white dancing bodies"; "black dancing world," "white dancing world?" Where do you see differences for your generation and earlier generations of dance scholars/critics/choreographers?

sc: It's trendy to be in hip hop class or to learn how to break dance or to be in an African class. I think it's great—spread the word—but I've taught at studios where people treat African class like an aerobics class. To me, all dance is more



sacred than that. There's something icky or inauthentic about white women in do-rags and lapas. There's a need, a want, a desire to be the other. I'm guilty of it too. I go into my snap-queen thing or I sing along to the radio and try to sound like Destiny's Child or Peabo Bryson. It's okay to do this now. It's fun now. It's flip.

BDG: And hip.

SC: Right. I was fascinated—I love dance history—when we discussed Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams in *Agon*. I was proud of George Balanchine and thought what a great, wonderful risk. Today, a white woman dancing with a black man means nothing.

BDG: In ballet, it's one thing to make a role for Arthur Mitchell that plays on the differences of skin colors, but that's still not saying, "You can be Romeo."

SC: Something that's interesting for me now are the changes in Irish step dancing. When I was a kid, all the kids who did Irish stepdancing were the children of Irish immigrants. I made a work for a company in Chicago called Trinity Irish Stepdance Company. They have African-American kids in their classes. One of their leading dancers is a kid who is purely Polish—a Polish mom and dad. That thing is spreading a bit more too. I have a photograph somewhere at home of a *feis*—the Gaelic word for festival and the place Irish stepdance competitions are held. There is a line of kids in their Irish stepdancing costumes, with a beautiful little black face about to do her steps. Whether she has an Irish parent or not, there's something she loves about Irish stepdancing and sticks with it. So that's a difference that I think is satisfying and as valid as a white kid in the suburbs copying the moves on a Sisqo video.

Tony Guglietti, one of my guys, is a brilliant popper and locker. We do this piece, *Folkdance for the Future*, in which I'm questioning—Who are your folks? What is folk dancing? Will we folk dance in the future?—and commenting on the intertwined nature of the world. I didn't ask the African American woman to pop and lock, I asked Tony, the Italian American. I do love how she does the Ron Brown–Seán Curran–Doug Varone phrase, but it's one of my white guys who's popping and locking.

BDG: Is she okay with that?

SC: Yeah.

BDG: Staying with these two categories, black dancing bodies and white dancing bodies, I want you to look at three environments. The first is the first dance school you attended.

SC: My first dancing studio was a VFW hall in a police station in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where there was not a black face to be seen. The room we used was where they had their meetings and dances. It was completely white.

BDG: What forms did you study?

SC: Irish stepdancing. It was a dollar a lesson for an hour on a Saturday morning. The teacher played a scratchy old record and you learned to jig or reel or a horn-pipe step.

- BDG: Did you dance anyplace else before college?
- sc: I danced at a place called the Joy of Movement Center in Cambridge. I started to see and meet more black people, black faces. I was in high school, maybe fifteen, sixteen. I would take public transportation from the suburbs and it was terrifying, but I knew I wanted to be an actor, a musical comedy performer. I have a vivid memory of watching Adrienne Hawkin's Impulse Dance Company—she's the Boston-based choreographer of an all black company—through the window and thinking, Hmm, I want what they have. I want some of that. Moving big, working hard, showing off. Jazz, more jazz. Adrienne comes out of the Danny Sloan period in Boston. Another Boston-based school—very different—was Elma Lewis. To me, that's a more proper, rigid, traditional thing. I was still in classes with pretty much all white faces and white teachers, even though I was in a jazz class.
- BDG: College?
- sc: In college, I had my first black dance teacher, Denise Jefferson, who now runs the Ailey school: very proper, Graham technique, leotard and tights, relaxed hair pulled back in a beautiful bun. Perfect. Goddesslike. She didn't have the looseness I saw in that studio in Cambridge, but I still wanted it because it was elegant. That's another thing I associate with black dance, the elegance of the Nicholas brothers. I remember finding them on TV once and freaking out. That was a real jumping-off point, wanting to see them again. I went to New York University and I don't think there were any African Americans in my class.
- BDG: At this American College Dance Festival Association festival in Gainesville, I saw very few blacks, Asians, or Latinos. Is university dance still white young women?
- sc: At NYU I took ballet with Larry Rhodes and Ernie Pagnano.
- BDG: There is a mixture there.
- sc: Shelley Washington would take class at NYU with us, with Larry. A lot of the Tharp company did. Keith Young. But I'm kind of shocked to realize this. There were not a lot of black people in my studio dance experience. Even when I went to Bill, Bill and Woody were the only ones.
- BDG: What studios did you study at in New York?
- sc: Pineapple [at Houston Street and Broadway], which was in existence only a short time.
- BDG: Steps?
- sc: No I never went up there. I was a more downtown person. I took Bebe Miller's class when I was already in Bill's company. I loved her class.
- I love the beautiful round black butt. That's one of the things I love about Obishay, my dancer. We do a piece in white leotards. She's so beautiful, so sculptural. I remember giving Bill a book about Grace Jones. I loved Grace Jones back in the day. Jean-Paul Gaultier made a book called *Jungle Fever* where he fetishized her, exaggerated her butt and made her tongue stick out to there with a glass of champagne on it. I bought it for Bill for his birthday and didn't quite

know if he'd hate it or love it. He'd have a reaction one way or the other. He kind of loved it. There's an image where she's standing naked and her butt is a shelf holding a glass of champagne. The champagne goes over her head and into the glass.

There was a guy named Greg Hubbard in Bill's company for a short time who was tall and black and wonderfully gay. It was the '80s, so he had a shaved head on the side and a then a mop of beautiful dreadlocks on top that were dyed red. He had a reddish thing to his skin, so the hair really looked great. In airports and hotel lounges when he wanted to piss people off a little, he put on this hairpiece that he called Sheila. Sheila was a long reddish fall that he would braid. He'd knot the dreadlocks up and put Sheila in so he had this "I Dream of Genie" thing. He was a very tall, elegant black man and he would walk through the airport and people's jaws would drop because he had this long braid called Sheila. We said, "Well we all have our Sheila. We all have that little passive-aggressive thing." Sometimes he'd wear it on stage.

I think of the typical locker-room, dressing-room thing, trying to see the black man's genitals to see if they're bigger. It has less to do with the dancing body, but of course that was something that I was always really fascinated by.

BDG: There is a sense that dancers are different. We're in a world of our own without bias. But racism is in everything we do. It can't not be in the dance studio. I experienced some real bias and I was dancing up until the late '60s. There are ways that racism has gone underground.

SC: When Bill was doing *The Promised Land*, he wanted thirty, forty, or fifty people—one of everything—from each community. The first audition was in Minneapolis, set up by John Killacky who ran the Walker Art Center. It was all nineteen- to twenty-eight-year-old white women. Bill said, "No! This is not what I wanted!" They said, "We did our best. We put ads in the paper. We put posters up." Bill said, "You didn't go to the right places." He had three very strange suggestions: black churches, black bars, and black hairdressing schools.

BDG: He was so right.

SC: Black hairdressing schools. I thought, What is that? Then I thought, Oh my god, you treat black hair differently than you do white. In my naive denial, I thought, Oh, doesn't everyone go to the same school? Wouldn't a white person learn how to do cornrows and relax hair?

BDG: You don't have to know. That's the point. It's white skin privilege that allows you to disallow knowledge that a person of color has to have. You don't have to think about the fact that if I walk into the beauty parlor here in Gainesville, they would probably look at me with great embarrassment. Three decades ago they would have said, "Goodbye and get out of here."

Okay, this one is not about your personal experience. What I want you to do again is associate—whatever comes up from the voices, the ghosts of the past. When they are alone, what do white people say about black bodies? Lore? Mythology?

- sc: Immediately I think of the feet. The feet not stretching.
- BDG: How is that talked about? Anything more specific?
- sc: We have a joke, we say “Stretch those hooves.” That’s not aimed at a black person. I too have short, fat, flat feet, so it’s a joke I use in class. An idea that placement has to do with the butt and the curve of the spine—tuck your butt underneath you, keep your back straight. Bad placement. There’s also the sense of blending in: quiet down, don’t take that solo, bring it in, bring it back, stifle it.
- BDG: Anything specific? Something that I would not be privy to because people wouldn’t say it around me?
- sc: I wish I had more information that was more helpful. I’m not trying to protect you or me or white people!
- BDG: Because I’m educated, because I speak and move in a certain way, I have certain kinds of white skin privilege. Frequently, white people will say things to me about black people as though I am white. It’s like saying, “Why aren’t they all like you?” So I’m assuming that if they would take the liberty of saying things like that to me, they would say more to each other.
- sc: I know this concept. Bill calls it being a “special black.” Feet, attitude: bad attitude, “Get out of my face,” dismissive, anger.
- I’ll tell you something that freaked people out. In *Folkdance for the Future*, there are three couples: a gay couple, a straight couple, a lesbian couple. My dancers say, “Who are you? The homo, the hetero, or the lesbo?” In *Folkdance*, they dance with a baby doll. There’s a white doll, a black doll, and the doll we lovingly call the “cappuccino”-colored doll. When I made the piece originally, it worked out that the couples were all interracial. There was a Filipino and a white guy with a white baby in the gay couple, a black man—very black—and a blonde woman with the black baby in the heterosexual couple, and then the lesbians had adopted the cappuccino-colored baby. The black man left to do something else and a white guy took his place, so all of a sudden, I had the dilemma of the white couple with the black baby. Everyone was freaked out: “Give the black baby to the gay couple because a gay couple might adopt a black baby,” or “Give it to the lesbian couple.” I said, “We’re going to keep it the way it is.” But there was real tension and weirdness among the company. It made me think, What if I had two black dancers and they had a white baby? I think I’m so special: I’m a dancer for a black choreographer, I have friends who are black, I’ve made love with black people. But these things open your eyes.
- BDG: It’s interesting you mention that. There is this whole thing of transracial adoption which has been disputed, but certainly there are white families like a team that I know at Temple, two professors, who adopted black kids. No one ever thought about a black couple adopting a white kid. That would almost be less acceptable.
- sc: And not chic and trendy.
- BDG: Can you give an example of any time when the black dancing body or the white dancing body was at issue? You’ve worked in *Stomp!*, with Bill T., and other things as well. You’ve gone to auditions, competitions . . .

sc: Recently, my company auditioned for a residency at The Yard, a five-week company development thing. They do a nationwide search, narrow it down to four companies, and then pick two. There was a woman who was New York-based but German-born, an African American guy—Paule Turner—from Philadelphia, my company, and a white guy from Minneapolis. I saw the companies and thought, They'll probably go to my company and this Minneapolis-based guy. They went for the other two. I was kind of surprised. We were a little more established and maybe The Yard really thought they could help these companies develop. But of course it went through my head, Did Paule get it because he's black?

BDG: This is what I was going to ask: Can you give an example of when you had the edge over a black dancer or choreographer? Or the opposite?

sc: My ego was a little bruised. I was a little hurt. I had to justify it. I am guilty of thinking, Oh, did Paule get it because he's black? Did they want the chic and trendy and politically correct thing? On Martha's Vineyard, of all places.

BDG: But can you then give a reverse example of when you felt that you had the edge over a black dancer or choreographer when white-skinned privilege played a part?

sc: Oh god, I can't. Am I in complete denial? Am I blind?

BDG: I think it has to do with a blindness.

sc: I've been so caught up in my weight, my gayness, the whole *Stomp!* experience. I thought, I'm too gay. They're not going to hire me. *Stomp!* started with working-class English blokes and it's become very black. It started out as eight, white, English-born, London-based friends riffing on Brazilian rhythms, black English musicians—Soul to Soul, specifically, do you know "Keep on Movin. . ." that base line from the '80s? When they came to cast it in New York, the show got a lot blacker.

BDG: When I saw it in Philly, I think there were two black members.

sc: Frankly, it was easier to teach. I don't know if the *Stomp!* guys would say that, but black performers have a freedom in terms of improvisation, an intuitiveness. Maybe it goes back to this transchanneling idea of Bill's. Bill talked about African Americans giving America the idea of taking a solo—how you work in jazz—that was really revolutionary to me.

BDG: I'm thinking that maybe there's a difference in generation with you. Eminem, Rennie Harris. There are a lot of people out there.

sc: Rennie Harris brings up an interesting thing. At the Bates Dance Festival, in Maine (I've been there when the company's been there) it's ninety-five percent white women students. There was such a fascination with Rennie's company—all male, all black, all street, all ghetto, all rough, all ready, all virtuosity, all sexuality—that they had to make a rule that the students couldn't go to faculty row where they were staying. Those girls were all—woo!—and I think the guys too. But it was a little weird and creepy to me.

BDG: It was the exotic-erotic.

sc: Exactly. Jungle fever while safe on the campus of a very white school.

- BDG: What do you see as the most prevalent area of stereotyping with regard to the black dancing body? Confine yourself to one area.
- sc: I think of the word “wildness.” It goes back to images of savages, natives, the jungle. That’s what leaps to my mind. It’s a stereotypical thing. In the documentary *Dancing to the Promised Land*—I think it’s in *I’ll Make Me a World* too—I talk about Bill’s phrase called “warming up in Dixie” for *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. He would say, “No! You’ve got to do it more like a darky dancing in the South.” Everyone could do it. We knew how to do it from seeing minstrelsy and those old black-and-white films.
- BDG: Even in the swing era, performers had to be far out in terms of stereotype in order to get jobs.
- sc: I remember thinking, Isn’t it interesting that we all can do this, but we can’t do what Bill is asking in that other way.
- BDG: Is that what you meant when you said white Americans say that blacks should “pull back on the solo?”
- sc: Yes. It’s improper. Impolite. Vulgar. Too much. That for me would be the biggest stereotype. Today, it’s the snap queen: the loud, obnoxious girl with really long nails. When Greg came into the company, we were touring, and I said to him, “I can’t believe how much black-blond hair there is in this town.” He said, “What’s black-blond hair?” I said, “See her over there, with blond hair?” We used to have a little code—“b-b!”—when there’d be some black-blond hair.
- BDG: It is interesting—and so wonderful—that people wear huge hoops and do the long nails. Their aesthetic is, “I am not buying into the mainstream white aesthetic. This is what I value.” Just like the baggy stuff that everybody wears. “This is mine and this is where I’m staying. You can come to it or you can dislike it.”  
 You have a sense of the kind of work I’m doing. Anything that you could add? Be as specific as you can be: personal reflection, stories, anecdotes. We can sit here for a couple minutes if you don’t mind, while you think of anything else that comes to mind.
- sc: *The Black Dancing Body*.
- BDG: And the subtitle is, *A Geography from Coon to Cool*.
- sc: The alliteration is so great. I just thought of another thing. People make fun of names—Africanized names, made-up names.
- BDG: You mean like Shanniqua?
- sc: Yeah. In the generation coming up now.
- BDG: How would somebody joke about it? What would be said?
- sc: “Shanniqua? What kind of a name is that?” “How many syllables?” I immediately want to excuse it because the same thing happens with a Polish person, with three consonants in a row. The name thing, or the religious, Muslim thing. “How many Ahmads, how many Abduls can there be?” “Abdul, Rashid. Come on. Who’s he kidding? His real name is Tommy Jones.” So maybe that’s a closed-door white person thing.
- BDG: Skin. Anything about skin color?

sc: Lighting African-American dancers on stage! I stopped myself yesterday giving notes about the piece with the three men. Two of them were black and I was going to give the note, "If you have African Americans on stage and a black backdrop and a black floor, you have to hit them with some front light because they disappear. I wrote it down and thought, Hmmm, I'm going to have to deliver that carefully. So much of dance lighting is so dark anyway. You have to use a little more light.

BDG: This happens in photos, of course—company photos. Marlies [Yearby] talked about the reverse of this. She's often the most light-skinned one in the black company, so they put her off to the side so it doesn't change the lighting.

sc: I have a piece called *Symbolic Logic*. There's a soloist in the middle and then there's a trapezoid of four dancers around the soloist. I was going to put Obishay into it but realized that the trapezoid creates a frame, and because she's black—their backs are to the audience—she doesn't pop out. It didn't work so I took her out. I needed—wanted—the white skin.

BDG: That's a good one. For a long time there was this issue of black dancers in corps. Can there be a black swan in the corps of *Swan Lake*? We have found out, I think very clearly, that there can be. It's all so much about artifice anyway. I'm glad you brought this up because in dance and theater—where people are visible—you have to question where the line breaks between artistic choices and cultural bias.

sc: At the Ailey school, white people would get really pissed off at products in black people's hair. When we'd lie on the floor and there'd be a little "Jerri-curl" residue, we'd say things like, "They gotta wipe that up! Break my ankle because of his hair product!" There was a whole thing about disdain for processed hair.

BDG: Would you ever say anything to black people? Would it be said in the dressing room so black people could hear?

sc: No, not in my circles. I remember signs went up at the Ailey school, "If you have a 'Jerri-curl' . . ."

BDG: If you have "black" hair . . ."

sc: . . . "and it's wet and loose and curly and you're doing a floor barre, be sure to wipe it up." It became a danger thing: "I'm going to break my leg because of his or her hair."

BDG: And then braids are not allowed for performance. These things all seem important because you add them up and what do you have? You have a black dancing body. Is it the coon or is it cool?

sc: The black dancing body: a length of limb. I think of dancers like Woody McGriff, Greg Hubbard, and Obishay, who have long femurs, a long radius and ulna. I used to love Greg's hands. He had really long thumbs and I sexualized them. I wanted to put his thumb in my mouth. It was a phallic thing for me. I had kind of a crush on him.

A suppleness in the spine. We would do sort of a Cunningham thing in Bill's class—a fishtail right, fishtail left—which I never could master. It had to do with

the lumbar spine and the hips. We tried forever to do it like Bill. I can remember being in a middle school in Rhode Island ten years ago teaching a master class and the kids wanted to learn this [demonstrates head movement]. And I can kind of do it, but they were desperate! All white children in Providence, Rhode Island, and we came up with this idea: "Imagine there's a clear plastic box here and you have to get your head in the box." It was their wanting to have a black dancing body: the need, the want, the desire. I think it's how it looks or how a white person perceives it: "That looks like it feels good. That looks like it feels fun. That looks sexy." I don't want to oversexualize because we do that as a white culture.

BDG: But it's interesting because the love/hate sits right there in the sex part. You want the look of the sexy body, but then the Judeo-Christian tradition says, "You can't really want that!"

sc: Yet you pay a lot of money to go sit in an electric tanning booth to make your skin darker.

BDG: But it shouldn't be too dark.

sc: Or in the '80s, the perming of hair.

BDG: I look at your body—would you stand up again, Seán? My theory is that—do you know that wonderful title of Marcia Siegel's, *The Shapes of Change?*—that the shapes of bodies change because of cultural factors. You're studying with Bill, listening to Bessie Smith, dancing to Bessie. You have, to me, a kind of black body. Your legs are pretty long, your waist is pretty short, your butt is pretty high.

sc: I learned how to move like [demonstrates] . . . I want that!

BDG: Work it! Right, yeah. Now, I don't know how much that's shaped your body. How would it have been if you had continued stepdancing or not danced at all?

sc: I'd be more like this [demonstrates]. Everything is up.

BDG: You definitely have this arch in the lower spine.

sc: For years, in the beginning, they tried to do this to me [demonstrates].

BDG: Right. If you had kept doing that, you'd have a totally different kind of shape. Okay. Thank you!