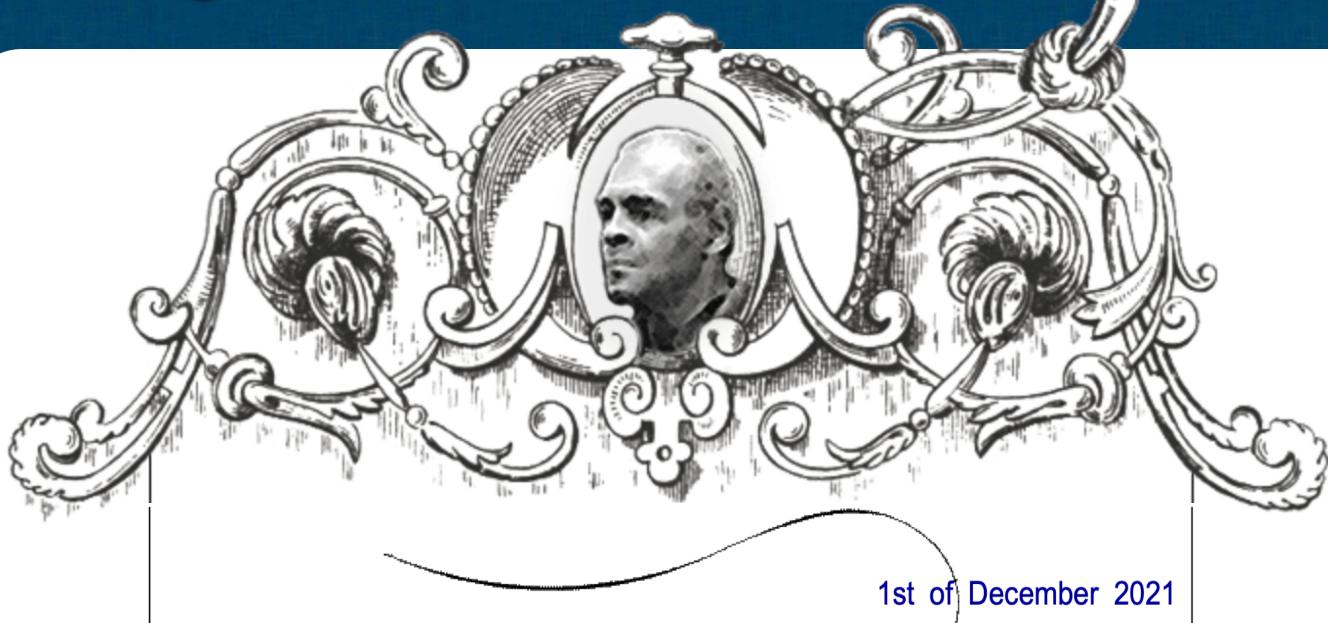


SOLOMONS SAYS



1st of December 2021



WHERE IS MY B-O-D-Y? DIARY

I had been one of Kun-Yang's dance professors at NYU/Tisch School of the Arts, while he was completing his master's degree there, and it came as a surprise that he was inviting me to participate in this project, since we had had our differences during school.

"<https://player.vimeo.com/video/641292423?h=9bf0f239b5>"

I had formerly been both a site visitor and a panelist for the Pew's Dance Advance Program and knew how rigorous the application process was but also how generous in granting fully the projects that met its strenuous multi-level application requirements and its openness to whatever aspects of projects one could apply for as long as they made a

convincing case for their request. Here are excerpts from my thoughts on the Discovery project "Where Is My B-O-D-Y," which was awarded a generous grant by the Pew Charitable Trust for a team of three mature dancers of diverse artistic and racial backgrounds to investigate the changes, positive and negative, that age had enforced on their dance practices after the age of fifty. Kun-Yang Lin Dance, a modern dancer, initiated the project, and he chose me, along with Pallabi Chakravorty, a master practitioner of the Kathak style of East Indian dance and professor at Bryn Mawr/Swarthmore, to be one of the three principals.

The project took place in Philadelphia and New York over the course of nine months from January till September, 2021, which allowed the team to take our time in designing and considering our approach without

the normal time pressure and the requirement to deliver some artistic product at the end. We were generously funded simply to discover whatever we discovered during the process about our personal modifications, enforced by injury, wear and tear, and maturity. Kun-Yang met with each the collaborators separately and we met all three together in person and on Zoom to discuss conclusions and observations. The project concluded with live showings in New York and in Philly.

After my sixty-plus decades of dance making, it's hard not to feel the simplicity and directness of my chosen approach is less, rather than just other; somehow inadequate, rather than just different. It's free of ulterior meanings and purposeful innuendos, of references and allusions, of symbolism. In this project, I'm interested to see how my approach intersects with Kun-Yang's, which seems more emotionally specific and Chakravorty's, which is necessarily narrative.

During the project, I intend to promulgate the notion of doing, versus thinking, of starting with action not contemplation but not precluding feeling from entering the mix, organically, if it will, but mostly allowing the feeling to rise and grow from the sensations of moving and through repetition/ persistence, letting feeling arise without identifying it until it arrives.

JANUARY, 2021

January 7: before we began...

I received video of KYL's APAP showing, comprising excerpts. His dancers are strong and confident; their extensions are and their balances secure. The first three excerpts use nebulous new-age music no emotional trajectory, just steady-state emotionality. That tends to give his dances a dynamic evenness.

The first begins with a chair solo that the female uses in some clever ways, winding through it, becoming transformed by it. Then comes, a female trio; the energy is burst/decay, repetitively.

The second, "New Normal," for four women and a man, juxtaposes lateral traveling with adagio solos.

Next, "Inside," is again a woman's solo, again with a chair, that's more sophisticated than the first one.

Fourth, "The Calling," is an earthbound, ritualistic adagio.

The last is KY's solo in progress, which will be shown in April. Notably, Kun-Yang solo to German Lieder, a refreshing musical change-up.



Kun-Yang & Gus in Solomons's NYC studio. Photo by Caroline Haidet

January 9:

In watching KYL's work and reading his Temple University students' insightful endorsements, it becomes apparent that breath is integral to his movement style. Lin's work is highly competent and very western in its esthetic sensibility, as he has mostly dance in Western styles like that of Jose Limon, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham.

January 11:

A clip of Lin's "Be/longing," a research collaboration among 4 Asian male dancers, done on location in Indonesia in 2013, shows a strong connection with nature, filmed outdoors and adjacent to rushing water. It posits "What do these four strong Asian dancers have in common?" and "What are they seeking?" It also reveals Lin's predilection for collaboration. The movement shows the connection among the four artists though nothing new with respect to movement invention.

A man/woman duet from another piece shows competence in Western-style dance making. And a short clip of students at a calligraphy exhibit affirms Lin's curiosity about Asian influences, although they appear only fleetingly in his choreography.

January 16: first meeting of all three collaborators in Philly.

At age fifty-one, and suffering physical limitations, Lin is afraid of losing his passion for creating dance – cataract surgery, cracked cervical vertebrae, a growing, benign, brain tumor – and the need to wear too many creative hats as company director, teacher, dance maker, and administrator.

After a long discussion of our experiences, wants, and needs, I determined that my job in the project might be to help him regain his creative spark by helping him re-discover inspiration in a less supple, less pliant body. He also mentioned that fear of no longer having good peripheral vision makes stage performing a fearful experience.

The final hour of our three today included moving with eyes closed for 10- minutes and observing our own responses. I felt the uncertainty of being able to move with confidence through space; Pallabi's training is in the strict, traditional Indian style of kathak. Kun-Yang's training is primarily in Western styles – Graham, Cunningham, Limon – with some traditional Chinese folk from this youth. Although we didn't discuss it, my training is eclectic with tap, acrobatic, and ballet as a youngster, then German-based modern, Cicchetti-based ballet, and Broadway-style jazz at the Boston Conservatory, where I moonlighted, while studying architecture at M.I.T. during the day.

January 18: personal reflection:

One can find movement from an inspiration or find inspiration from the movement itself. The purposeful actions, derived from doing assigned tasks, although it may seem an arbitrary method, will lead to some, real choreographic inspiration. My mentor, Merce Cunningham, proved that that any method, arbitrary though it may seem, can lead to something concrete and something expressive through mindful repetition.

Observing the video of our 10-minute moving meditation from Saturday showed that Kun-Yang tended to stretch and sensate parts of himself, moving up and down vertically; Solomons stayed standing pretty much in one spot, using hands and arms at medium level; Chakravorty walked around a lot, went to the floor once (good knees!), and moved through space listening to the proximity of ambient sounds to orient herself.

We agreed that having to wear too many hats as an artist, as we all must, can be daunting: trying to integrate all your energies into also feeding your creativity. If you can somehow accomplish this, you can feel you're not wasting your time while doing all the seemingly extraneous things you must do. It's never easy, but it is simple, if you can minimize your stress by making each activity impel you into the next one – rather like dancing.

Nowadays, Lin, who has always looked to his teachers, gurus, idols for inspiration needs to practice finding inspiration within himself: learn to be his own inspiration!

The wonderful thing about a “Discovery Project” is that it is foolproof: You’ll always discover something, if you don’t try to predict what the discovery will be. And if you can get out of your own way and see what it is you’re actually doing, you’ll be better able to identify discoveries.

January 23: (Zoom reflection on our January 16 meeting):

We talked about finding ways to incorporate a physical life into your daily routine and prioritizing moving over other obligations. I suggested that with all your hats, you need to find a way to wear them like a 'nest,' so that

they feed each other. When your plate is too full, things start to slop over the sides, and you have to either let the excess go or find a way to incorporate it into everything else. I also understand the value of this kind of discussion about art and life and its necessity for intellectual exercising.

We realized that culturally all three of us were raised to overachieve, to say yes to everything, however difficult it became to manage. Kun-Yang, Asian, was taught not to disappoint people, Pallabi, Indian, studied and was dedicated to classical forms, and I, African-American, grew up with the attitude of having to overachieve to be accepted as being just as good as my White peers.

FEBRUARY, 2021

February 14-15: reflections on our 2/7-8 meeting...

Meeting to reflect on our 2/7-8 sessions: trouble-shooting homework – move, repeat, and practice, don't judge. Interpret each, action however you like or not, and let it modify with repetition in context of the phrase. It's almost like saying a nonsense phrase and repeating over and over until it starts to sound like real language.

We continued discussing the difficulties of working alone; KYL needs other bodies in the room to encourage him to take the next steps, and for him I was that other person, when we were together. I likewise discovered that I work more easily with another person present.

I'm finding too many possibilities and having trouble settling on any single one. Our dialog is inspiring and enlightening. I need to pretend I have a deadline to show something in order to make myself stay productive. KYL also feels the need to have another person in the room to motivate him, but he is investing too much energy in the notion that it has to be someone older to make the motivation valuable.

MARCH, 2021

March 7: NYC meeting, KYL and GSj...

Kun-Yang had indeed done his homework, and practiced his phrase in silence, and then he did it for me with music by Black Coffee. As he repeated the phrase, it became more in sync with the music. He'll keep growing it.

He and I had a head-motivated “conversation,” in which we sat face to face and bounced movement off one another, trading motifs, alternating leader and follower every few seconds. Later, we did a similar exercise using the whole upper body from seated positions. Again, the rapport was exciting. At the end of the 3-hour session, we did another call and response duet passage.

Kun-Yang confessed that his eyesight had made him afraid to move into the floor, yet here, he was doing so confidently. I realized that this working was also giving me confidence to move more freely – albeit using my cane – and re-awakening my kinetic urges as well. Our discussion touched on the use of this music, which had a rock beat and lyrics, versus his usual listening to amorphous music to move.

March 8: second day...

This morning, Kun-Yang reviewed his “verbs” dance phrase. It's starting to fit more comfortably to the music of “Lost” by Black Coffee, although that music is not definitive. We spent the balance of the time learning the “Task phrase #1” a series of 17 activities, which can be paired in myriad ways, done simultaneously. We practiced the 17 actions in order, trying to gain fluency in repeating them without looking at the script. The goal is to develop fluency, learning the actions in various ways to create a duet that juxtaposes them in various ways and in different structures, such as: even numbered, odd numbered; moving alternately or overlapping each other.

Kun-Yang remarked that he was having fun in my studio. And I suspect that the source of his feeling of lack of inspiration stems at least partly from his pervasive seriousness. He's lost the sense of play, which generates fresh ideas. And I admit getting on my feet with him regenerated a similar enjoyment for me, even though I no longer consider myself specifically a dance maker. So far, the project has been therapeutic for us both.

March 15: (Zoom reflection on last weekend)

Our discussion today, March 15, after last weekend's in-person meeting, was mutually enjoyable, productive, and inspiring. Kun-Yang had the realization that now, in his early 50s, he can “still go up and down” to and from the ground, while I, in my early 80s cannot, and yet I can still dance expressively. The time we've spent together has been mutually rewarding as a demonstration of rekindling movement memory regardless of age and physical limitations.

My philosophy of abstraction can somehow eliminate roadblocks, because if you don't have a story, you can always resort to activity: action. While you may still be researching your intentions, discovering your expressive "narrative," you can continue to move by giving yourself simple, arbitrary structures to generate movement. And sometimes the action that arises will suggest a "story." In other words, the activity can generate the intention, rather than the intention generating the action. When in doubt, move first, and let the movement tell the body what it wants to mean.

We also discussed a symposium, "Alchemy and Effort," I had recently attended, virtually, in New York, about reconstructing dances, and issues that arise therein and the evolution of ballets over time. The question arose, "How do you account for the increased physical skills of today's dancers, when recreating an older work?" The repetiteur noted that they had to modulate their dancers' skills to the expressive intention of the work. In other words, if the original dancer could manage only two pirouettes, and the new one can do five or six with ease, can you "modify" the choreography to accommodate that increased ability without impairing the intention of the work?

I decided that for me, it's a mentor's judgement call. If the intention of the original dance was to push the dancer to their limit, then the intention demands that the new, more facile dancer needs the extra challenge of going to their limit to maintain the original intention. The wise mentor/repetiteur can then push the new dancer to their new limit of virtuosity without damaging the work's integrity.

I pointed out that I had recently been watching YouTube compilation clips of the same ballet variation, done by various ballerinas at various dates in time, which had made it clear that each reconstruction exploited the strengths of the current ballerina: one excelled at complex turns, another at speedy footwork, another at balance. Each variation allowed the ballerina to show off her own forte without damaging the integrity of the steps. Similarly, as a dancer's age might disallow various kinds of physical virtuosity, their performing experience and maturity can enhance their expressiveness and thus the impact of their performances.

APRIL, 2021

Revelation: As we age, the space between life and death gets increasingly smaller. In youth, we are unconcerned about the death, but then finality approaches reality. As you gain experience, your body loses amplitude. But your experience of life can substitute for the youthful energy we've lost. Maturity is admitting your limitations and accepting them. Getting older as a dancer means getting out of your own way.

MAY, 2021

May 19: observation...

In considering Kun-Yang's situation, I find it understandable that fear has begun to limit his dancing and creative endeavors. Perhaps the greatest contribution I can make to eliminating that fear is to reassure him that nothing is irreparably "broken" and give him strategies to get him unstuck creatively.

May 27: insight...

Inspiration vs motivation: As I see it, inspiration is ever present in an artist, like breathing. What is sometimes lacking is motivation: the will to overcome inertia and do the next thing. This can be for myriad reasons: fear, lack of energy, illness, boredom, aversion to being compared to oneself or others; depression.

May 31: Exercise...

The following exercise is instructive in breaking old habits of how to approach making work:

Theoretical Exercise: (*adapted from Alexandra Beller's Praxispace practice.)

"You can do this for something you would like to plan/make. But if you are not in that stage of development, you can make up an idea for a piece you have no intention of making.

"This work grapples with how isolation has both bred and destroyed intimacy.

"This is a creation in which, a la theatre improvisation, the performers are challenged to always say 'yes/and' to every prompt. Chance will feature highly in both the development and performance structures.

"Process is working, and not working, talking about your work, not thinking about your work, staring out a window slack-jawed. I've had more revelations about what to do with my dance while in a dark theatre watching

dances I found boring than I have in the studio, or diligently poised over my notebook.

"But, if I'm honest, 90% of my revelations about how to solve a problem in my work have come to me on the subway or somewhere "accidental."

"I used to have 'a process.' I'd start each piece the same way. Though the phrases that we made were different, and we'd change text, the process was relatively similar. I'd think, read, write, maybe interview, get some ideas brewing. I'd schedule rehearsals, come up with a plan for rehearsals.

"It would usually include teaching phrase work I'd made, eventually moving into manipulation or improvisation off the phrase work. Improvisation would lead to capturing gems, starting to weave them together into sections. And on and on...

"At about the same juncture, I'd invite in a few trusted friends. At another juncture, a work in progress showing. Eventually a half evening of work, shown more formally, and (usually a year later), an evening-length work. I was using the same process yet expecting a different result.

"Over time I realized a new piece required a new process: This one rehearses in silence. This one starts every rehearsal with a ritual. This one ends in a group discussion for the last half hour. There is no improvisation in this one, only improvisational reactions from another. This one rehearses every day for a month, in the woods. That one for two years once a week.

"This may not be true for everyone, but I do hear from many students that they are wanting to venture out from their known world and have a process that felt fresher, yielded different results, failed and succeeded in new ways."

Another way of looking at your creative process is to embrace what you've already made/learned and continue to refine it, discover new facets in it that can be expanded, reversed, speeded up or slowed down, danced with a different emotional intention or "meaning." Many artists: painters, writers, continue to examine their made work over and over without guilt. They repair tiny mistakes, develop second thoughts, refine/alter dynamic energies.

JULY, 2021

July 12/19, 2021: observations on process...

The process of translating words into movements, then into phrases presents various kinds of difficulties, which encourage new ways of solving the sequence. It can seem a very foreign way to work, because it's inorganic, and the "story" we're telling changes slightly every time, gradually settling into a pattern that becomes similar each time. The maker shapes and reshapes the material to their satisfaction, visually, emotionally, like a sculptor reshaping clay endless times before letting it set.

Observing Kun-Yang's movement habit, reveals that it tends to be geometrically amorphous rather than curved or rectilinear in design. By the final run-through of his task solo on 7/12, that distinction became clearer than ever before. He is a natural improviser – the mark of a true performer – and always delivers a "performance" under any circumstances, because his body is physically strong, despite injuries, which gives him a large movement range and facility.

Group Discoveries:

- 1. Memorizing becomes more difficult as we age and muscle memory wanes;**
- 2. We gain increasingly less value by watching ourselves in the mirror vs feeling the sensations of your own body;**
- 3. Inspiration no longer comes in "Aha! Moments." It's rather a simple honoring of the knowledge you've acquired over time.**
- 4. There is nothing new in the universe, so you must keep looking at what already exists in new ways.**

AUGUST, 2021

August 14 & 21, 2021: the process continues...

We had a rehearsal, showing each other our versions of the 17 Tasks. In general feedback, we appreciated each other's contributions, and it felt like a very productive session. In our Saturday group reflection at the end of the week, we discussed what "performance" meant. Pallabi observed that the act of teaching is also a kind of performance, and Kun-Yang and I heartily agreed. There is an enhanced consciousness that makes your senses more urgently attuned to the situation when you're teaching.

What does that mean about our performance as older dancers? For me, it means the stakes are lower, which can ease the nervousness and tension that the self-imposed pressure of trying to prove something often create.

We also agreed and appreciated that the hierarchy of our normal lives as so-called "authorities" vanishes among us as peers.



Gus in Philly before last sharing, 9.25. photo by Rob Li

SEPTEMBER, 2021

September 12, 2021: a guest visit...

Zoom interview with scholar Camille Bacon-Smith: I'm constantly impressed with how both colleagues have responded to the notion of just "doing." Physical actions without agenda get transformed into narratives as needed by the artists involved. For all of us, it happens: we turn the movement into stories – Kun-Yang into emotional ones, Pallabi, into narratives based on rhythm, character, and traditional gestures that use finely-tuned articulations of body parts – fingers, facial features, the angles between joints, etc.; I, into transitory imagery that is subject to change in one's mind with each run through, even though We used no music or other accompaniment the movement remains the same.



Christine Jowers, facilitator of Sharings. Photo: Rob Li

September 19, 25: community sharing, NYC, Philadelphia...

We presented the material in silence, with no music or other outside accompaniment except the sounds of our breathing and body contact with the floor. Only after the showing, did we distribute the "script" of actions that

comprised the movement phrases. Some were surprised that we had each been doing the same actions, altered only by our individual interpretations of the instructions on paper.

Our first public sharing was at Solomons Studio/Dance in New York on Sunday, 9.19, at 3pm. The invited audience, limited to around a dozen invited guests, including Wendy Perron (Dance Magazine) and William Whitener (NYBessie Committee), among others. Christine Jowers (editor, The Dance Enthusiast) moderated the Q&A discussion. Happily, the response of the viewers was enthusiastic, which reassured us.

The following Saturday, 9.25, we did the second public showing at Lin's Philadelphia studio, CHI Dance Center, for an audience of around 20 people, including auditors from The Pew Trust. Jowers again moderated the post-show discussion. The Philly audience gave us a standing ovation, which made us feel jubilant. In both shows the format was to do our own versions of the 17 actions singly, then simultaneously, interacting with each other as a trio.

My personal take-away from the experience was that the most convincing performances use minimum energy to produce maximum effect. Trying to "persuade" the viewer backfires; if you are clear about your physical intention, the audience will find its own way into what you are doing and is most moved by it.

OCTOBER, 2021

October 2, 2021: post-showings reflections...



Gus, Kun-Yang at talk-back in Philly, 9.25. photo by Rob Li

Pallabi spoke of the healing the project had held for her, which was an aspect of Kun-Yang's rationale for instigating it. Being a university professor reinforces the mis-impression of having to be in control. Working with trusted peers reassured us that control was not necessary, which alleviated a lot of needless tension and allowed us all to relax and eliminate the competitiveness of having to prove our superiority over students or colleagues.



Pallabi chatting w/audience after Philly Sharing. Photo by Rob Li



Pallabi, Gus, Kun-Yang have fun at the Philly sharing. Photo by Rob Li

We had all been surprised by how difficult it had been initially for us to remember the sequence of 14 simple actions I had devised as a basic structure. These actions were devised to unify us, as we created our individual tracks: a kind of “dance by default.” In the sharings, we performed them first individually then ensemble, creating a continuity. We each used our own methods for learning the sequence by repetition and practice. The act of repetition itself deepened our familiarity with what came next and began to transform into a “story” for each of us, based on our individual preferences and propensities for emotional narrative (Kun-Yang) or Kathak cultural tradition (Pallabi) or non-objective, physical abstraction (Gus.)

Throughout the process, all three of us were able to bring who we were at each moment to the situation, rather than what we thought we ought to be into the work room, thus diffusing tension and allowing play to enter the work fully. The same held true in the showings, even when adrenaline levels were heightened.

Linda Tarnay, the former department chair of Dance at NYU/Tisch, where I taught for 25 years would sometimes help students change their mood with the three words “act as if...,” meaning if you act confident, you’ll feel more so; and the inverse also applies. At the Philadelphia showing on October 25, we received a standing ovation from the enthusiastic audience, which had clearly been moved.

-Gus Solomons jr, © 2021



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