

DEAN MOSS

AUDIENCE FEEDBACK & CRITICAL RESPONSE TO *Nameless forest*

“I loved the show. It was one of the best things I have seen this year. The performance... was an inspiring place to be. By the end, I was willing to roll on the floor, pile up against strangers, speak, do whatever - because I felt we were all breaking bounds. **It felt like jumping in the pool with your clothes on.**” – Elyssa Dole, audience participant, The Kitchen (New York)

“At one point (one of the performers), while naked and behaving as if dead or wounded, was tended by two people from the audience. Such minor pathos as the scene had all came from those two unrehearsed contributors. **Their tenderness and perfect attention gave the moment more reality than the trained performer.**” – Alastair Macauley, *The New York Times*

“**His mastery of the surreal, visceral, and participatory is truly unique and arresting.** The seamless artistic symbiosis that Dean achieves with Sungmyung is a rare and welcome experience.” – Michael Reed, Director of Cultural Participation and Programming, ASU Public Events

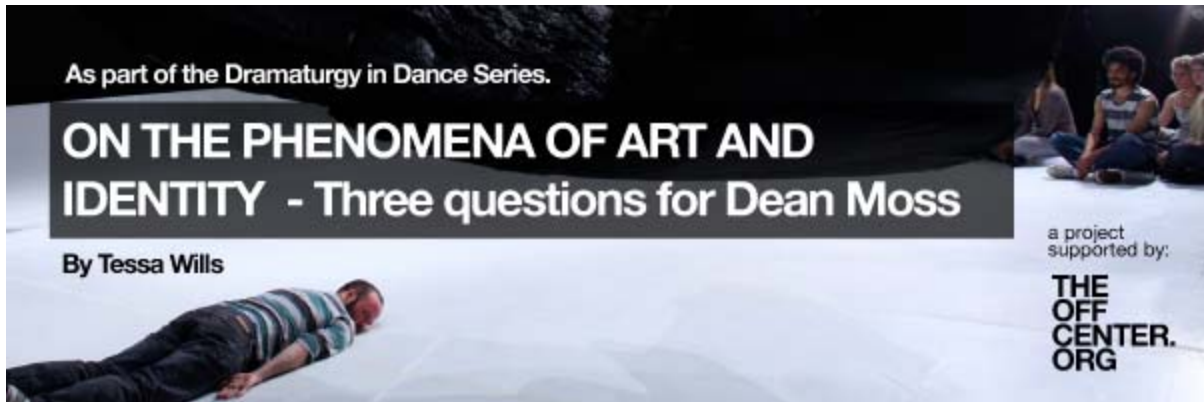
“The dancers' behavior suggests at once a lost tribe and disturbed children, terribly serious about the games they're making up. **The confusion is interesting.** So are the exaggerations of gender... **There's uneasy comedy in this, an edge of terror**—much like adolescence.” – *The Village Voice*

“...what Dean Moss recently offered so eloquently in *his Nameless forest* at The Kitchen a couple of weeks ago **revealed some of the key investigations for our form at this moment in history.**” – Maura Donohue, Culturebot (from *Get Closer: thoughts on activating the audience in live performance*)

“**Visually stunning, mentally and physically absorbing.** That ‘space’ where movement emerges in its completely raw form, the way Moss’ score contained that held great meaning for me. The rarified and defamiliarized bodies, movements, and gestures framed in proximity to familiar ones—each gave greater resonance to the other.” – Kathy Westwater, audience participant, The Kitchen (New York)

“The question of audience vs. performer isn’t new, but it feels ripe again. **The considered sophistication of Moss’ work reveals how wide the field’s reach is in considering what the nature of live performance is today.** In Moss’ *Nameless forest*, several selected audience members become actively engaged in the work and are moved and placed by the company; their presence becomes essential to the remaining (seated) audience’s experience of the work, and our witnessing of their experience becomes essential to our enjoyment of it as well. There is a sympathetic alignment that allows them to serve as our avatars in a very precarious, exploded landscape. They become part of a shared experience, and we sympathetically do as well.” – Maura Donohue, Culturebot (from *Get Closer: thoughts on activating the audience in live performance*)

“This may be up there with the best work I have ever seen. On so many levels. **To bring the performers and audience together this way is one I will never forget.** I found each moment like breathing, like thinking a private thought and then having it front of you for anyone to see.” – Marya Warshaw, audience participant, The Kitchen (New York)



This past January 19 through the 21st, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts presented the west coast premier of Dean Moss's Nameless Forest. As part of THEOFFCENTER effort to contribute critical discourse into dance performance, Tessa Wills sat down with Dean Moss and asked him a few questions.

Tessa: Hi Dean. What are you most excited about in this piece?

Dean: I'm always excited about the audience and the kind of experience they get. That's what drives me. I just had a final rehearsal with the dancers where I asked them...reminded them...they're taking the audience on a ride...the audience has to believe you [the performer] is going on this ride too, so they can go along with you...this is not a shadow play, this is a sophisticated audience...

It's like when you go and see a movie, the special effects fool us the first time, we will suspend our disbelief for a second, but we are so much more experienced about interpersonal dynamics and relationships now. When you bring your presence to an audience, they can see right through you that you're 'acting'...they will suspend their disbelief, but if you give them more than that, they will go with you. And that's a huge benefit.

Tessa: I was really struck by the piece's reflection on the evolution of American Identity and integration of "the other" in the work. What's it like making work about American identity at this cultural moment?

Dean: I think it's mostly confusing there's so many options....and Americans are aggressive about wanting to have those options, but are really lazy about committing to them...they want to be able to do all these things, but they don't want to do the work...they are late realizing that the ramifications of choosing one...what happens when you say..."OK; I'm this, and that, and the other"...can you do that and keep the complexity and the openness to all the options going?



Dean Moss, Nameless forest, Pictured: Eric Conroe, Pedro Jiménez, and DJ McDonald — credit: Julieta Cervantes

It used to be that whether you were black, or gay, or transgender... and you were "other"...it was clear...but now you have all of those "others" really moving into centre of society and that has a whole other implication!....what does that mean?...it opens up many possibilities....what's now the other? and how do you define that?...and since this phenomena is not evenly across society....it's chunks of understanding in different places geographically across America. Here, for example, there is a really digested understanding. But its not like that in other places. So i think...just having a lay of the land..the topography of identity in this country...just having a sense of it is a lot....

And i think that this work in some way explores what the individual is to the group...and vice versa, and the ramifications in that of identity. In this piece we kind of initiate an audience into looking at the world our way. and we feel like that way involves a kind of...understanding of the difficulty of creating identity....creating an artists identity, creating an identity of other.

That is what some Sungmyung Chun's [South Korean Sulptor and poet; a collaborator in Nameless Forest] work steams from...that is the original inspiration, which was how this painful process of coming into knowing oneself. In his sculptures the pain is reflected in the eaten and bruised sculptures that are mostly all his face. What we do as performers in this piece, instead of putting on bloody makeup is to show an experience....we involve ourselves in the same experience that we involve the audience in...we initiate them into a world where that kind of image is valued...where this self inflected circumstance is part of what we look for, we aspire to, we find value in..and that is part of an interesting relationship the community has to an individual. its the way that an individual brings compassion to a community...the community becomes compassionate when it can see itself in others...i think that is something that art does and can do.

Tessa: This piece is an amazingly complex collaboration between sculptors, musicians, performers, technicians, visual artists, even photojournalists and war commentators. To me, your ability to lead this many diverse practices into a single art experience speaks to your project of integrating the "other" into a space of co-authoring. What specific skills do you utilize as an artist which facilitate this co-authorship?

Dean: for a while i was a curator at The Kitchen in New York. I did that for 5 years. And for another 5 i was an advisor. During that time i did a lot of working with

emerging artists, even as I was one myself. What i found was i was good at casting...i was good at looking at people, and putting them together. and i liked my role...how my role diminished. I was able to get myself on the outside of something, and look at the grouping and really feed off of that...set it up and get out of it...and i think that affected how i began making work how i wanted to replicate that process of pulling in other people..giving an initial impetus...and then through the process putting myself through it...

Tessa: ...becaming the outsider?



Dean Moss, Nameless forest, Pictured: Aaron Hodges, audience members and Pedro Jiménez (in striped shirt) seated — credit: Paula Court

Dean: We have to negotiate each other, and in a way that pulled me out of being the only person whose mark making...as an artist I am actually reacting to all the pressures, the issues between artists..the process of making something together, shared creativity and at the same time...I think there's a lot of pressure...or maybe that's not the right word...there's a lot of challenge in it...and...since we are making an object that's separate from ourselves...that we are making something that we are not in, but making together. I feel that we are coming together to birth something else, which reflects our struggle, our negotiating around each other as people, not just as artists doing a job, but as people. I'm interested as a collaborator in not just taking what you do better or different from what i do...but in the negotiation.

Its' this varied and dynamic world that I'm interested in bringing in,...the way that its brutal...i want that in my work. And there's some value i have for it.

Tessa: So you dealt with the concept of " anoutsider" by utilizing your curatorial skills in a new way, in an artistic way to effectively put yourself on the outside of a group of people. But the critical difference is you have a place of power from that outside position...they are working with your vision. And you use that special power to create value around images of struggle and violence which we, your audience might otherwise avoid or misunderstand. Your work seems like an interrogation of the phenomena of art and identity, as much as it is an aesthetic experience.

Thank-you so much for your time, Dean. Welcome to San Francisco.

Nameless Forest was presented as part of the YBCA's ongoing exploration of the relationship between audiences and artists, passive observation and active engagement. Nameless forest was rooted in two years of exploratory communication between Moss and Chun.

Be With Me: The Revelatory Work of Dean Moss

by Abbe Schriber, Program Assistant

A sense of *becoming*, or *metamorphosis*, permeates the work of artist/choreographer/curator Dean Moss. As an attendee to one of Moss's immersive, multidisciplinary performances, you might be selected to transition from audience to performer, in a shift that is sure to forever alter your conceptions of the roles of each. Moss is above all committed to his audience and trusts the intense emotional and aesthetic power of the ultimate surrender: of audience to the performers' instructions. And conversely, Moss engages in a kind of surrender of his own, by allowing room for spontaneity and risking the direction of an artwork on participation and interaction. As audience contribution has been increasingly privileged by performance artists and art institutions, Moss's work stands out as especially generous and powerfully *about* his viewers in a way that differs from most performance, which might use participation to further the ends of the artist. All of Moss's work displays a vested dedication to the contradictions and fragility of interpersonal connections—though his performances can be quite dark, they constantly work toward the possibilities

of understanding, embodying, and ever really knowing another human being.

Over the last decade, in addition to becoming more concerned with the role of the audience, Moss has investigated collaboration as a conceptual conceit and creative process. Though he works closely with musicians, set designers, dancers, choreographers and writers, Moss's collaborative efforts with visual artists in particular have proved to be especially fruitful starting points for the open exchange and reconfiguration of ideas, usually through a performative translation of the artist's body of work.

Moss's first collaboration was the 2005 piece *figures on a field* with artist Laylah Ali (b. 1968), whose work is represented in the Studio Museum's permanent collection. *figures on a field*, like Moss's collaborative performances since, translated the experience of the artwork to the stage, rather than the work itself. Based on Ali's ongoing series of detailed paintings that depict flat, brightly colored characters called "Greenheads," *figures on a field* included a docent-led tour of the performance *during* the perfor-



Video still of *figures on a field* (2005) at The Kitchen, New York
Left to right: Wanjiru Kamuyu, Okwui Okpawasili, Kacie Chang

mance, rethinking the relationships between audience and performer, and audience and work. In addition, Moss used movements, gestures and props—dodgeballs, clothing, belts—that subtly referenced the suggested narratives in Ali's paintings.

The artist's latest project, two years in the making, is a tour de force called *Nameless forest* that debuted at The Kitchen in May 2011. *Nameless forest* expands and challenges the scale of collaboration and audience involvement found in Moss's previously mentioned works, further questioning the responsibilities of community and the individual in both art-making and society at large. It was created in conjunction with Korean sculptor, painter and installation artist Sungmyung Chun (b. 1970) after the two recognized shared elements and processes in their respective practices. Part sculpture and part installation, Chun's dystopic mise-en-scènes are heavily influenced by theater and cinema, featuring a muted color palette and dramatic lighting. The figures, who wear striped shirts and whose faces are eerie clones of the artist's, interlock in scenes of aggression and violence. As he did with Ali in *figures on a field*, Moss renders, translates and distills the unnerving aesthetics and theatrical storytelling of Chun's work into the environment of *Nameless forest*. The choreography generates movement that, though meticulously tailored to each performer's role, is unrestrained and highly physical, convulsive and even violent, seeming to trace the unresolved storylines in Chun's work. Through motion, Moss establishes narrative in unconventional, fragmented ways, eschewing any linear, expository structure—as he put it, dance is itself an “automatic narrative,” one that by default provides an “abstract story of personhood.”¹

Nameless forest is a collective enterprise on a larger scale than any of Moss's previous works. In addition to the aesthetic collaboration with Chun, there are audio recordings of journal entries by war photojournalist Michael Kamber, neon sculptures by artist Gandalf Gavan, original music by sound artist Stephen Vitiello, costuming by Roxana

Ramseur and lighting by Vincent Vigilante. Then there are the performers, representing a wide variety of backgrounds, technical abilities and interests, and ranging in age from twenty-six to fifty-seven. Many of the movements are derived directly from their idiosyncrasies and individual responses to the choreography Moss—who does not appear in the piece—proposed. Again, Moss involves the audience, too, in a kind of ritual process of *becoming* that wavers between comfort and discomfort, intimacy and distance, stability and uncertainty. Discussing the piece, he invoked a quote by Andy Warhol that begins with the phrase, “being born is like being kidnapped.”

Though not quite a metaphor for birth, *Nameless forest* echoes the arbitrary, overwhelming reality of where and how we emerge into life, and how we then muddle through the isolation, pain, and crisis that weaves throughout it. Thus Moss describes the effect of the work on these participants as “a wounding and examination of the audience.”² Up to twelve audience members are seated onstage and called upon to interact directly with the performers, while the remainder of the audience watches from the traditional, removed perspective. This separation creates two vastly different experiences of *Nameless forest*: a full immersion into the events unfolding onstage and a more distant, consumptive experience, in which we empathize with our fellow audience members from afar. The brilliance of Moss's work lies partly in this emotional mixture of compassion and confusion we feel while watching the metamorphosis, as audience members engage in situations that are by turns awkward, unpleasant, intimate and instructive. “Be with me,” the performers whisper at one point to the audience participants, and no matter our level of spectatorship, we have no desire to do anything but—Moss's work draws us in, invites us not just to be, but to become.

1. Dean Moss, in conversation with the author, April 19, 2011.

2. *Ibid.*



Dean Moss in residency at Arizona State University; Photo: Tim Trumble/ASU

CULTUREBOT

arts + culture + ideas

Five Questions for Dean Moss

15 May 2011

by Maura Donohue

Dean Moss' premieres "*Nameless Forest*" this week and next (Thursday-Saturday, May 19-21 and May 26-28, 8 pm) at The Kitchen. Part rite-of-passage, part meditation on the evolving processes of contemporary performance, it



was developed in collaboration with Korean sculptor Sungmyung Chun and features dancers **Kacie Chang, Eric Conroe, Aaron Hodges, Pedro Jiménez, DJ McDonald** and **Sari Nordman**. In work also incorporates diary entries from photojournalist **Mike Kamber**, neon effects from visual artist **Gandalf Gavan**, an original score by **Stephen Vitiello**, costumes by **Roxana Ramseur**, and lighting and technical design by **Vincent Vigilante**. We spoke briefly last week.

So, you're loading in this week and premiering the work, but it's had many showings ASU, MANCC, and recently at Yale. But you're in the final gathering of everything for it, right? Yes. We had three preview performances at Yale. That was a great out of town showing for a very supportive group of students and public. The Kitchen is the premiere after a week in the space and I'm very excited to have the time to ensure that the technical aspects and performers are working well in the space. So, I'm very excited to be presenting it, hosting it. I feel like I'm sharing something with my audience. It's as if there is a gift that you've worked hard on, that you know is a very nice gift and you've gotten this very nice gift for someone you know very well and you are about to present it to them and that's how that's how I feel about this work.

What do you mean about the work as a meditation?

It is a meditation on the work of my collaborator. The meditation is not only what I think his work means, but also what it is in the space and within the circumstances of its presentation. I start to think about myself in relationship to it, my own experience of it including what's not in the work and what is tangentially related to the work. One can be thinking of all of these other things. It takes his exhibitions and installations into a whole other realm of experience and that process of moving from one thing to another becomes the work. The rite of passage is a method to experience the work. The work is set up for some fraction of the audience to navigate through it physically and that journey can be seen as a rite-of-passage. The passage is witnessed by the rest of the audience, but the witnessing that the audience does is like watching a ceremony that you may or may not know all the parts to. You are probably coming a way from it with an impression of how difficult this journey is. Whereas the person navigating through it may have a different experience. One primarily of the embrace that their community is giving them, the support that they are being extended. The off stage audience sees one thing and onstage audience sees another. It's very embracing, very intimate onstage.



You have been constructing carefully considered methods for making the audience experience integral to your work. I was deeply appreciative of it during *Kisaeng* becomes you. What is it about this careful bringing in that interests you? I'm interested in vulnerability again as I was in *Kisaeng*. If you want to get at that and at compassion and at these intimate details of someone's emotional lives, I think it's

important that the participants feel safe and I think having a community that values that enables that.



How did you come to collaborate with Sungmyung Chun? And, how did you work together?

It's important to see his work. He makes figurative sculptures. They are the size of a child and often have his face on them, an adult head on a child's body. The figure is often wounded – light scrapes, a little blood. As you go through his exhibition, these wounds seem self-inflicted. You never see that activity, but you have this sense that there's no one else doing this to the figures. His work is presented not as individual pieces but as whole installations. So you see scenes. He very much likes to think of himself as a storyteller and he uses these stories to explore existential being. I was at the beginning of *Kisaeng*, walking the streets of Seoul and I came across his gallery. I went in, saw his work and thought it was fantastic and would make a fantastic performance work. I left my name and he speaks little English and I speak no Korean so we had a friend translating and we hit it off. He watched the making of *Kisaeng*. In 2007, I saw his work, then made *Kisaeng* and then came back in 2009 to work together with him. It's taken a long time. Working together was and continues to be relatively easy beyond language where we always use a translator. The idea is strong and we quickly found that we could be flexible and patient with it's physical development. Also practically we did a lot of traveling. I have flown Sungmyung and his associate Hyangsuk Choi to the states five times in the past two years. I have gone to Korea twice during the same time. So we put high value on being together in the space and looking at the

work. Part of the process was in the selection of the transferable elements of Sungmyung's work. Asking what was going to make a transfer onto the stage that can be about more than merely animating his characters. With figures on a field, Laylah Ali and I found out right away not to do the big green heads from her pictures. With *Kisaeng* we wanted to avoid the dancers being seen romantically as traditional artist courtesans. With this piece, the narrative that I conceived was kind of a parallel, not based entirely on the narrative of the original work. We broke down that narrative to disrupt and comment on it. Some early inspiration was taken from the structure of *Rashomon*. There was some early inspiration taken from the structure of Indonesian hindu rites in Bali. We both wanted the audience onstage and that meant that if the audience is onstage how we incorporate them must be significant. The audience becomes the core of the work. You're inviting the audience onstage and you're creating a frame with dancers for bringing the audience in.

The work originally developed in a different way. We had a showing at the Kitchen that didn't work entirely. So, I changed the master narrative or the primary metaphor: the underlying logic of the work. The original metaphor was trying to create community with our onstage audience. That became extremely unclear when we showed it – for me and for many who saw it in process and they were right – how are you going to get from here to there. I was faced with this aesthetic problem – how do you keep what you have onstage in this specialized environment and make a circumstance or framework for community. So there became these questions: What's the community? What's the relationship between the performers themselves and this thing they are trying to embody on stage? What is it that artists do in their communities? Why does a community, dance community, artist community – why do they care about individual feelings and the artifact of those feelings? Why does that matter was a big question. So by changing the primary metaphor to a place of initiation – ritual of passage – allows the performers to be the performers. It allows them to take their place within this specialized space and allows us to shepherd our guests and introduce them to this space in a very specific personal way.



You've also included several other elements. What fed that?

Sungmyung's original images and installations have a pure kind of form and are editorially very straightforward. He's



really cut into his sense of self within a particular world. There's not a lot of comment on it or distance from him. He has an interesting humor, but the work is a sincere and straightforward interior dialogue. In bringing it onto the stage, I was aware that people in the role of his figures will carry a more complex sense of presence and that there'll automatically be a commentary. If you are a single visual artist and making work, it can be about yourself but if I take that intimate existential idea and put it on other people it becomes about other voices. So, I wanted those other voices to help form the structure of the work. The performance of *Nameless forest* is in three parts: the first part is homage to Sumyung's world. It is the longest section and there's a kind of journey well depicted. In the 2nd part, the narrative (his internal narrative) is replaced with the photojournalist Mike Kamber's diary entries. Mike's been in many conflicted places. (We're friends from the early 80s when we used to squat buildings together.) He gave me his audio diaries from when he was in Somalia. Using Mike's diary entries as score the performers dance a choreographic variation on the first section. The third section is like a ritual epilogue. It sets up the work in a timeless sort of way and then it asks for a kind of participation from the audience to again fill in the narrative. The audience themselves, their own narratives complete the work.

Dance

Dean Moss and Sungmyung Chun

A choreographer and an artist walk through a *Nameless forest*.

By Gia Kourlas



Photograph: Tim Trumble

One afternoon, the choreographer Dean Moss came across a storefront gallery while walking along a street in Seoul. Inside was a figurative installation by the Korean sculptor Sungmyung Chun, whose work—violent, sinister and eerie—often features groupings of figures with the same haunting face (the artist’s own). “I stopped, went in, looked at it and said, ‘I want to work with him,’” Moss recalls. “I just knew about this guy. We had something in common.” Moss’s *Nameless forest*, which will be at the Kitchen beginning Thursday 19, is developed in collaboration with Chun. At its heart, the production explores the act of initiation. Twelve members of the audience sit onstage with the performers, who include Moss’s longtime dancer, the elegant and austere Kacie Chang. (Always a main attraction in any of Moss’s works, she serves as a guide for the onstage audience members.) For Moss, Chang embodies “an emotional content that has pain and edges in it and, in a way, makes one feel very much for her.” Without giving too

much away, she makes the piece snap. There are two ways to see it—onstage or off—but the point is to see it.

When did you begin working together? How did you meet?

Kacie Chang: It was through Marya Warshaw at BAX [Brooklyn Arts Exchange]. She recommended me to you. I was working in the office, and she mentioned that you were looking for someone and thought I'd be a good fit. You were doing a solo performance there.

Dean Moss: I had done something that I was sort of embarrassed about, so I was doing my hiatus in Brooklyn. [Laughs] We were at the beginning of *Commodities, Identities and Synchronized Swimming*. Kacie came in, and we did a duet together.

Chang: It was our first duet. It was wonderful. It was more like a rehearsal that I walked into, and the weird thing was that I felt like I understood your movement or what you wanted it to look like even more than what you were showing. It was odd because we hadn't met before, but I knew what you really wanted it to be.

Moss: We hit off quickly. You were the only person who could do the movement the way I wanted it.

Chang: It was like I was shadowing you.

Moss: She understood where things were coming from; I was still making work based on myself at that point, so it was important for somebody to be able to do that.

How did you want the movement to look? Why couldn't anyone else recreate it?

Moss: Well, it's one of those crazy things where you think you're some kind of wonderful purveyor of movement that nobody else has [Laughs].

Chang: I feel like it's not what it looks like, it's the thought behind it—we're always thinking while we're dancing. That's kind of what I saw.

Moss: And Kacie got the thinking behind it and nobody else really did. She could anticipate where it might go, and we could have a conversation about the kinds of ideas around the movement, which is different. With most dancers it's, How do I do that as a form, not as an idea? The next piece was *Spooky Action [at a Distance]*, and for the first time I really started choreographing on Kacie. I would suggest something, she would take it and then I would shape it. And it became the model for the way I choreograph now. It's more elaborate, but it all came out of that dialogue of moving and speaking. Also, the dialogue you have with somebody is an exponent of your ideas, so I can do something that's really shorthand—verbally—but I see it on Kacie, and I see what she does with it, and that reinforces what it is. So the conversation is really about movement, and it's quick.

Chang: I also get an idea about what you want; I'll make a choice about it and it's always to serve your idea, but it's also about what choices I make and how you'll react to that.

Moss: Exactly. And she also allows me to shape it on her. I like to cut, but dancers like to own; so you start cutting and there becomes a reaction, and Kacie allowed that reaction to happen. She quickly understood that cutting is really important.

Chang: I became fascinated that for *Spooky* we made an hour worth of material and we took a few months off and came back and we'd have a few minutes. If I trust you with it, then I know [to] just try and try, and if I'm really floundering and if it's not working,

you're going to get rid of it. I knew how it helped Dean; I thought, I'm doing something and I'm making choices and we're building something and I *know* it's not really right, but I just keep going because maybe I'm wrong or maybe it'll be gone. You just go with it and trust that if it's not serving the idea, it's cut. It could come back in the next project. You never know.

How did *Nameless forest* begin?

Moss: I wanted to use Kacie, but I didn't know if I was going to cast women at all in this piece. Sungmyung's work was based on men. I had just finished a piece with all women [*Kisaeng becomes you*] and thought this would be all men, but it just didn't feel quite right, and there was Kacie and Sari [Nordman] and I liked both of them. This was going to be a cast of a lot of people I didn't know. Having somebody who understood what I was doing became important also as a balancing act within the world. And just having somebody who grokked me. Who understands. And can take it seriously. The balance between you and Eric [Conroe], who laughs at the drop of a hat and is nervous about everything—a wonderful performer—but [it was important] to have somebody in the rehearsal process, to have someone on the other side, saying, "No, really. We're going to do this."

Could you talk about your ideas for the piece?

Moss: The piece was based on Sungmyung's sculptures. They are installations, and they have a real fragile and emotional content, and they're a lot about a kind of self-identity, about finding out about what this circumstance of being alive is. And they are a kind of journey, and they are a kind of initiation to life. That's the underlying narrative of his imagery. This work is divided structurally into three parts. The first part is more of an homage to Sungmyung's work, where we try to present the characters and their relationships to their world. Everyone's dressed in costumes by Roxana Ramseur, based on Sungmyung's imagery. So there's that world, and then there is the idea of taking this interior narrative that Sungmyung has and replacing it with a narrative that's more worldly and more about where we live now. I used fragments of diary from my friend Mike Kamber, a photojournalist, while he was in the field in Somalia mostly. He made recordings about his life. Those fragments are edited into narratives. The movement within that section reflects [the narrative in] a kind of cynical way. The first part structurally repeats, but in a more irreverent way. It looks at that and twists it into something that's more aggressive.

Chang: And it comments on itself. So it's a more modern, real, worldly thing in that it's commenting on itself as it's happening.

Moss: It multiplies the complexity. The third part pulls it back into a kind of ritual, but a ritual that takes advantage of the space that we're in and the place of theater and ritual in this world. Now, over the top of all of this, is the audience. Twelve members are onstage, and that audience goes through a kind of initiation process. The piece itself actually dissolves into a kind of ritual of initiation. Even as we are enacting this movement and activity based on these images, we take the onstage audience on a journey.

Chang: The first section has this true narrative based on the interior world that the sculptures create. Then we bring the outside world into it through this narrative and this irreverence, but in the end we bring our actual, true circumstances in. So actually being in

a theater, in the audience, in a presentational space becomes part of it.

Moss: So we have a translation, and the translation includes [Chun's] work, the figures of his work, the space that his work exists in, our relationship to that in theater and performance and your relationship to it as audience. From the beginning, the primary metaphor of the work becomes initiation. We separate the audience and bring them into our world, and then we send them back out into their world changed. It's quite astonishing.

Where do they sit?

Moss: They sit on the stage with us. Their relationship to the performers is very intimate right from the start. There's a kind of small emotional wounding that happens through which we encourage the audience members to think about how this character that we're basing our work on feels about the world. We don't say, "This is how it feels." We say, "Feel this." The performers have to figure out how to perform for those people onstage. The onstage audience is in the round. We wanted to explore the performers performing for this group while the audience sitting outside is looking through a very thick fourth wall. We've since opened the fourth wall up [after a series of showings], so we're not so ignoring the seated audience. At the end, Kacie interviews the onstage audience members. She tells a story and asks them to tell a story; everything faces out to the house, so it becomes a mirror of them onstage. [For the audience] the stories aren't pointed, like, "Tell me what you think of what we're doing." Your story is now being supplanted for the photojournalist's story, which was supplanted for Sungmyung's interior story. Meanwhile, as these interviews are going on, the ritual of the work continues.

How do you maintain the intimacy of performing with the group onstage?

Chang: It was a process of trying to understand how to do that. We're with them—I spend half my time seated with the onstage audience. There can be a clear difference when you're with them and then you stand up and enter the [performance] world. And sometimes that can bleed.

Moss: I didn't want Kacie looking out. I didn't want all those secret ways of manipulating the audience.

Chang: I make a lot of eye contact with [the onstage audience]. I lean on them. We touch them. That became a key element. We wanted it to be real, and if you're touching someone, that's a real thing. I think people got confused—if we talked to them too much, what was real and what wasn't? I always say that nothing is real. Or everything is real, because when someone comes to your house, there's a certain way you behave. You put on a little show for your houseguests. Everything's a ritual. Life's a ritual. We found that they believed it, and that it was very unusual and *real* to sit and invade someone's space and to really sit *with* them.

Moss: It causes real emotional connection, which is what we really wanted to inspire: It's an emotional connection to the performers and therefore to the work. So when somebody does something harsh onstage and comes back to join the group, people think about that person differently. They're sensitized to that performer. People grow attachments: "That's *my* performer," they will say. That's the one that brought me onstage. There's a pride in, That crazy one was *mine*.

Chang: It's another mirror of life. You can see your loved ones do harsh things and have

a different reaction than if you see a stranger do something harsh on the street. It becomes heightened and more complex, and the onstage audience has a completely complex emotional relationship, truly, to what's going on. They're very involved; they have a shared responsibility with us.

There's no way I'm getting on that stage.

Moss: [*Laughs*] People get very shaken by the world—and surprisingly for simple things. We are so happy that we did so many showings because we got to know what was working through them.

Chang: You say goodbye and thank you, and they hug you.

Moss: It's kind of amazing. Also, there's a completely different reaction between them and the audience offstage. [The latter] sees it as a much harder world. It's like watching an initiation ceremony when you don't know the culture. You think, You're doing that horrible thing to those people, yet those people are seeing themselves be embraced by this society, by culture, by everything around them. They're being embraced and shown a kind of joy and togetherness. It's a very strange circumstance. People onstage come out saying, "I felt at peace."

Is that what Scientology is?

Moss: [*Laughs*] The people offstage feel like, That's so harsh, that's so horrible. What are you putting those people through?

Why is initiation a theme?

Moss: That was hard, because it wasn't at first. The early rehearsals were about the idea of community. But seeing [the piece at an early Kitchen showing] and listening to the feedback, I realized that instead of having our performers go toward the audience, what I really needed to do was the opposite. That would give us the control.

Why has this idea of participation taken such hold of you?

Chang: You talk about how you use our behavior—that that's how you build the work. And with *Kisaeng* I thought, He'll never get these [Korean] women to give him that kind of moment of pure behavior onstage. And then he had the audience do it, and I was so floored! It's a development of this fascination of behavior and vulnerability onstage.

Moss: Part of it also comes from being a curator at the Kitchen and looking at other people's work. That experience pushed me into a place of, Where does the work happen? What's that experience for the viewer? I wondered about that, particularly with *Figures on a Field*, where I first saw an audience onstage. You couldn't get these responses and this emotional play without the audience onstage with you. A lot of artists [nowadays] are very much interested in *real* vulnerability. How am I really putting myself out there? Am I making decorative work? I'm not good at [making decorative work], frankly. There are people who do that so much better, but I'm very much interested in a kind of experience, and that dance is about that. How the dance is articulated is really telling you about the quality of that experience. I love the implications that the audience and I are the same, that we understand this landscape of emotion. We share in it. I like to do things that reiterate that, that resonate with that feeling. I don't know where I'll go from here.

[*Laughs*] But this has been exciting.

Kacie's role involves telling a story and sitting with the onstage audience. Could you talk about the part?

Moss: The women's roles were about contextualization, and contextualization got more complicated as the work progressed. Because I started out with the men in relationship to Sungmyung's work, it was easy to make them the content. But the piece is really about contextualization. So the focus starts out with the men and ends up with the women.

Chang: In the end talk, I have to tell a story, and that was a very hard thing to figure out: What was I going to talk about? I choose my stories based on what I feel when I look at the sculptures. If I were in the audience watching the work, what would it bring up for me? What are the moments in my life? So these are the stories that I'm looking to tell when I do the ending.

Moss: Kacie's a fabulous performer, but I think it's a very particular thing to be an actor, and that's not what she does. It's not about recitation or trying to act like this is a true story—it has to be from her life and it has to communicate vulnerability.

Chang: Throughout the piece maybe I acknowledge a kind of complicity within myself. It's knowing what you're doing while you're doing it and not necessarily approving of what you're doing—but you're doing it anyway. And that's the kind of role I feel I have, and that's the kind of story I tell.

Has this changed you as a performer?

Chang: It definitely has. But the change began a little bit with *Figures on a Field* in that you don't have any of the control that you have when you're just performing a piece without the audience onstage with you. There's chaos, and the thing that I learned the most as a performer in this piece is that when you interact with the audience you have to be very firm; you can't be nice, and you really have to adjust every bit of your energy to direct them. How do you get the response you want without asking for it? That's my job. If they do something that's not what we want, that's my fault. So that calibration is really intense.

Moss: Early on at our first showings [of *Nameless forest*] at Arizona State University...

Chang: It was the first time we had done it with the audience participants in this way—we came right at them with all of this crazy energy, and they started to play. You approach them with the wrong energy? It's permission for them to be as crazy as you are. I became truly frightened and had to ask someone to leave. He was doing back to me what I was doing to him, but he was a man and he was pushing me around because I had been pushing him around and making him do things that he didn't want to do. So he pushed back.

Moss: We learned that we had to regulate our energy in a whole different way.

Chang: I have all this energy, and then when I cross this new, invisible line on the stage, I have to drop the energy. I have to communicate.

Moss: And there's a real thing about firmness. The guys put the guests [onstage audience] in a kind of half nelson and really control them. You can't do it lightly, like you're being kind—you have to do it really firmly, like you're dancing with somebody who doesn't know how to dance. So you lead them and they then relax because you are leading them so well. If you are light, they feel like, Oh, I'm not sure what you want me to do—I have to make decisions. You don't want them to make decisions. [*Laughs*] Just go with us. [*Softly*] Go with us. And the thing that we're trying to frame is not so much

what they do but how they feel and how they project what they feel. We build up a relationship, and we break it apart, and you get to see a reaction in the audience again and again and again. From the outside, it looks like it's all about control, and on the inside, it's control and something else. It's definitely not so brutal. With *Kisaeng*, the control was really psychological, and in this piece, I think that psychological control exists and that there is this other level of control. Or suggestion. Or hypnotism. It's an initiation ritual, just like when people say afterward, "I don't know why I was doing that. I don't know why I felt okay. I don't know why it felt like it was the right thing to do."

Chang: They often say they were at peace. It's because they're not making the decisions. That's peaceful.

Nameless forest is at *The Kitchen* Thu 19-Sat 21 and May 26-28.

The New York Times



Kisaeng becomes you: A scene from Dean Moss and Yoon Jin Kim's piece at Dance Theater Workshop about the undercurrents of emotion.

Currents of Desire, With an Assist From the Audience

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO
Published: March 2, 2009

Who knows where Dean Moss ends and Yoon Jin Kim begins in “Kisaeng becomes you.” The inner workings of the collaboration between Mr. Moss, an American choreographer, and Ms. Kim, a South Korean, is just one of the marvelous mysteries of this remarkable work, which had its United States premiere last week at [Dance Theater Workshop](#).

How did they develop the idea of the kisaeng, Korea's answer to the geisha, with their intense and isolating training and lowly status, into a surprisingly natural metaphor for contemporary-dance artists? Which decided to roll the dice every night and gamble the entire show on several dazzling, sophisticated bursts of audience participation?

Who selected the five striking Korean performers, and who thought, Aha!, let's throw a [Janis Joplin](#) song into a mix that includes biting kisaeng love poems, original music by Okkyung Lee and what appear to be Korean pop songs?

You get the sense, while watching, that these choices were made on a gut level; such is the strength of the sensual logic governing this work, which draws us into a private, deeply female world of often unidentifiable emotional currents and desires. (Save for a brief video, in which a man describes an almost love affair with a woman from another culture, the only male desire we see is reflected in the action of these women.)

At one point the five women turn ragged little circles on their tiptoes. Their heads are thrown back, mouths hinging open and shut, like goldfish grasping for sustenance at the water's surface. They are mute in their need, and inscrutable.

At other times they are vulgar, making suggestive use of a microphone, or rowdy, downing copious amounts of alcohol. They screech at one another in excitement and anger and grief. These raw emotions and unpolished behaviors are placed against the seductive, perfected armor of the kisaeng, whose skill as the ultimate purveyors of fantasy is belied by the almost caustic loneliness threading through their poems.

Both the strength and chinks in this armor are made clear when audience members (on Friday, first an elegant older woman, and later two very young women) are drawn into the work. At times they are completely protected, given ceremonial costume touches while their every word and action is coached, and filmed.

Elsewhere they are left vulnerable, without instruction, made to play roles they cannot grasp. On Friday something terribly fragile and beautiful bloomed within these awkward transformations. The gamble paid off.

The New York Times



From left, Mihyun Lee, Yuree Bae, Soyeoun Lim, Jiseon Kwon and Jeongeun Yang.

February 22, 2009

DANCE

The Loneliness of the Long-Distant Courtesan

By GIA KOURLAS

AS Dean Moss knows from experience, it's lonely to be an artist. For his newest work, "Kisaeng becomes you," to be performed at [Dance Theater Workshop](#) starting Wednesday, he explores that isolation through the poetry of the kisaeng, Korean courtesans who were trained in the arts of entertainment, from the 10th to the 20th centuries.

In 2006 Mr. Moss, a New York choreographer whose travels had taken him to Korea (he was also dating a Korean woman at the time), found himself perusing the shelves of St. Mark's Bookshop in the East Village when his gaze fell upon a title, "Hwang Jini & Other Courtesan Poets From the Last Korean Dynasty." His curiosity was piqued. "I thought, who are these people and what did they do?" he recalled.

Highly educated and accomplished in the fine arts and poetry, the kisaeng, being courtesans, were relegated to the bottom rung of society, a circumstance that Mr. Moss, as a dance artist, found familiar. Above all, their poetry captivated him. “They’re not sweet love poems,” he said. “One starts out with: ‘So, what is this love? Is it round or is it flat?’ And it ends with, ‘Mine breaks to a sharp edge within me.’ That feels like my life and the kinds of things I’ve gone through. It feels modern.”

In “Kisaeng becomes you,” Mr. Moss and Yoon Jin Kim, a Korean choreographer who collaborated with him on the project, underscore the similarities between the kisaeng’s poetry and today’s social networking to explore isolation and connection with others. “The kisaeng poems were also like diaries,” Mr. Moss said. “Nowadays we write our diary on a blog, on [Facebook](#). It’s the same thing. It’s just our contemporary style.”

An impressionistic, multilayered work, “Kisaeng becomes you” intends to establish a feeling rather than tell the story of a courtesan. “We’re relating the contemporary artist’s life to the poetry of the kisaeng’s life,”

Mr. Moss said. “It doesn’t tell you how to think about it. It tries to allow itself to be seen in a number of different ways and to use these poems, which amazingly have within them a critical mind.”



Mr. Moss met Ms. Kim in Seoul in 2005 when he was invited to present a talk at a Korean dance festival. “I saw her work, and it was the only piece that seemed to show an absorption of Korean culture, in that I did not understand it,” he said. “I couldn’t predict the rhythms, the actions, the relationships and the juxtapositions. I thought: Ah, this is Korean — this use of the breath and the traditional with a mix into modern. After I read the poems, I realized that I could work with her and bring a Korean cast to do this piece.”

Ms. Kim, speaking with the help of a translator during an interview on Skype, laughed as she recalled Mr. Moss’s proposal that they make a dance together. “I cannot understand English very well but back then, it was worse,” she said. “I couldn’t figure out exactly what he was saying, but I could understand the depth of his idea, and I knew

that I could add onto his ideas with my own. It was like we were connecting and melting through each other. In this project I realized a lot about my own identity. Dean talks about isolation and loneliness, but for me, as a Korean woman, I found inner strength.”

“Kisaeng becomes you” features five female Korean dancers, three poems, music by the experimental composer Okkyung Lee and luminous projections of flowers, to represent the mute beauty of the kisaeng. Audience participation — the dancers select two women before the show to appear in the work — is integral to the production’s choreographic fabric. “They also interview a man in the lobby,” Mr. Moss said. “One of the dancers’ first jobs is to interview a guy for three minutes about his past loves or some pain in his life. We project that as part of the video in the piece. So men are always like a shadow. It’s really a women’s world, but they have a voice.”

The two women chosen in the lobby highlight the sense of otherness that the kisaeng experienced. One participant is given a video camera to shoot the action, which is projected onto a screen in real time. The other is absorbed into the group, essentially becoming a part of the cast. The dancers place a wig on her head and instruct her in how to recite the poetry. When it all works — and both Mr. Moss and Ms. Kim admit that involving a nonperformer is a risk — the production successfully captures the vulnerability of a kisaeng as she looks back at her life.

“There’s an understanding that this is serious,” Mr. Moss said of the audience participation. “We understand that the people who do this want to do it well, and we push them to do it well. Sometimes there’s a real self-consciousness, a real lack of understanding and then, as a director, you get nervous. This is a big part of the piece. Getting the dancers to recognize when somebody’s not comfortable and trying to make her comfortable is important, because the flow of the work depends on them having an interaction with the guest. The guest has to look good. She is the star.”

Dance

Dean Moss, Yoon Jin Kim, and David Roussève Practice the Art of Displacement

By [Deborah Jowitt](#)

Wednesday, March 4th 2009 at 2:55pm



In the crosscultural kitchen of postmodern dance drama, it's sometimes hard to tell whether the chef has embarked on a particular creative process to discover more about himself and his roots, or more about the Other. Most often, it's a bit of both. The customers may be charmed, enlightened, and/or confused. *Kisaeng*

Becomes You by Dean Moss (African American) and Yoon Jin Kim (Korean) is performed by five women dancers from Korea and several different recruits from the New York audience each night. The cast of David Roussève's *Saudade* includes Roussève, two other African Americans, an Indonesian, a native of Burkina Faso, and a dancer who studied India's Bharata Natyam for 22 years.

Moss, who taught for a year in Tokyo and has often visited Korea, was inspired to collaborate with Kim by a book, *Hwang Jini & Other Courtesan Poets From the Last Korean Dynasty*. Lines from these compressed poems, such as "What is this love?. . . Mine breaks to a sharp edge within me," scroll in white letters across the back of the stage, and are spoken onstage quietly, almost noncommittally.

Amid a flurry of video, live feed cameras, and images projected on two screens, the five vivid performers pare down, intensify, and explode the role of the *kisaeng*

(a carefully trained, government or court-controlled “entertainer”). She must be young, beautiful, cultivated, decorous—adept at entertaining high-born men (or simply wealthy ones). As delicate as the peonies we see onscreen, she’s charming at the banquet and (perhaps) compliant in the bedchamber.

In a fascinating exercise in displacement, a handsome woman, perhaps in her late fifties, is brought up from the audience (I believe recruits are first approached in the lobby). The five performers greet her warmly, wire her, dress her in the full underskirt of a *hanbok*, place an elaborate wig on her head, and educate her in behavior. Mihyun Lee tells her what to do, while Yuree Bae demonstrates. The others praise her progress enthusiastically. Her final duty is to perform alone the slow turns, gazes, gentle arm gestures, and slight swoon, while reciting the poetry. She must pick up a fallen scarf and wipe her eyes. One woman videotapes her and another snaps her picture. This time Lee’s coaching is unheard by the audience; it feeds directly into the earpiece of the “trainee.” Lured from her own life into another virtual culture, this spur-of-the-moment performer is bound by its rules, and distanced by the prompting and the inevitable pauses from the import of what she’s doing and saying. The others’ final act, besides applauding her, is to offer her money.

Aspects of a *kisaeng*’s life are abstracted in a variety of ways and given a postmodern twist. In the beginning, a woman is bending over a table; the video shows us that she’s embroidering her hand (!), slipping a needle under the topmost layer of skin (*kisaeng* were skilled seamstresses). Soyeoun Lim rubs a microphone over Jeongeun Yang’s face and neck, and we imagine a novice being trained in fellatio (afterward Lim brandishes the mike like a penis, then bites it noisily). In one sequence, Jiseon Kwon and Bae, smiling and servile, usher in an imaginary male visitor, then gradually go dead—all expression draining from their faces and bodies. For what seems an eternity, they stand staring at us. Several times, all the women revolve on tiptoe, heads back, mouths open, like fish at the surface of a pond.

They also show us the clientele. Lim lines up glasses of beer, rim to rim, balances shot glasses of whiskey on top of them, and, with one gesture, knocks the tiny glasses into the larger ones. Party time. Channeling their inner males, the wonderful performers ad lib, down their drinks, and encourage two women from the audience to drain their glasses. Things get rowdy, a raucous song is

sung. One of the volunteer performers is educated in the delivery of *kisaeng* poetry, the other is given the video camera and told to shoot the fun.

It is she who ends the piece. On display. They've taken away the camera and left her alone center stage in her trim little dress and high-heeled boots. She looks pleadingly over to where the others are sitting on the sidelines, giggles, gazes at us, decides to be brave. She stands there for quite a while before the lights dim. Suddenly: a *kisaeng* waiting to be chosen for the evening's diversions.

WNYC CULTURE BLOG

Performance Club: Of Kisaeng, Gentrification and Arts Marketing

By Claudia La Rocco | Tue, Mar 3, 2009

Performance

Last week was quite an eventful one for our little old Performance Club. First we trekked over to the Chocolate Factory in Long Island City to see “(re)DEVELOP (death valley)”. Then we got embroiled in a discussion on how the heck to market such a delicate work as “(re)DEVELOP.” And, last but not least, we saw “Kisaeng becomes you,” a collaboration by Dean Moss and Yoon Jin Kim that had its U.S. premiere at Dance Theater Workshop.



“Kisaeng becomes you,” photo by Mr. Ng

A few of us headed over to Le Singe Vert after the show for a little alcohol, some French fries and a lot of dissection. And we continued to talk about the necessity and impossibility of marketing such sophisticated, nuanced performance works as those we had seen. How, in other words, do we use words to draw people in without giving them overly concrete expectations about non-narrative works. As the creator of “(re)Develop,” Brian Rogers, asked in responding to some people’s feelings that the stated linkage of gentrification to his work was distracting, “is it important for the connection to be clear, and if so - why?”

I certainly don’t have an answer - and thank goodness that I don’t have to market performance for a living! But I thought it was interesting that both of the works we saw last week had very concrete terms associated with them as subject matter, (gentrification in Brian’s work; Facebook and other forms of social networking in “Kisaeng”) and yet both works were , for me, marvelously resistant to any sort of frameworks one might want to put around them.

But, of course, before the fact and after are entirely different ball games. What did people think of “Kisaeng becomes you” (in relation to “(re)DEVELOP” or on its own)?? I’m all ears...and I’ll hope to see many of you on Friday at [NTUSA!](#)

7 Comments For This Post

Maura Says:

March 3rd, 2009 at 2:21 pm

kisaeng - made me weep. The entry point for the audience into the work through the vessels of the audience participant members was so wrought with “real” energy and vulnerability - both for the work (will this work?) and for the participants (will they survive this? are they okay?) - that I was buzzing in my chair. They made the experience of the “Other” so alive for me. This could be the experience of the courtesan, the contemporary artist, the traveller, the immigrant. “I’m new here” - “What are the rules” The care and detail taken with those moments was so effective as a work that allowed the audience member to experience a work from the inside - which is something I know I’ve been interested in as an artist.

Also, as someone who for years worked on developing cultural exchange residencies and projects (both as an artist and a facilitator) between

American and, mostly, SE Asian artists - I'm very attuned to the way that these deeply profound experiences and desires to share become trite, sentimental or nostalgic. 'kisaeng' - did none of that but made me totally aware of it as a work created by a collaboration between artists who have come from very different places. It made me ache for Korea where I spent a month many years ago and for those eureka moments of connection between two human beings who were a moment ago strangers.

It also made me feel very lonely.

I wish I could write in comparison to '(re)develop' - I had planned to see this since last September but as a mom of two can't commit to going to much till several schedules and energies align - and by the time I went to get tickets - it was already sold out.

Claudia La Rocco Says:

March 3rd, 2009 at 2:39 pm

How beautiful, Maura - thank you.

I think you've said it all better than I could, so I will only add, on the loneliness front: I'm not sure what night you went (though I am told that the performers always picked an older woman from the audience to be their first kisaeng) but on Friday, the woman they picked was so elegant and serene - truly beautiful, and it was an unexpected gift to be presented with this beauty, which is so different from what we think of as being attractive in 2009 America. But the loneliness for me came in when one of the performers said to her, while instructing her, "You're so beautiful," and the woman gave her this "yeah, right" incredulous look, not knowing if she was being made fun of or not (it seemed clear to me that she wasn't, but I was safely tucked into my seat). That moment, how fragile and isolated this woman was just then, and unaware of her own powers - wow. It knocked my breath out of me.

marie-christine Says:

March 3rd, 2009 at 3:33 pm

Well, i enjoyed more the getting together of our little group on Friday than I did the performance. But I am not saying in anyway that the event wasn't good. It was. I haven't reflected much about it but wish to share a few impressions. It was clever and well put together. Did I feel emotional? No. However, the artificiality and "I am in control" message of the performers (as the piece wanted it) in opposition with the vulnerability of the 3 chosen audience members was very powerful. But the message I really was left with is: performances and performers are masters of delusion. (I'll ask my shrink about that... actually, no longer have one). It is kind of sad for me because even with the most control in a performance or an art piece of any sort, the authenticity, the desire to give something, to give shape to some "beauty" (very non-contemporary word; sorry) and some humor is paramount to me.

I guess that is the main thing that I was left with.

Cannot come on Friday as I have a board meeting.

Looking forward to more with P.C.

Martha Says:

March 3rd, 2009 at 4:21 pm

Again, sorry I missed this with PC... but I went on Saturday night, and also thought it was really powerful. Interesting, that the first to be brought onto the stage is always an older woman (yes, so was "ours"). Although this woman was not particularly attractive as she stepped on stage, she seemed completely transformed by the Korean costume, by the lines of poetry, by her own willingness to move as choreographed. She, too, was told that she was "so beautiful" — and at that point, in fact, she WAS beautiful. (But still, how glad I was not to be up there — the exposed one).

I would have described the feeling as vulnerable — but I think Maura's description of feeling lonely is closer — especially in those last, long, uncertain lovely moments for the third woman on stage, with everyone else (including performers) as her audience, watching and silent.

tonya Says:

March 4th, 2009 at 4:08 pm

I wrote my fuller review here: http://www.tonyaplank.com/swan_lake_samba_girl/2009/03/04/kisaeng-becomes-you-and-20-up-front/

but I really liked it. I have to go to experimental dance performances more often. I really liked hanging out with the performance club afterward too! It's interesting reading other people's thoughts. I'd forgotten about how they kept telling the older woman she was beautiful. She did kind of become more beautiful at that point. But she was also embarrassed, like she knew it was fake (at least the woman in the production I saw did), which is how anyone would probably react, so it's human - -but it still went to the inauthenticity of the connections and all. The feelings of loneliness that people mention are also interesting — especially at the end. With the young woman we had in the end, I didn't feel so much loneliness for her but exposure, being up there onstage all alone and having the lights shining down on her and not knowing what to do. I felt it was more like voyeur and looked-at had exchanged roles, and I would have loved for that person to have been a man.

mv sprenger Says:

March 5th, 2009 at 3:46 pm

I really enjoyed both works. You could see that each artist had the time to conceptualize the work, build the work, and then edit the final product. That kind of detail is so rare.

For me, Brian's piece was about the idea of right to space and how spaces change when more people are allowed to inhabit them. I thought it was striking, appropriately aggravating, and poignant.

Dean and Yoon Jin's work took me for a ride. I was nervous that the audience participants might fail the work, curious if that was the whole point, empathetic that they had to chug beer, and completely exhilarated when they all went for it and performed wonderfully.

As for marketing the works and the terms used to help attract viewers...

I think dance marketers try to find ways to give concrete information about

abstract performances in hopes that someone (hopefully a new audience member) will latch onto a particular idea and then take a chance on the work by buying a ticket. The glitch is that in most cases the clearest information is the artist's source material, what they are working from versus what they are creating (this is in large part do to the differences between marketing and creative time lines). Because of this, the audience ends up expecting to see the source and not the artist's opinion, interpretation, or translation of the source.

In re(DEVELOP) gentrification became the tension between the audience space and the performing space and need/want to see or experience more of the other. In Kisaeng, Facebook was nonexistent in the final product but the parallel of contemporary artists' blogs to the Kisaeng's writing of poems is still fascinating. As a viewer that information enabled me to layer what I was seeing with the notion that current day artists are experiencing the same loneliness.

Maybe performance works are more than what we see during that hour in the theater, maybe they are everything written, talked about, and discussed plus the act of watching...

Maybe I just want to let myself off the hook as an artist and an arts marketer...

Maura donohue Says:

March 7th, 2009 at 7:21 pm

I was still thinking through the marketing discussion and appreciate Megan's comments. Wasn't that issue of trying to market work that's in development and not easily explained from the inside to those who witness from the outside part of what propelled "The Nothing Festival?"

And something else about the potential for cross-cultural misreadings and inauthentic or insincere acts... what Kisaeng captured - as well - was the way in which one, as a newcomer, can be quickly embraced by a group - my experience (from a month in Seoul over 10 years ago) was one filled with constant compliments and communal snacking, drinking, and singing.

To consider their repeated assurances of the older woman of her 'beauty' as insincere is to look at a work through an exclusively American (western?) perspective - where notions of forthrightness and the individual are placed in high value as opposed to cultures that have capital "F" - Face, and seemingly compulsive or masochistic or endless graciousness, and the benefit of the larger group, and respect for elders as primary social forces. That is why I loved the work - it brought all of that to the fore for me. Culture is more than language and more than food and more than geography and more than topography and more than how we hold our bodies, or whether it's polite to blow your nose in public or chew gum or care for your parents when they get older or listen to your parents and consider their wishes over your own... and on and on. It's all and more.



Dance Review:

Still Contemplating Becoming - Dean Moss & Yoon Jin Kim at DTW

Kisaeng are Korean young women trained in the arts for the entertainment of aristocracy. In *Kisaeng becomes you*, at Dance Theater Workshop, Dean Moss and Yoon Jin Kim invite selected audience members to "become" Kisaeng. Not really, but they are placed in the uncomfortable position of being onstage for our entertainment, paralleling momentarily the lives of Kisaeng. Mainly, this brilliantly constructed piece serves as a portal into a world which is foreign and mysterious to westerners.

The atmosphere is established from the beginning with both beautiful and disturbing images. Five Korean women skitter on tiptoe, with their necks bent back, faces to the ceiling, and mouths open painfully wide. A woman stitches, and strings thread through the skin on the palm of her hand. Live video projection serves as a magnifier of this image, and is used throughout the piece to show varying angles and amplify selected details.

Audience volunteer number one, a woman, is greeted by the Korean cast with girlish, comically over-exaggerated hospitality. They dress her in costume, wig, and wireless mic, and direct her through stage blocking and delivering lines of poetry. Opposed to typical sappy love poems, these lines of Kisaeng poetry are beautifully devastating: "When I love, I make you my enemy".

Even the girls' night party scene has an underlying ominous feeling. Two other audience volunteers are "recognized" and brought onstage for a celebratory reunion. The girls chug beer and maintain a rowdy drunken noise level. Surrounding this noise, there is a hollow emptiness, like in a bar that's closing, when the voices are still loud but the music has been turned off.

The new audience participant "Kisaeng" are instructed through actions and interactions. At times it is unclear what is going on. One documents with live video, while the other acts, and vice versa. In the end, one is left alone, standing center stage, creating a feeling of loneliness and isolation. The volunteer looks suspiciously comfortable in this position, either due to the beer she just chugged, or perhaps she was prepared for this role.

Dean Moss' multi-layered pieces blur the line between, dance, theater, and performance art. In this collaboration with Yoon Jin Kim, he creates a disturbingly believable environment where nothing in the performance is precious or contrived. It's sophisticated work with a complexity which I'm unable to appropriately articulate. True to my definition of effective art, it left me with something to contemplate for days afterwards.

iDANZ Critix Corner

Official Dance Review by [Julie Fotheringham](#)

Performance: Dean Moss and Yoon Jin Kim, *Kisaeng becomes you*

Venue: [Dance Theater Workshop](#), New York City

Date: February 26, 2009

www.iDANZOnline.com

Force field

Choreographer Dean Moss and artist Laylah Ali bring a series of paintings to life **By Gia Kourlas**

When Dean Moss first suggested to Laylah Ali that her paintings might make a great dance, it wasn't in his capacity as choreographer, but as a curator at the Kitchen. "Her work was really interesting, with a kind of inherent drama," he says. "I thought that somebody could bring this to the stage, and I wanted her to have options. Of course, I really wanted to do it." Moss, who is black, felt a kinship with Ali's paintings before he even met her. "I knew that this person probably grew up in a white neighborhood, and I could connect with that," he explains. "I recognized similar strategies—I insist on a kind of visceral toughness in my work. She has that in hers, but her approach is really cool and distant: A weapon is a belt, a rope, a look, a circumstance, a hand at the throat."

Ali, a 2004 Whitney Biennial artist, watched Moss's choreography and found it to be "mesmerizing, foreign, funny, alienating and resistant," she says by e-mail from Australia, where she is traveling. "The chance to work with him seemed too special to pass up." The resulting collaboration, *figures on a field*, which opens at the Kitchen Thursday 5, explores issues of race and power, as well as the consumption of art, and is inspired by Ali's captivating series of "Greenhead" paintings. While *figures on a field* manages to be as provocative and darkly creepy as her work, which depicts cartoonlike characters as both victims and culprits of violence, it is not, mercifully, a danced version of Ali's distinctive imagery. "The performance is so transformed from the paintings that inspired it that while I recognize the ancestry, the performance doesn't really need the paintings anymore," Ali says.

In *figures on a field*—conceived and directed by Moss in cooperation with Ali—there are scenes and characterization, yet the work doesn't follow a linear trajectory. The cast, including remarkable performers such as Okwui Okpokwasili and

David Thomson, is purposely, as Moss puts it, "brown," to match the stick figures in Ali's paintings. Kacie Chang, a longtime dancer in Moss's work, is the exception; she portrays a museum docent. Before the piece begins, Chang stands in the Kitchen's lobby, asking ticket-



SPEAKING IN TONGUES Dancers perform the new figures on a field.

holders if they're interested in taking a tour (it costs a dollar).

As select audience members wander among the performers—in one particularly harsh instance, they seem to hang from the back wall with belts strapped around their necks like nooses—Chang encourages her tour group to pose with the art. "If they have their own cameras, they can bring them onstage," Moss says. "If not, Kacie has a cam-

feedback and alternate ideas. "At first, she wondered why I needed her as a collaborator," Moss recalls. "She said, 'Why don't you just look at my paintings and make something based on them? Why do I need to do this?' What I was looking for wasn't really material, but a way of thinking. What makes somebody think like that to make that work? I wanted to access those techniques, to be able to generate them through myself. I wanted that understanding. And I couldn't ask for that."

Moss contends that the collaboration garnered him a deeper trust of his own sensibilities. And for Ali, the project got her out of her

cloistered studio environment. "I am accustomed to the relatively autocratic safety of a 2-D practice," she notes. "Living, breathing, three-dimensional dancers who eat lunch and have opinions? That's been new for me." Moss, laughing, recalls Ali's initial reaction to working with people instead of paper. "Normally, she doesn't have to deal with the physicality, the emotions, the negotiating with performers," he says.

"What I was looking for wasn't really material, but a way of thinking," Moss says.

era, and we will e-mail pictures to you. I wanted this dance to be about framing: Just as you are watching this piece, you're watching people in the tour learning about this piece. So the work is a reflection of you in a way, and how you absorb and assimilate culture. That play of duality runs through all of my work."

As the piece developed in the studio, Ali's unusual contribution was not that of a set or costume designer; instead, she attended rehearsals, took copious notes, and offered

"She just draws them, and if they're in the wrong place, she moves them. So there was a running joke about being nice to the dancers."

figures on a field is at the Kitchen Thursday 5 through Saturday 7, and May 12 through 14.

DANCE

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THEATER

Outstanding in Their Field



ART 21

DODGEBALL 'Figures on a Field' will be at the Kitchen until May 14.

By HELEN SHAW

At first nothing seems less theatrical than Laylah Ali's paintings — cartoonlike figures isolated in slices of light blue. Many of her pieces have the gravity of religious icons. But her still images throb with narrative. Ms. Ali's characters tie each other up, dangle belts menacingly at their sides, and do strange battle with a large number of red rubber balls. Persuading them out of their frames and onto the stage at the Kitchen seems to have taken only the lightest push by creator and director Dean Moss.

FIGURES ON A FIELD *The Kitchen*

Inspired by her two-dimensional works, Mr. Moss has created "figures on a field," a literally overwhelming piece now at the Kitchen. He throws much of the postmodern book at us — performers talk to the audience, a docent conducts her tour in the middle of the artwork. But devices that often feel like self-conscious pomposity elsewhere come across as generous and moving here.

The company, some in street clothes that recall military garb, first move slowly, unaffectedly across the stage. One woman is alone, but in silence her companions arrange their group around her. Soon this phase of acceptance explodes when dozens of bouncy red balls come crashing into the space.

The ensuing, violent game of dodgeball raises welts and tempers, nearly driving some of the dancers off the stage for good.

When the aggression dies down, a small group of audience members takes a tour through the light blue playing space. Around them, more terrible images have begun — Okwui Okpowsili drags Wanjiru Kamuyu around by the jaw, or Keila Cordova finds herself trussed and wiggling across the floor. Men hang, lynched by belts, and friendships struck up among the cast turn ugly.

Mr. Moss keeps the tone light, though the funny moments add up to massacre. Red stickers pasted to a standing man suddenly look like laser sights; piles of bodies accumulate when chatty groups slide unconscious from their chairs. They always rise, though, to bound around in a circle, or to begin another game.

The impression builds of sweet people doing awful things — recalling countries where children carry automatic rifles or stone each other in the street. The attentive tour group, happily listening while men dangle from improvised nooses, spotlights a callousness that seems familiar. In Darfur, in Rwanda, we have affected the same polite interest while bodies fall in the dust.

♦ ♦ ♦

MONDAY, MAY 9, 2005

ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2005

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

BEST OF 2005

The Artists' Artists

To take stock of the past year, *Artforum* contacted an international group of artists to find out which exhibitions were, in their eyes, the very best of 2005.

KARA WALKER

Figures on a Field (The Kitchen, New York) Choreography by Dean Moss, inspired by the work of Laylah Ali: violent, flat, and funny—and violent again.



Ongoing
by **Elizabeth Zimmer**
May 10th, 2005 12:10 PM



Field notes: Okpokwasili and Kamuyu
photo: Art 21

Dean Moss and Laylah Ali

The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street
212.255.5793, ext. 11
Thursday through Saturday at 8

If you arrive early for Dean Moss's 40-minute *Figures on a Field*, you'll see the choreographer hanging high on the Kitchen's back wall, precariously perched on protruding bricks and clinging to a couple of others. Collaborating with visual artist Laylah Ali, he's transformed the huge space into a sort of gallery, in which a cast of six expressive "brown" performers (Keila Cordova, Pedro Jiménez, Wanjiru Kamuyu, Okwui Okpokwasili, David Thomson, and Moss) enact a variety of vignettes, posing as art viewers, basketball players (abusing the smallest among them), and abject crouching figures who might be prisoners or Islamic worshippers. Scenes form and dissolve, evoking circumstances of racial persecution, injustice, inequality, violence. We hear, as if from a distance, the sound of explosions.

A seventh performer, Kacie Chang, serves as docent for an onstage tour. A group recruited from the audience, mostly white, reinforces the sense of a gallery situation, staring at the "brown" people, objectifying them, marking them. Using visual tropes from art and sport, Moss manipulates Ali's images to deliver an experience that elevates—or reduces, depending on your point of view—painful realities to the status of art.



PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Life's mystery: Who's framing whom?

BY APOLLINAIRE SCHERR

May 11, 2005

Laylah Ali's delicate gouaches, featured in the last Whitney and Venice biennales, subject stick-legged cartoon figures to gruesome acts. In one disarming small painting, three bubbleheads hang by ropes, rendered as elegant lines, while one bystander forces another to watch. The reluctant onlooker happens to be missing his arms and a leg, which the hanged men dangle in their own arms. "Look," the coercive stickman seems to be saying, "they have something you need."

The bubbleheads are left to deal with a legacy of violence perpetrated on their people. They're also stuck playing the parts of aggressors as much as victims. All the figures - the hanged men as well as those haplessly ensconced in Klannish regalia - are brown, which is to say, black.

In a brilliant move, choreographer Dean Moss translates Ali's knotty concerns to the stage (with Ali as adviser) by scrutinizing the act of translation itself. The exquisitely constructed "figures on a field" asks: What happens when you frame real people as if they were flat, fictive figures? It moves with stealthy grace between the political and aesthetic meanings of "frame."

Moss' stage design features frames inside of frames: a white rectangle painted over The Kitchen's black back wall, against which Moss is flattened as we enter the theater; the white flooring that demarcates the stage space, to whose borders the seven performers are highly keyed; and a video overhead in which the cast briefly squiggles past as speedily as flagella.

To begin, the performers array themselves in deliberate clumps and look anywhere but out front. They're avoiding us. Like all audiences, we're framing them.

In beautifully paced scenes, they move between pretending to hurt each other and really hurting each other, or close. On the one hand, they stick Band-Aids over invisible wounds or pile each other up like trash. On the other, they play a fierce game of dodgeball (with balls as bumpy as skin). In the most disturbing moment, Moss hands David Thomson a belt; Thomson tightens it around Moss' neck and drags him backward. Then, Moss hands him the belt again for another go.

Starting when Marcel Duchamp brought a urinal to an exhibition, artists have made the point that the way an object is framed changes its meaning. "Figures on a field" makes the more frightening point that this framing exerts a force on the picture itself, not just on its meaning. Because the theater is blind to the real - everything is play - Moss can get someone to asphyxiate him, and we hold our tongues.

The stage of "figures on a field" is both a stage and all the world - or ours in America, anyway.

FIGURES ON A FIELD. Conceived and directed by Dean Moss, with Laylah Ali. Continues through Saturday at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., Manhattan. Tickets \$15. Call 212-255-5793 or visit www.the.kitchen.org. Seen Friday.

The Arts

The New York Times

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2002

DANCE REVIEW

Video Layered on Movement Plays With the Sense of Time

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Dean Moss's rare gift for the fluid integration of live dance and film imagery was much in evidence in his intriguing new "Supplement," performed on Tuesday at the Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church.

In "Supplement," set to snatches of atmospheric music by Marc Ribot, a young woman (Kacie Chang) waits in an apartmentlike enclosure suggested by projections on three panels placed about the empty stage. Shadowy men and a woman enter. A one-winged angelic poltergeist (Hiromi Naruse) breaks the calm, tossing foam bricks and other props and generally causing cheerful havoc.

Eventually the woman and her friends (Marcelo Coutinho, Jason Marchant and the tantalizingly contained Kathryn Sanders) interact in ways that evoke life lived in real

time, though mysteriously. There are moments of tedium. The choreography, created with the performers, is less interesting than the visual effects. Mr. Moss's video imagery fractures and layers time.

A hand kneads body parts in a slow, methodical therapeutic massage filmed in close-up and projected on one screen. On the other screens, an apartment interior in tangy color provides the set and ambience. In another step away from reality, the performers move behind the screens, their now-blurred bodies looking suddenly like watercolor portraits bleeding onto paper. Sometimes they begin a movement there, then crawl out to become startling, sharp-edged humans again.

The five performers are first-rate actors and movers. David Fritz's lighting is subtly adroit, and there are fine contributions from the witty costume designer Gia Grosso, the screen designer Eric Guzman, the



Tom Brazil

Hiromi Naruse as an angelic poltergeist in Dean Moss's "Supplement," at Danspace Project.

photographer Ayumi Tamaki and the performance consultant Yasuko Yokoshi. But Mr. Moss's imaginative eye is the crucial element here. The program will be repeated today through Sunday at Danspace (131 East 10th Street, East Village).

Arts & Leisure

Casting a Critical Eye on Dances, Including His Own

By GIA KOURLAS

DEAN MOSS is a choreographer and curator whose opinion counts for much in the New York dance scene. But his journey to being an influential tastemaker has not always been smooth.

Raised in Tacoma, Wash., where his parents, Harold and Bill Moss, are prominent civil rights activists, Mr. Moss originally planned on joining R.O.T.C., but a single dance class in college changed his path. In the late '70s he traveled to New York to train at the Dance Theater of Harlem, then quickly switched his focus to Martha Graham and musical theater. While at an audition for an "Alice in Wonderland" arena show, he asked himself a tough question: "What are you doing?"

Mr. Moss auditioned again, but this time for David Gordon, one of the founders of the groundbreaking Judson Dance Theater. He stayed for 10 years.

"It really is falling through life," said Mr. Moss, 48. "I was clueless."

He recalled his response when Marya Wurshaw, director of the Brooklyn Arts Exchange, where he was an artist in residence, once asked him what he wanted people to think about his work: "I said, 'I just want them to think I'm intelligent.' Because I've made so many stupid mistakes."

Now Mr. Moss, whose newest dance, "Supplement," will be performed at Dancespace Project at St. Mark's Church beginning Friday, is the epitome of discerning taste. His curatorial triumphs at the Kitchen, the Chelsea performance space where he oversees dance and performance works, include the mixed program "Talk-a-Dance" and the recent seasons of Lucinda Childs and Xavier Le Roy.

As Ellise Bernhardt, the Kitchen's executive director, puts it, Mr. Moss "does not suffer fools."

"My take is that because he started in dance late, he doesn't take any of it for granted," she said. "He expects a certain kind of rigor from anybody whose work he brings here. I think he's done an extraordinary job as curator, and actually one of the things I really enjoy is that our tastes differ, and that we have huge arguments. Dean has no room for sentiment, and I guess I do. But at the end of the day, I totally trust him. He's so absolutely clear about what he likes and why he likes it."

His own choreographic experiments are marked by subtle, minimal movement, images glide by like flash photographs, leaving behind a mysterious and unsettling residue of carefully plotted emotion. In the two solos he will perform at Dancespace, "Board Dance" and

Gia Kourlas is the dance editor of Time Out New York.



Dean Moss, center, rehearsing "Supplement" with Kathryn Sanders, left, and Marcelo Coutinho.

Dean Moss

Dancespace Project, 131 East 10th Street. Friday-night Sunday, Nov. 5, Nov. 7-8.

"Porous," and the new group work, "Supplement," a meditation on isolation, dissolution and the body, Mr. Moss continues his rich visual exploration of what happens when dance and video coexist.

"Supplement" focuses on a woman (Kacie Chang) who finds personal transformation after visiting a Rolfer (Marcelo Coutinho). The massage therapy, developed by Dr. Ida P. Rolf, purports to unify the body by targeting the connective tissues that attach muscles to bones. But Mr. Moss's work has less to do with the act of Rolfing than with what drives people to seek out emotional relief through bodywork.

"You're asking the Rolfer or a bodyworker to help

Dean Moss is both a maker of cerebral, minimal dance works and an arbiter of taste in the downtown dance world.

recognize emotions. That play of perception, when the ebb and flow of those emotions are apparent, that is when the dance is interesting for me."

As with all of his dances, "Supplement" features extensive video work, including tape of his dancers relaxing at home, but Mr. Moss is not drawn to integrating technology with old choreographic ideas. Rather, he uses video as a way to add dimension and density to the theatrical picture.

"I'm interested in the layers of presence and in how thick the information is for a viewer," he said. "How you use your mind when you have to see all this stuff and take it in."

The juxtaposition between intimacy and isolation is at the core of "Supplement." For Mr. Moss, who at the age of 6 was enrolled in an all-white school in Tacoma, where his father was the first black mayor, there is a personal history behind that detachment.

"I integrated a white school by myself," he said. "It was really hard. The social aspect was huge, and I don't think my parents had a clue about that. I grew up being the odd black guy with white friends, to be honest. So that isolation has continued to this day."

His early career choices had something to do with that disconnection. "My decisions generally go against something that I feel like I know," he said. "That is the reason I auditioned for David Gordon and didn't go into Bill T. Jones when he asked me or didn't follow in the same path as Ron Brown. My interest was always slightly different than that I have always wanted to know something I don't know."

In the fall he will begin working on his first collaboration with a black artist, Laylah Ali, and this spring he will create video for Yasuko Yokoshi, a fearlessly idiosyncratic soloist with whom he lives in Brooklyn, as part of a project to be presented at P.S. 122 in the East Village. And it turns out that the rigor he demands of other artists does not waver in his personal relationships.

"Dean validates my thoughts, and he guides me," Ms. Yokoshi said. "What he's most good at is that he raises the bar so high that I will say, 'No way — I'm not going to do that!' He constantly challenges me."

Time Out

New York

Year-end special

- The best and worst of 2002
 - Making your resolutions
 - Last-minute for the big night
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The Observer's guide to impulsive direct mailings
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Stores where you can snack while you shop

THE ETERNAL CITY
Pete Hamill conjures a New York that's impossible to leave

THE DARK
bites into C's newest food craze

The best and worst in Dance

Best Performances

American Ballet Theatre's productions of Frederick Ashton's *The Dream* and *La Fille mal gardée*

The Bessies hosts, Keely Garfield and Lawrence Goldhuber

Keely Garfield's *Free Drinks for Ladies with Nut*

Kirov Ballet's *La Bayadère* and *Jewels*

Noemie Lafrance's *Descent* at the City Court Building Clock Tower

Xavier Le Roy's *Self-Unfinished* at the Kitchen

Sarah Michelson's *Grivdon @ the Grivdon: Concrete*.

Mark Morris's *V, Foursome, Sandpaper Ballet, A Garden* and *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato*

Dean Moss's *supplement*

Ohad Naharin's *Naharin's Virus*

David Neumann as George Jones in Stacy Dawson's *Best Western*

New York City Ballet's June 8 performance of George Balanchine's *Who Cares?* with Nikolaj Hübbe, Jenifer Ringer, Jennie Somogyi and Janie Taylor

Twyla Tharp's *Movin' Out*

Christopher Wheeldon's *Morphoses*

Worst Performances

The New York debut of Raiford Rogers's Los Angeles-based ballet company

The New York City Ballet *Live at Lincoln Center* telecast, a stream of largely terrible Diamond Project ballets

David Parsons's *Too Many Cooks!*



NY OUTLOOK
Mario Dawson teams up with Mike Lee again in *25th Hour*

THIS WEEK: MORE THAN 250 FREE EVENTS!

DANCE

By GIA KOURLAS

TALKING and dancing have not exactly been constant companions over the last 30 years, but neither have they been strangers.

When Elise Bernhardt, executive director of the Kitchen in Chelsea, suggested to the choreographer Dean Moss that the performance space might present a program combining the two, he examined the idea from both artistic and curatorial points of view. A Bessie-award winner and the Kitchen's dance and performance curator, Mr. Moss imagined ways in which serious work could be presented in an irreverent setting.

"I didn't want it to be a historical document," Mr. Moss said recently. "I'm influenced by Richard Move" — the Martha Graham impersonator — "and what happens when cabaret or vaudeville is introduced into an evening of dance. It's just a lighter way of looking at work that is engaging for the audience. The entertainment becomes part of looking at the depth of the work."

To take charge of what eventually became "Talking Dance," two programs fusing text or talking with movement, Mr. Moss approached Lucy Sexton and Anne lobst, the outlandish duo of Dancenoise, the performance-art venture they initiated in 1983. As hosts, Mr. Moss decided, they would lend the two evenings a modern variety show flavor.

"I'm thinking of it like 'The Carol Burnett Show,'" Ms. Sexton said. "She would have hosted the program, but then had a cast of characters that were also part of it. What I like about it is that it's a way to clean the palate in between each performance. Sometimes when you have evenings where one piece flows into the next, it's hard to readjust. Even though what we do may be utterly silly, it does help to reset the stage."

The first program — this Wednesday through Saturday — will be led by Ms. Sexton in her familiar role of the Factress, the loquacious host of "The Lucy Show," a talk program presented by P.S. 122 in which guests discuss dance. Mike Iveson will join her, as he does on "The Lucy Show," as the Factress's sidekick and bitter-tongued German, Nurse Vendetta K. Starr; Ms. lobst will most likely appear in her longtime character role of Naked Lady (literally so). Largely rooted in the old school, the choreographers who will present work are Ann Carlson, Blondell Cummings, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Bill T. Jones (Friday only) and Yvonne Rainer. Jonathan Demme's film on Trisha Brown, "Accumulation With Talking Plus Watermotor," will be screened.

At the second program — Feb. 7 through 10 — work by a more recent crew of choreographers will be on view, including Katie Duck, Elevator Repair Service, Foofwa d'Imobilité, Miguel Gutierrez, Sarah Michelson, Cynthia Oliver and Jamie Sneider.

This Friday and Saturday at the Kitchen, the dance scholar Maura Keefe is to moderate a panel discussion with participants from both programs.

The crucial difference between the two groups is delivery: younger practitioners present their work in a more casual, deadpan way than any postmodernist choreographer ever contemplated. "The thing that the younger choreographers seem to be doing is throwing away the framework of theater so that they're free and very light," Mr. Moss said. "I think it's as big a difference from classical modern to postmodern as it is from postmodern to now."

Both Ms. Michelson, 36, and Mr. Gutierrez, 29, embody that approach with wonderfully detached yet forceful performance styles. In "It's Time for Another One of Those Crazy Talking Dances," Mr. Gutierrez takes a satirical look at the form; joined by Ms. Michelson, he offers a lecture-demonstration that mocks talk-

Movement Leavened With Language



ing dances. Mr. Gutierrez, who danced with Joe Goode for three years (and now performs with John Jasperse), says he thinks text in dance is frequently a turnoff.

"I've been involved in a million workshops about how to use talking with dance," Mr. Gutierrez said with a sigh. "When I watch talking dances, I tend to see the methodology rather than the piece. It frustrates me. The language always seems to be in the foreground. It's often 'Walk to the front of the stage and talk, then run to the back and dance around.' I was psyched to have this

DANCE



Left, Vincent Laforet/The New York Times; above, Dana Ann McAdams

Top, Sarah Michelson and Miguel Gutierrez; left, Dean Moss, choreographer at the Kitchen; above, Lucy Sexton, left, and Anne Iobst, hosts of "Talking Dance," fusing text with movement.

opportunity to perform, but I kind of had conflicting feelings about what I was being asked to do."

Creating "It's Time" allowed Mr. Gutierrez to address those doubts. The tongue-in-cheek duet essentially catalogs all the ways choreographers use text. In it, the pair recite lines like "Talking in the foreground of the space creates a cinematic effect" and "Sometimes people talk when they improvise and let the words be affected by the way they move."

Ms. Michelson, who comes from Manchester, England, confided, "Miguel and I are really a bit rude, which is part of our charm, I'm sure." Their shared sense of humor may have more to do with it. Mr. Gutierrez said, "One of the things language can achieve is to create an inviting place where people can laugh."

Both Mr. Gutierrez and Ms. Michelson are intriguing choreographers and performers. Ms. Michelson is particularly fearless; in a recent collaboration, "Blister Me," with Julie Atlas Muz, both dancers performed nude. Still, Ms. Michelson is not deliberately subversive

in her dance-making; rather, her work is based on the absurdities of life, in which movement and text unfold as if by instinct, even if the premise seems ludicrous.

Such is the case with her latest piece, "I'm in Fawn," a quartet with Mr. Iveson, Mr. Gutierrez and Tanya Uhlmann, that is both a reaction against the nudity in "Blister" and a humorous look at deliberately using text in dance. "Fawn" focuses on nylon, as in pantyhose. "It's an examination of the difference between nylon and actual skin," Ms. Michelson said. "I always make dances with talking in them, but being conscious about making a dance with talking in it is really hilarious. We're going to have text on our T-shirts and on video; we'll even sing a song. It's a bit underhanded really. And we will be wearing pantyhose."

One compelling part of the series could surely be observing choreographers like Ms. Rainer and Mr. Gordon as they watch their younger counterparts. Mr. Gordon, 64, who made his first talking dance in 1963 ("Random Breakfast"), will present "Short History," a solo based on work from 1972 and 1978. It will be performed by his wife, the actress and former Merce Cunningham dancer, Valda Setterfield.

Mr. Gordon acknowledged that he is not in love with talking dances. "At some point, frankly, I turned off all the words in my work and began to deal with music," he said. "It was after I had entered the 27th performance space and was listening to somebody else tell me about their grandmother. I'm less interested in confessional stuff than in something that transcends the telling to become something that is more art and less a way of unloading yourself. So I do not go to see people simply because I know they're about to spill something."

Mr. Gordon said he decided to participate in the Kitchen program because of Mr. Moss, who danced with the choreographer for 10 years. "Dean knows I don't really talk about this stuff," Mr. Gordon said. "I either do it or I don't. But Dean was so amazing to have worked with me for all the years that he did. So what he asks for I do. There have been other programs with people talking that I have declined to be a part of. Categories make me nervous, but Dean really seems to be approaching this like, 'Imagine a series of paintings put together in a show because they are political.' This seems to be that and not something else." □

The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 1999



Tom Brazil

Marcelo Coutinho, left, Dean Moss and Kacie Chang at the Kitchen.

DANCE REVIEW

Shadowy Half-Lives Cavort With the Ghosts of Swing

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Ghosts from several worlds and times inhabit Dean Moss's new "Spooky Action at a Distance," performed on Wednesday night at the Kitchen. Most immediate are the ghosts embodied by Mr. Moss and his dancers, Kacie Chang and Marcelo Coutinho. Fred Astaire is seen as clearly, on a television monitor, putting on blackface for his "shadow" dance with Bill (Bojangles) Robinson in "Swing Time," an inspiration for the piece.

The next layer of ghosts includes a large silver creature, dressed in a stiff black net suit, that hangs over the shadowy half-lives unfolding below. In the furthest reaches of this universe are film images of dancers projected on the black back wall, as insubstantial as wisps of smoke. Crowding in around them are wisps of another sort: bits of 1930's-era popular music and music by African composers, and excerpts from the writings of Noam Chomsky, Richard Feynman and David Ruelle, some of

them about quantum physics.

"Spooky Action at a Distance" is probably not for those who like dance with a strong center. Mr. Moss's images fly off like sparks from a non-existent torch, creating a moment's glimpse of the perimeter.

Mr. Moss is also not interested in delivering gut-wrenchingly plain messages about society. Instead, the black dancer and choreographer puts on the black suit and slips in and out of a solo that draws on the kind of eccentric capering that came to represent slave dancing and a generation of black performers in Hollywood film, including stars like Robinson.

"Tale Telling Telling," a 1997 solo, choreographed and performed by Mr. Moss to music by Kevin Volans, is less subtle but just as ghostly. Its central image, of a black man in a dark suit that becomes dusty with white chalk powder, is powerful.

David Fritz designed the lighting for the program. The stylishly insubstantial costumes for "Spooky Action at a Distance" were by Gia Grosso and Leah Chalfen.

DANCE

Preview

The ol' ultraviolence

Dean Moss nods to Bill Viola in his harrowing new work, *American Deluxe*

By **Gia Kourlas**

Within Dean Moss's dances are visual landscapes. Haunting, extreme and complex, they allow his audience to poke its head into a wholly unusual world. In his dark and dry *American Deluxe*, the theme is violence. And lest you imagine you'll see dancers hurling themselves at one another in mock anguish or just looking mean, prepare yourself for something different. Moss and his three exceptional dancers—Kacie Chung, Jason Marchant and Hiromi Naruse—brandish weapons in the form of small boards, with which they whip and smack each other. Moss's realization of violence is neither funny (although you might laugh out of nervousness) nor artificial. It's harrowing.

For all its aggression, *American Deluxe*, which will be at Smack Mellon Studios through March 18, is also strangely seductive. Broken into five sections, the work unfolds more as if it were an installation than a dance because of its dreamlike lighting, by David Fritz, and its remarkable setting: a 5,000-square-foot former spice factory in Brooklyn. "It's a gorgeous space," Moss says. "It's not comfortable, I'll say that. Dress warm. But it's spectacular, with 40-foot ceilings and all wood beams. You can still see layers of cinnamon spice. You can smell it a little bit, but it's very faint. It's like the ghost of spice."

While the structure of the work was inspired by Bill Viola's 1992 video-and-sound installation *Slowly Turning Narrative*, which featured a large rotating panel with projected images (there's a similar panel in *American Deluxe*), and an ancient Hindu ceremony, its beginnings arose out of Moss's relationship with his younger brother. "In 1992, I made a video piece called *American Deluxe: Portraits of My Brother*," he recalls. "We talk about our life together as sibling rivals—he's the bad seed to my Goody

Two-shazes. But I was always very manipulative."

This brand of bullying, however passive, was Moss's point of departure for *American Deluxe*. "The kind of violence I'm interested in is sort of intrinsic," he says. "It's the kind we survive and thrive on and that becomes a violence of conversation, of culture, of ideas—either appropriating or clashing against culture."



ALL THE RAGE
In *American Deluxe*, Dean Moss creates chaos.

Moss incorporates footage from a home movie that his father filmed when he and his brother were children; it is screened on a large version of the boards that the dancers use in their assaults and revolves like Viola's did in his original installation. "I'm tired of seeing projected images big on the back wall and somebody dancing in front of them, or on monitors that are so small you can't see them," says Moss, who is also the dance and performance curator of the Kitchen. "They never seem to be incorporated well. In the board dance, I'm essentially dancing with these images and reflecting them out to the audience; the audience, in turn, is reflected onto the board as it pans around. So it becomes this crystalline moment in the piece, from which everything

else spills out and is reflected back."

Moss is as much a director as a choreographer, but his experiential leanings didn't come naturally. He was lured to New York from Tacoma, Washington, by Arthur Mitchell, who granted him a scholarship to study at Dance Theatre of Harlem. But he didn't stick with ballet; within three months, he moved to the East Village and began taking classes at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. "Martha was fabulous," he says, laughing. "She basically told me I was a little bit too small for her kind of man, but she was sweet. It was a lucky time for me."

He eventually joined David Gordon's company, where he danced for ten years and, in 1992, began creating his own performance and video works. With *American Deluxe*, Moss completes a quartet of projects that deal with mythology used as a structural device (for his last piece, *Spooky action at a distance*, Moss was awarded a Bessie). "They all come out of per-

sonal experience," Moss explains. "I'm not making pieces about seasons or high spirituality. They seem to be a set, and together they form a kind of portrait."

They're not easy to produce; it took Moss more than a year to complete *American Deluxe*. "I'm not so bright," he says with a smile. "I don't know where I'm going when I start. I work toward being able to have a conversation with the dance. I don't make work based on conceptual ideas, manifestos. I fall into it, and that's why it takes so long. I have to trust that I will see it—that I will catch it with my eye, rather than my mind."

Dean Moss presents
American Deluxe at Smack Mellon Studios Thursday 8 through March 18.

dance

the village VOICE

May 6, 1997

Moss Gathering

RReal moss—the mysterious, velvety green stuff that appears on rocks and the like—has the look and feel of golf-course grass for ants. Dean Moss, formerly a dancer with David Gordon, has recently been spinning out dance/theater pieces with a similar magic of miniature. His latest, *Navel, My Navel*, (Danspace Project, April 17 through 20) is mundane only in its title.

The five-part "multimedia event," in which Moss charts his place in a family line, instills an iridescent mood even before it starts. While waiting for the work to begin in a space lit by the first of David Fritz's shadowy lighting effects, we hear distant voices of children and birds and see a grainy haze projected on a large video screen.

Moss is a master of theatrical halftones. Everything he concocts contributes to an overall shimmering effect. His worlds have the enticement of whispers; their delicacy makes us pay unusually close attention. (For some reason his mastery doesn't extend to titling.) "Tale Telling Telling," the opening segment, is a kind of chalk talk in which Moss appears on stage and video, charting a family tree as complex as a nuclear equation and as matter-of-fact as hopscotch.

More video in subsequent segments, artfully shaped by Moss, takes us all over the map: to Guatemala and Senegal, and into Japanese and Hollywood westerns. As a dancer Moss goes from looking and functioning like a chalkboard eraser to tumbleweeding around like a cowpoke salamander, to glorying in his mellow athleticism, like an angelic Olympian.

To most of us, being low-key and being bold remain antithetical. With Dean Moss, the contrasts come beautifully blended; his *Navel* is both an inny and an outy.

—ROBERT GRIBSKOVIC

the village VOICE

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Sharp

By Tobi Tobias

Dean Moss/Mary Abrams
Moss's *Dirt*, Abrams's *Totem*
and *You Look Like My Lunch*
Dance Project at
St. Mark's Church
January 10 through 12

Dean Moss opens his new trio, *Dirt*, with an extended solo for himself, establishing an atmosphere of pure pleasure that is sustained, with interesting variations, throughout the piece. Moss is one of those extravagantly blessed dancers whose every move has beauty in it. He's fluency and grace personified—which might be too much of a good thing if it weren't offset by the stranger ability to embody celestial lightness and rooted weight at the very same time. Similarly, the agreeable lushness of the dance as a whole is given an edge by a couple of the images flashed repeatedly on a pair of TV monitors at either side of the dancing ground: Though most of them preplay or replay the dance itself, often in tantalizing, close-up fragments, there's also the mocking head of a grotesque carnival puppet and a hand—Moss's own, you assume—deliberately closing around a lethal razor blade.

Karen Graham and Christina Pratt, looking like postmodern equivalents of the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets, help Moss extend the dance through sections



BILL JACKSON

Blessed: Dean Moss

that range from some wonderfully overblown swirling romance through a contact-improvisation sequence that's more specifically sexual to a kind of jitterbug passage rendered in the slowest tempo possible this side of stasis. The piece might benefit from more rigorous structuring, but it is full of gorgeous imagery and redolent with atmosphere in the manner of Balanchine's *La Valse* and *Cotillon*. Come to think of it, those works, too, take their ultimate meaning from the ever threatening presence of the fatal edge.