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Cover Artist
Hahn Rowe

SARAH MICHELSON'S DOVER BEACH

Translating Dance Concepts in the
Process of Mastering a Form by cristiane bouger

Extravagance and idealism were qualities cherished by those who embraced Romanticism. The movement that took place in Western Europe in the middle of the 18th century influenced many countries in different periods of time. Its ideas vastly influenced literature, philosophy, music and visual arts, with reflections in architecture and political thought. The beginning of the movement is a matter of disagreement among literary critics, but it is generally accepted that inspired by *Sturm und Drang*¹, it arose against the supremacy of reason inherited from the Age of Enlightenment, and gained strength in opposition to industrialism in England. Its aesthetic and philosophical lyricism was mainly based on the power of nature, imagination, individualism and freedom.

The title of British-born choreographer Sarah Michelson's new choreography, *Dover Beach*, was influenced by the Romantic poetry of that period. The name refers to the homonymous poem written in the middle of the 19th century by the English lyric poet Matthew Arnold.² The poem was inspired by the natural soundscape of the ocean on the ferry port of Dover in the English Channel, from where one can face the French coast.

It is interesting to note that it was in the Romantic Age that children were understood as individuals for the first time in history. Idealized for their innocence, children were a source of inspiration for many poets and writers during that period.³

Michelson's interest in choreographing girls is not new, but particularly for this work, she felt inspired by young students in a ballet class at Chapter Arts, in Cardiff, Wales, while in residency there.⁴ That inspiration defined the leitmotif of *Dover Beach*, which was originally commissioned by Chapter Arts Cardiff and premiered at the same arts center in 2008.

For its American premiere at The Kitchen, in New York in 2009, *Dover Beach*'s cast included the girls Non Griffiths and Latysa Antonio (from Cardiff) and Sofia Britos and Allegra Herman (from New York). The girls were between 11 and 13 years old. Her long-time collaborator Greg Zuccolo, as well as Laura Weston, Alice Downing, Rebecca Warner, Jmy Leary, Oren Barnoy, Adele Nickel and the curator for Chapter Arts, James Tyson, completed the cast.

In *Dover Beach* the young girls are central to the choreography, and the contrast with the adulthood of the other dancers leads us to experience equally a feeling of displacement and a powerful revelation about the individualism of each girl in their process of accomplishing Michelson's score.

The original music score composed by Pete Drungle, with additional sound design by Max Bogdanov, was rich in its atmosphere and varied in intensity. It included live piano, cello, violin, viola, trombone and woodwinds, and occasional vocals by Charlotte Pharr. Nature so fundamental to Romanticism and to the imagery of Arnold's poem was also stressed in the sound design, in which we could hear ocean sounds and birds (but also, the sounds of the fans on the stage). Silence was imperious in specific moments and Oren Barnoy's cadence, in the voice-over reading of Arnold's poem was solemn.

Michelson, who usually recreates the spaces to fit the intimacy or opulence of her dance concept, designed the set in collaboration with Parker Lutz. The set consisted of a cage adorned with pale yellow that separated the two parts of the choreography. A paradox could be seen in the enclosure, which was an ornamented confinement made of two fences in an L shape on the right side of the stage. The cage served as a barrier between the spectator and a significant part of the dance. It was also the space where the choreographer chose to place her neon mark, perhaps a symbol of her authorship. From the time we entered into the theater, the green neon drawing of Michelson's head, by Charlotte Cullinan, could be seen on the back wall inside the cage.

Blocking most of the visibility of this side of the dance, Lutz and Michelson made me understand that the "main dance" was on the left side of the stage: the space in which the young dancers would also perform.

The impressive stage-light-prop hybrids she used in earlier works—like the giant metal flowers with stage light petals in *Dogs* (2006)—were also present in *Dover Beach*, this time in the form of two oversized standing fans with stage-lights replacing the blades. Both were placed beside the cage.

The lighting design, by Carrie Wood and Sarah Michelson, was eloquent in its transitions and most of the time taciturn in its coldness or somberness. At a certain

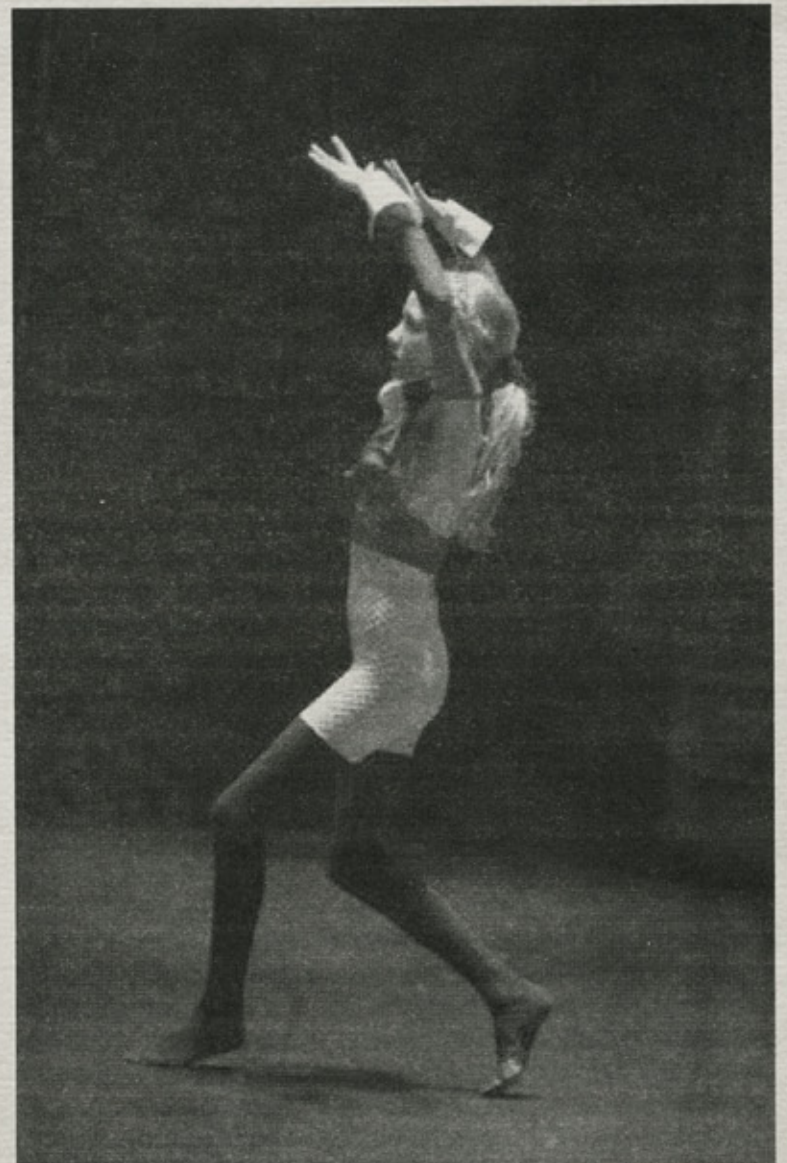
time, the stage-light fans mimicked beacons—an apparent reference to the light gleam's mentioned in Arnold's poem—and lateral lights were used to cover the stage with the pattern of the cage.

We could clearly see two different worlds happening simultaneously, inside and out of the ornamented cage. Inside it, Rebecca Warner danced a solemn score. A certain sensuality was present in the dance and in the black leotard she wore. Other dancers joined her and left her throughout the dance. Externally, in what reminded me of a dance room, the 12-year old Non Griffiths and Laura Weston danced in outfits inspired by the clothing etiquette of traditional fox hunting attire. Designed by Elena Scelzi, the attire re-signified the tradition they referred to and showed both dancers wearing scarlet, a color reserved for men and masters in that tradition.

The similarity of both dancers was also transgressed by the difference of the experience inscribed on their bodies, while the duplication by their resemblance showed a twofold chronology: like observing the future and the past of the same dancer, happening side-by-side.

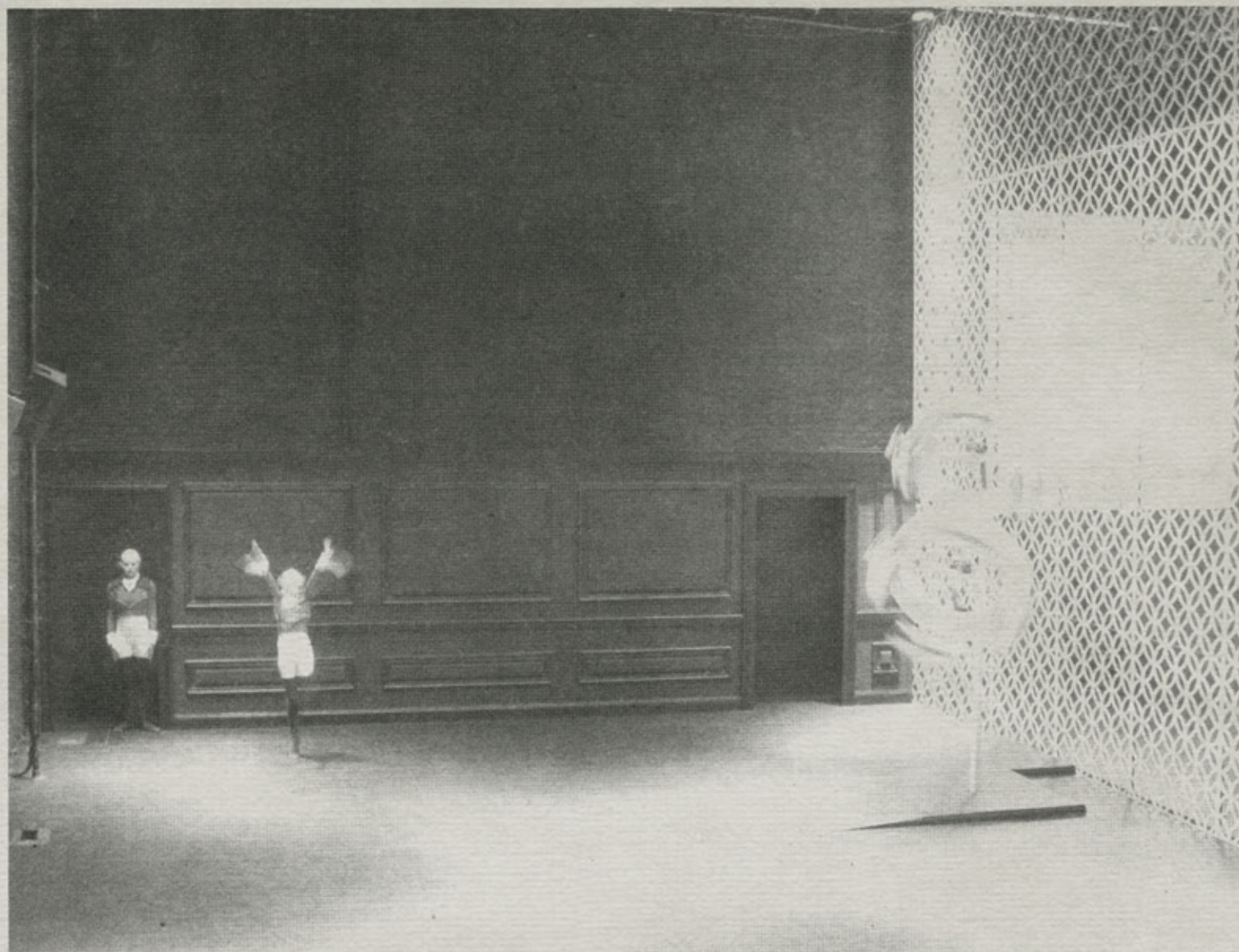
The deliberate choice for the spatial simultaneity led us to open possibilities of reading: perhaps what we were seeing was a reference to two different places like Cardiff and New York; maybe, a metaphor for the partially shown adult space in which other adults also performed, but generally in relation to the younger ones.

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PHOTO/PAULA COURT

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PHOTO/PAULA COURT

In the duet between Greg Zuccolo and the young Allegra Herman, the contrast of their bodies gave their dance a particular weight. There was tension and a profound beauty in the counterpoint of their individualism and physicality, as we also saw in the duet initially performed by Griffiths and Weston. Zuccolo, who, in a Romantic-inspired outfit, was cordial, conducted the girl, who wore a black unitard, mixing leadership and gentleness. There was a mesmerizing co-existence of their different experiences, ages and body shapes and a vision of what could be a couple if age did not play a role.

A horse-headed dancer appeared while Zuccolo and Herman danced. As the only dancer who crossed both sets of the choreography, he ended up inside the cage with another dancer (wearing a leotard), while the audience left the theater. Even though the figure of the horse can establish several cross-reference meanings within the context of the work—from the psychoanalytical aspects to the symbolic ones like nobility, freedom and strength—I felt its presence was unessential to the work, as if it were a reminiscent gimmick from a previous Michelson dance. In the density of *Dover Beach*, however, this element seemed to be dispersal.

Although Michelson was very specific in every choice presented on the stage, the movement presented austerity through its unequivocal relation with the space and with the elements that surrounded and resonated with her choreography.

If we look back, we will see that the same interests keep being deepened in Michelson's work. Her choice of choreographing girls, the crucial conceptual role of the light design, the boldly designed costumes and the defiant usage of the places and spaces her dances appropriate and inhabit are some examples of what seem to be constant vectors of her staging

concept. All of these elements seem to be used to clarify and analyze the dance form, which was the strongest element of *Dover Beach*.

Form and Dynamics: A Permanent Quality Instead of a Repetitional One

There is a lot of effort in Michelson's dance. The difficulty of the movements and tasks she delivers to her performers brings to the stage a kind of specificity in the movement quality we see, and this specificity is also existential. The dancers are witnessed in the process of an achievement on the stage. They are not performing this process. Instead, they live it while working hard to accomplish and overcome the movement score. The paradox is that it does not necessarily mean they are dealing with the risk of failing in front of us. As soon as we see Michelson's dancers we know they can accomplish their assignment, although not without effort.

Through this process the performers reveal their nature and humanity. There is a potent beauty in it. A beauty that comes from the difference among the bodies and how they react to achieve the dance they perform. This is not an easy beauty, but one that seems to be excavated, a little rough, a little wild.

Permanence and a strong understanding of perspective are aspects constantly present in Michelson's work. The word "repetition" has been used quite frequently to describe her choreography. If we refer specifically to the same dancer's score, I do not think "repetition" is a good word to describe Michelson's movement vocabulary. Instead, I would rather use the term permanence.

Different from repetition, there is an intertwining between permanence and time. The movement quality is extended

and revealed through its insistence in occupying a certain amount of time. The dancer does not repeat the movement and its variations; s/he keeps doing them. There is constancy instead of reiteration.⁵

The commitment resulting from one thing and another is completely different. Time is brief through repetition. Time is expanded in permanence, as if an imperious quality defined the tonus of the movement and the presence of the performer on the stage. This quality unfolds the beauty, strength and fragility of any movement. It gives us time to reflect upon it and inhale its fundamental relation with space and with the performer's development on the stage. Repetition is redoing; permanence seems to be defined by complicity with time, as in experiencing the absorption of a movement that insists on its own existence and is revealed in deeper layers because it is essentially related with time. Time is revelation.

In *Dover Beach*, Michelson reached a fine balance in the usage of elements she has been employing in earlier works. In dealing with the many conceptual aspects and elements of staging, she is mastering her own form while conquering a vast terrain to amplify and resonate her choreographic concept. Resembling a translation, through which one can better understand one's own language, it seems she is developing the dance form through her own translation of movement concepts into staging.

Perhaps writers, including myself, feel entwined in adjectives in attempting to translate what cannot be completely translated into words. The divergence of forms is the lack of understanding between the evanescent abstraction of a form transfigured in time and space faced by the apparent solidity of words and language in its attempt to communicate objective/subjective meanings. The

indelible works Michelson stages allow us to attempt a philosophical approach to her dance. Even if pretentious, it consists of an effort to understand the nature of her work or, perhaps, a pretext to retain part of what she makes us perceive while experiencing her choreographic vision.

The choreographer does not seem to be interested in the attempts by critics and writers to understand what her work prompts. Instead, she seems to deal with her own constant excavations and translations to analyze her relation with the dance form she embraces. She owns her right.

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NOTES:

1. *Sturm und Drang* was a movement that took place in the middle of the 18th century in Germany and was primarily against the Enlightenment rationalism, inherited from the earlier century.
2. The most commonly accepted date among literary critics is 1851, but the poem was first published in the collection *New Poems* in 1867.
3. To learn more, see *A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature*, English Department, Brooklyn College.
4. To learn more about the initial process of *Dover Beach*, read Gia Kourla's interview with Sarah Michelson in *Time Out New York*, Issue 714: Jun 4-10, 2009.
5. However, reappearance of certain phrases and duplication can also be seen in the work.

Dover Beach was seen at The Kitchen, in New York, in its American premiere on June 9th, 2009

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EDITORS' LETTERS

You learn something new everyday. I'm really excited for you to read this issue. Some great articles including an excerpt from Penny Arcade's newly released book. We also have two portfolios—our cover artist and one in tribute to Merce Cunningham. My undaunted collaborator, Troy Lambert who designs the MRPJ reminded me that portfolios in number of pages divisible by four can be taken from the journal whole for convenient carrying. Unbeknownst to Troy, I was naive to this fact. I'm looking forward to maximizing this new knowledge in the future.

We've promised pieces on Boris Charmatz and The Giant Women and sorry we're still working. So, lots to look forward to as 2010 keeps rolling.

All the best,

Trajal

When I was approached about editing the Hahn Rowe artist portfolio for this edition of the Journal, I didn't know very much about Rowe or his work. I agreed, in part to learn more, and in part because a fellow musician had once told me that seeing a Hahn Rowe dance score made him believe that writing for dance could be fulfilling musically.

Hahn has flown a bit under the radar, though his credits are long, both in music, film and dance. Among many others, he has performed on recordings for David Byrne, Michael Stipe, Glenn Branca and Moby and written dance scores for Bebe Miller, David Dorfman, John Jasperse and Meg Stuart. Yet, writings, reviews and even photos of him seem to be in short supply.

The focus of this portfolio is on Hahn's involvement with dance, and hopefully provides an introduction to him and his work. I'd like to thank all the people who contributed their materials and time to making this come together.

-Jon Moniaci

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