

TITLE: Artful Magpies: The Minds Behind Big Dance Theater

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Performers Elizabeth DeMent and Cynthia Hopkins face square to the audience, standing side by side downstage and far off center. “Great good news,” says DeMent, “I know what my topic and subject is; I’ve got it all worked and figured out.” Their posture and position suggest a public presentation, but their speech conveys something different. Hopkins replies with mistrust, contending that her interlocutor has been out “doing ruining,” and should admit as much. “If you don’t do that, don’t do that right now,” she warns, “you are a lost ghost man, glass frost snowman. Snow over, Flap. Your wings have flipped, Flap.” The dialogue, recast from a scene in the middle of *Terms of Endearment*, surfaces in the early moments of [Big Dance Theater](#)’s most recent show, [Alan Smithee Directed This Play: Triple Feature](#). As Hopkins casts suspicions of infidelity and DeMent responds with dismissive evasions, the familiar dynamic is made strange by language studded with alliteration, rhyme, and looping repetitions delivered with an eerily steady pace and neutral tenor. The speech reveals plainly that the two are husband and wife, a relationship the performers neither match in gender nor otherwise enact. The heightened language draws attention to the material qualities of the words, displacing the stakes of the conversation from the emotional to the poetic and rhetorical. The episode, which begins in medias res and ends without resolution, gestures toward the narrative context it leaves behind. Hopkins and DeMent aren’t exactly performing the scene, not exactly portraying the characters Emma and Flap. Rather, they point to them across distances made palpable.

As *Alan Smithee* unfolds, rifts, juxtapositions, and incongruities become as essential to the total effect of the piece as the content it collages. Image and texture are given primacy in Big Dance Theater’s signature amalgam of choreography, drama, video, music, and visual design. The show, which debuted at [Les Subsistances of Lyon](#), France in March 2014 and appeared in New York as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Fall 2014 [Next Wave Festival](#), takes for its title the pseudonym historically used by film directors who, citing lack of creative control, refused to be associated with the final product. For source material, *Alan Smithee* draws on three iconic films

across decades, genres, and nations: in addition to 1983's *Terms of Endearment* are the 1970 French crime film *Le Cercle Rouge* and the 1965 romantic epic *Dr. Zhivago*, an adaptation of Boris Pasternak's novel by the same name. A sundry array of themes, moods, styles, and scenes found in the three films come together in an assemblage shaped by dreamlike, associative logic.

The piece began as a commission for a short duet, which is when Big Dance began working with *Le Cercle Rouge*. Of what remains in the full-length show, a clip from the film is projected onto a large screen made of vertical strips in a thick frame, reminiscent of venetian blinds hanging in an oversize window. In the foreground, two performers (Elizabeth DeMent and Chris Giarmo) mimic what's happening on screen. Though identical to the characters' on-screen movements, decontextualized in this way, the live performers' actions can read as abstracted movement or, conversely, a kind of caricature. The film shows a man walking around a car parked in a field to open a trunk, a sequence of motions defined completely by its function. On stage, with neither field nor car, the same motions constitute a choreographic sequence. On screen, a character smokes a cigarette, points a gun, or puts his hands into his trench coat, and it is a discrete moment that occurs in relationship to the specific environment of the film in which it exists. Reflected on stage, the action is equally particular, yet it is not invested with the same type of specificity. By dint of being a double, the action is a reference; the cigarette, the gun, the coat each lose their particular narrative significance and become charged iconography.

When co-founding artistic directors Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar—who have been making work as Big Dance Theater since 1991—decided to continue working from this short duet to create a larger piece, the mode of the triptych proved foundational. ("It's often a form," says Parson, that provides the original impulse for their shows). Parson recalls thinking, "I want to find two other films that are very contrasting, that don't speak to it at all." So she asked herself, "Well, what is it about *Le Cercle Rouge*? For me, I don't really understand the narrative, it's so complicated, I just love how homoerotic it is, and I love the visual; he [director Jean-Pierre Melville] is a brilliant stylist. So I thought, *Oh, what about working with Terms of Endearment*, because it's the opposite. I don't like the style of the movie, I just like the acting, and I love the intimacy between these two women." *Dr. Zhivago* was appealing for its grand scale. "The novel has great intellectual and political and philosophical ambition to it," Lazar says. "It's not structurally perfect, but it's a kind of mess that deserves to be a mess because of all the different things it's trying to do. And we loved the environment and the romance and the absurdity of the film, in the sense that it's entertaining. So we tried to reinsert hunks of the novel into the settings, spoken by our sort of version of the characters."

The ultimate structure of *Alan Smithee* couldn't be further from three discrete parts. It's a work of collage that, taken together, forms a piece independent from its constituent sources. By the same token, it's not a representation of the films but is more like a cento, a poetic form in which

all of the language is lifted from other texts, the lines recombined into a new, freestanding entity. “Just because of recent things we were working on where we were kind of shoved into the iron pants of narrative, we were really hankering not to abandon narrative for nothing but to find a different organizing principle that had different intense rigors to it,” says Lazar, who also performs in the piece. When I met with him shortly after the close of *Alan Smithee’s* run at BAM, he cited filmmaker Christian Markkay’s short work [Telephones](#) as a critical turning point: “it led the way to a different sort of storytelling. . . [Markkay] takes a piece of film where somebody’s dialing a phone, then a piece of film—separate, unrelated—where somebody’s answering the phone and he works forward from the dialing to the answering, dialing again, someone answering saying ‘Hello.’ You know, just gradually piecing together that ritual. What really struck me was the journey of an object . . . we got excited by the idea of letting a physical object present in a scene lead us through.” After working with this “organizing principle” for awhile, linking unrelated film scenes by an object they have in common (such as a gun in *Dr. Zhivago* and *Terms of Endearment*), Lazar remarks, “eventually, that subtlized. Instead of objects it became a theme, certain themes.”

When working with *Terms of Endearment*, Parson and Lazar found that they hated the script. “We wanted to keep the situations, keep the psychology, but get rid of that language,” recalls Lazar, “so Annie rewrote the entire script, putting each scene in the form of different traditional poetic forms.” Though not a writer herself, Parson is a lifelong reader of poetry and had become interested in using poetic forms after asking her choreography students to structure dance according to the rules of various poetic forms. When she began working with *Terms of Endearment*, she looked for moments in the script that had possible affinities with a given form. “I would think, *OK, I want to write an ode. Which part of the script is ode-like? Where is she praising? . . . I want to write a pantoum, a sestina, I want to write quatrains, I want to do this, I want to do that.*” In some cases, a given moment in the original script would invite other source material. When Garrett Breedlove, an ex-astronaut, mentions that he has been invited to dinner at the White House, Parson says “I got out all the bragging poems . . . I made this gigantic speech based on those lines.” The grand boasts of Whitman’s “I, too, sing America,” Ginsberg’s “America,” and Sharon Olds’ (parodical) “Language of the Brag” all make cameos. Parson says the use of redundancy (as in DeMent’s “great good news . . .”) was inspired by the disposition of Flap Horton, another character. “He can’t say anything simply; he loves the sound of his own voice. So that wasn’t a poetic form, but it was something I came up with in order to describe him better, and I do consider it poetic in some way. It really helped the acting, helped meaning that it took it out of the naturalistic, which I didn’t think would work for that piece.”

Parson describes herself as a “major magpie” and the openness with which language from a range of authors came to suffuse the script of *Terms of Endearment* speaks to a porous quality that underlies all of Big Dance Theater’s work. “I don’t think there’s anything you can do to train your imagination besides just being awake in the world,” Parson replies when I ask about her

trajectory as an artist. “Imagination is not just in your body and in your brain. It’s not something we own; it’s something that we synthesize.” I see an example of the open flux between Parson’s creative processes and lived experience when she tells me that the telephones—which, more than set pieces or props, are a central object throughout *Alan Smithee*—made their way into the piece after she walked into a neighbor’s apartment during a stoop sale. “They had all these phones plugged in all over the house. All these ’70s phones. And they weren’t for sale, but I said to the old lady—I just thought of my piece, because I’m thinking about it all the time—*Oh my gosh, this reminds me of the phones in Terms of Endearment. Can I buy all these phones?* And she was like, *What? Are you out of your mind?* And I said, *Well, no I really want these phones. I have to have these phones.* And she sold me all the phones in that show for ten dollars.” It bears mentioning that life and art meld in Parson and Lazar’s relationship as well; they are married in addition to being longtime collaborators.

The tendency to sustain eclectic components in a single piece is not exclusive to those Big Dance Theater’s productions that, like *Alan Smithee*, are cut-ups of their own design. Even when they mount a pre-existing text—and their repertoire includes works by Chekhov, Euripides, Flaubert, and a play by Sibyl Kempson written in an invented language, just to name a few—the content is exposed to the influence of outside elements. Various media rub up against one another, material from divergent sources overlap, and elements borne of disparate traditions appear side by side.

My first encounter with Big Dance Theater’s kaleidoscopic approach was through the 2011 run of *Supernatural Wife* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. An adaptation of Euripides’ *Alkestis* as rendered in stark contemporary English by poet and classicist Anne Carson, the narrative follows the final days of a queen who has agreed to die in place of her husband, traveling to the underworld as his surrogate. In the hands of Parson and Lazar, the chorus manifests variously as text on screen, radio-style announcers, and in sequences of live music and dance; the cross-gender King Admedus (Molly Hickock) is molded in the heightened style of Yiddish silent films; Herakles (Pete Simpson) is rock-and-roll incarnate; Death (Aaron Mattocks) operates through gorgeous, sinuous choreography; and the bereft children of Admedus and Alkestis (Tymberly Canale) are embodied as television monitors on dollies. The movement vocabulary draws from the traditions of Pontian folk dance and contemporary western concert dance, sometimes elements of each appearing at the same time on different parts of a single dancer’s body. This panoply of effects may sound dizzying, but however divergent the sources, each moment unfolding on stage crystallizes in a single statement. In other words, Big Dance Theater was not treating *Alkestis* as a container to hold a hodgepodge of interests, but was deploying whatever materials available—across cultures, genres, and centuries—that would allow the play’s fundamental questions of mortality, sacrifice, and grief to resonate with clarity and immediacy.

As I continued to follow Big Dance Theater's work, I found there was no limit to the surprise in terms of what sources and materials might become the bases for a production. The constants were the ability for diverse source materials to coexist and to coalesce in a tightly structured manner; the interplay of speech, choreography, music, and video wherein each element is essential to the way meaning accrues; and the multitalented performers and collaborators who comprise the Big Dance Theater ensemble. Parson and Lazar both speak of the importance of not privileging one mode over another. Lazar says, "all the elements are egalitarian. And any of the elements—be it movement, or an acting scene, or video, or music—any of them can come into play at any time if it can advance or sustain what I would call the thematic object that we're trying to keep aloft. And fortunately our collaborators are all in the room the whole time." Parson has said in interviews that while some directors hope to make their audiences to think or feel, her goal would be to make her audiences see. She explains, "I consider the design elements at least as expressive as the text or the movement vocabulary. And certainly the sound, which isn't visual, but I started just as much as a sound designer as a choreographer. I think that the costumes are a very expressive part of the overall statement. I can't even watch people in sweatpants in rehearsal." The video, usually created by Jeff Larson, sometimes in association with others, has added essential texture to every Big Dance Theater piece I've seen, often as a counterpoint to the live. Parson says video also fulfills a kind of historical imperative: "if you're trying to express your world and you don't have some sort of two-dimensional screen there is like a little bit of untruth to it."

How do contained works emerge from such abundance? I ask Lazar about the accumulation and distillation process, and he responds, "A hugely important thing is frustration. We just bring in the room things we're interested in and into. And we don't try to judge it or figure out whether one element's going to survive and another won't. We just try to have things that are fun and exciting to play with whether they relate to one another or not. And we figure if one of them or all of them start to gain a life of their own, then they'll fall away." Regarding how that winnowing takes place, he explains, "the editing process is a little more mentally knowledgeable than the initial invention process. If after a series of inventions some kind of alchemy occurs between things you start to see, *oh, this is about x*. So you have a little more knowledge given to you by the piece itself . . . Editing has to do with understanding the rules. And what the rules are you learn from the piece, the raw materials of the piece."

And though Parson says it's "a requisite to break your own rules" with each new piece, she also denounces the fixation that novelty be the guiding principle in an artist's trajectory. "I hate it when people are like, *oh, that artist's new work looks just like their old work*. Well, it should, actually. That's their voice." The collective voice of Parson, Lazar, and their collaborators is polyphonic and resonant, recalling the definition of "interdisciplinary" Roland Barthes gave in his

1971 "From Work to Text": that which exists in moments "when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down . . . in the interests of a new object and a new language."

IMAGES:

1: *Alan Smithee Directed This Play: Triple Feature.* Photo by Brad Harris.

keywords: bam, bam brooklyn, dance, theater, postmodern, big dance theater

2: Co-Artistic Directors Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar. Photo by Jeff Larson.

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3: *Alan Smithee Directed This Play: Triple Feature.* Photo by Mike van Sleen.

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4: *Alan Smithee Directed This Play: Triple Feature.* Photo by Brad Harris.

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7: *Alan Smithee Directed This Play: Triple Feature.* Photo by Mike van Sleen.

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8: *Supernatural Wife.* Photo by Christine Rogala.

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9: *Supernatural Wife.* Photo by Paula Court.

keywords: bam, bam brooklyn, contemporary dance, theater, postmodern, big dance theater

10: *Supernatural Wife.* Photo by Mike van Sleen.

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