

# WHAT FRANCES ALENIKOFF ISN'T TELLING

(Part 2: WEB-EXCLUSIVE)

For years Frances Alenikoff and I have been dialoguing and debating numerous issues surrounding the importance of dancers sustaining themselves and transforming their potential as they move on in years, knowing that she was on the cusp of what was about to emerge broadband as a cultural issue. Our society has yet to realize the resources that age affords. Sure enough a front page article appeared in the *New York Times* in 1998, *As Centenarians Thrive, 'Old' is Redefined*.

Twenty-five years ago, sixty-five was deemed the old-age threshold, but a sea change has occurred with advances in technology and medicine, and the shift now is closer to eighty or eighty-five. (Is middle-age thus likewise extended to sixty-five or seventy? We're all in the business of buying time!)

De Beauvoir: *"There were between six and seven hundred [centenarians] in France in 1959..."* In 1980 in this country, there were an estimated 15,000 centenarians, projected to rise to 30,000 to 50,000 in 1998, becoming 72,000 by 2000, and projected to become 834,000 in 2050! Longevity realigns the axes of temporality and the profile of how time is lived and experienced.

I've watched dancers perform Isadora Duncan's work who do not fill out its indelible contours or catch the glancing nuances of its dynamic or style until well into their forties, fifties, or sixties. I retain vivid recollections of Maria-Theresa Duncan performing it masterfully at the age of eighty-three.

Frances, too, says she was at her peak in her sixties, and she joined Dancers Over Forty, an organization founded during the 1990s. In September 1996, they sponsored a large group concert, *Prime Time*, at Dance Theater Workshop where Frances performed *Re-Membering*, and in February, 2000, presented another concert at the Merce Cunningham Studio where we reprised our duet, reworked as *Sahara on My Mind*.

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Frances has long been a devotee of the sea, and loves going to the beach in East Hampton, Long Island where she has a home, to dance and sing. She relishes bringing the qualities from that aquatic habitat into her work, like the aforementioned magical seagull sequence in *Re-Membering*, an invisible duet with a lone one-winged bird she befriended one afternoon, feeding and making a sand castle for it until well past sunset. The dance's title refers to the body as a renewed member—she made and performed it right after recovering from a catastrophic illness.

What Frances doesn't or can't tell is how her vitality is fortified by the mosaic of several practices—in addition to being a dancer, songstress, and writer, she is a painter and has an extensive body of drawings, collages, art objects, and a large collection of painted stones. She scours the beach for stones of all sizes and shapes, collects them, and then meticulously and painstakingly hones them by bringing out their hidden patterns, faces, and scenes, finding fantastic gestalten buried within their physiognomies.

When she performed *Re-Membering*, her whole lifeline and the call of the body re-emerged and became transparent in the highly distilled continuum of her movement, with her ecstatic whiplash delivery, whimsical but perspicacious gaze, and endearing

presence. In a performance at Dixon Place in February, 2000, on a confined, tightly reined-in stage, the dance became a fiery, transformative, and spell-binding evocation.

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Multimedia enabled choreographers to explore the connections between disciplines and cross the boundaries between art forms. Language became preoccupational. Words act as prisms (and we need them to see). Writing thus bridges shared interests—the semantic gauntlet offers many parallel structural analogues with the reflexive play of signs that inhabit movement.

With chagrin, I tell her about the afternoon I walked dance writer Edwin Denby home on 21<sup>st</sup> Street (in 1983, during his eightieth year), when out of the blue he blurted out that *there are so many things about dance that have yet to be written!* Maybe he meant that so many impulses and images course through the dancing body during a single fleeting passage, or why its motor flexions and inflections, and signs and signals, are such a challenge to describe or explain.

Frances and I banter about how the eye has to be primed to tune into perceiving these subtle intervals and their dialectical transferences, between the visible and invisible, known and unknown, and self and other—before being able to write about them. Again, the voice is a clue, because the bridge to speech involves a projected disembodiment. And teaching choreography requires verbal prompts, takes considerable explanation, and is as enigmatic to impart as is writing. Both elude prescriptions and can best be learned only by trial and error.

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Every time Frances prepares for a performance, she agonizes over reworking the beginning as well as the transitions between sections and re-improvises her way through different alternatives to suit the particulars of the performance space or occasion. She'll often labor rehearsal to the point of obsessive preoccupation, then whimsically catch herself, puckishly insisting she shouldn't do that, when that is exactly what keeps her going and her instincts primed!

Neither of us considers a dance ever completely finished, even when its intent has reached a definitive threshold or conceptual closure. At my request, after one of our rehearsals, she ran through *Re-Membering* for the performance she'd be doing at Dixon Place the following week, eager for feedback. The threshold variables and differences between rehearsals and performance are continually elusive and enigmatic.

That week she'd found a new expansive vigor and full-out engagement as her gestural palette pushed against the dance's lateral margins, that in turn, magnified her elastic rebound. This reconnected her axial placement and gave new emphasis to the torque of her limbs, revivifying the spatial filaments and plasticity of contexts.

After running through the dance, she went to extra lengths to work out tiny knots, and to probe, talk through, and retry all the possibilities at hand. Sometimes rehearsals are freer-wheeling and elicit nuances performances cannot, whereas performance flies with an abundance of flair and fission, and spontaneously punctuates and realizes contexts that depend on an audience's collective presence.

We concur by lamenting the limitations and difficulties that confound dance writing: capturing movement's ephemerality, being able to summon or describe its virtual

intricacy and intimacy, the shortage of publishing and marketability options, its often lopsided, one-dimensional focus and ghetto mentality, its critical resistance to or involvement with a wider scope or matrix of contemporary ideas, issues, and other arts, and its lack of aggressive pan-theoretical consciousness-raising.

Writing also mythologizes its subject and indemnifies history by attributing an overcompensating largesse through an invisible or unconscious appropriation that inflates the existential givens. And as endemically problematic are dancers' political naïveté, the aggrandizing demands of presenters, and the washed-out toll consumerist culture takes on the arts that work against their support and perseverance. (Non-profits may have been the biggest runaround scam the government ever perpetrated; the corporate boondoggle has compromised and undermined long-term financial support, media outlets and marketability, and short-changed education.)

Dance teachers mostly restrict themselves to bare-bones technique, often sacrificing style and direction, not to mention the longer-ranged survival and longevity picture. How muscles, skeleton, and biosystem change with age, and to how reinforce them against time's physical assault, is an unexplored no-man's land.

Frances and I agree that what can be most pleasurable is watching a mature dancer capable of making their psyche as well as life's experiences and knowledge transparent on stage through their kinetic being. Not to deny virtuosity, but to amplify it. Group choreography often resembles regimented military displays of prowess that lack a deeper core, reason, or resonance.

One virtue of age is its detachment from worldly preoccupations. Even younger artists with enviable track records aren't sought out enough, but have to hustle at every stop by having agents or representatives solicitously barrage presenters, colleges, and institutions with reams of PR materials to generate teaching, residencies, and performances.

Other ironies are cost overhead, shameful lack of government and foundation support, and the fact that in our litigious society teachers and studios are obligated to carry costly insurance. We often commiserate about how destructive the demands of a dance career can be on body and spirit, with inevitable wear and tear, forced overuse and abuse, hectic touring and non-stop schedules, with injury and debilitation built into the consumerist work ethic. (And fame: the psyche invaded and vampirized.)

Simone de Beauvoir: *"There comes a moment when one knows that one is no longer getting ready for anything and one understands that the idea of advancing toward a goal was a delusion."*

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Decades before East Hampton became the celebrity Mecca and tourist trap it is today, Frances's home, on several acres of land off the beaten path, provided a refuge for her to spend alternating periods throughout the year (and during summers for months at a time) in retreat and renewal.

Similarly her paintings and stone works reinvigorate her by reining in her ranging, expansive sensibility to a containment in miniature scale that engages the same obsessive meticulousness that preoccupies her performing. Her East Hampton home is populated

with her abundant legacy. Collage, non sequitur, and free association are the unitive keys that connect the configurative processes of dance and painting.

*"Associative processes interest me; the way in which one act, thought, or image leads to another, allowing fortuitous accident and chance to surface the metaphors of fantasy and memory. I find ambiguity more interesting than the explicit and literal, preferring the a-logic of the allusive and evocative to the finiteness of the (so called) rational and logical."*

Her drawings teem with dense interpressionary interplays of images and intricate configurations that would tickle the fancy of a sleuth or puzzle addict. By the stove in her New York kitchen stands an exquisite work I call *Little Erzulie*, that measures perhaps 8" x 10", a small icon mounted on wood constructed with tiny iridescent fragments, an assemblage of filigree pieces of precious gems and shimmering twilight dust—turquoise, amethyst, and jade embedded in coral shells with a seaweed headdress, one ivory and one silver drop earring, and a tiny tribal clay mask.

This magical icon serves as the enigmatically smiling guardian of hearth and soul, an almost puppet-like being poised on the threshold of immanent motion. Erzulie is the Haitian Loa or Goddess of the Sea, mythically akin to Aphrodite or Hathor, the early Egyptian horned goddess of love and protector of women, that were also inspirations. Icons are archetypal mirrors. Frances once studied with Jean Houston, a pioneering New Age psychotherapist tuned into the mythic transformations of consciousness.

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After one rehearsal in 1996, we discussed primal wildness and I asked her about *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. She encouraged me to read it. Right after leaving her studio, I walked around the block to Housing Works, a used bookstore on Crosby Street, and found a brand new copy. As I read about *La Loba*, the Wolf Woman who collects bones and connects the realms of the living and dead renewed through song and dance in Clarissa Pinkola Estés' shrewdly intuitive depth analyses of folkloric archetypes (she's a trained Jungian), I reflect on Frances' similar ability to summon and inspire.

Bones are the keys to the body's and movement's deep grammar, and Frances has explained about letting them, rather than the muscles, be the source of movement. By analogy, muscles activate the cellular capacity of memory and motor recall, while the bones tap a deeper genetic arch(e)ology. Frances knows how to use her voice to activate her cellular and muscular infrastructures—I've watched her warm herself up very quickly backstage and change her frequency by vibrating every inch of her being, intoning a deep full body resonance and moving its locus to different anatomical sites.

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Frances' stones, drawings, and collages mirror the same generative processes that inform her choreography and have appeared in numerous exhibitions in the Hamptons. Another secret is her extensive knowledge of and dedicated decades-long research into herbal supplements, nutrition, alternative medicine, and healing.

When she injured her leg during rehearsal, she went to the Tiger Balm and magnets. She knows how to align their polarities in front of and behind her knee and leaves them taped on while she practices. I've seen her rebound quickly after accidents and injuries

and persevere through them as others couldn't. She has demonstrated again and again that the body has incredible rejuvenative powers; even nerves and brain cells can regenerate.

Frances has unfailing drive, gritty determination, and unflagging curiosity. She agrees that exercise and physical work are as important as any supplement. We're both largely vegetarian except for some chicken or fish, and we're both cognizant of the false glucose high of processed sugar that compromises the immune system and ages the body. I'm beholden to her for innumerable one-on-one seminars and generously shared knowledge.

Machines, too, contribute to her process. She has a sound and light machine to enhance meditation to prepare for performances, and a thumper for sore or tight muscles, and loves the different machines and weights at the gym. She uses a special masque on performance days that appears to wipe away years so when she steps on stage she can step out of time.

She has taught me about the importance of cold water at the end of showering to strengthen the skin, body, and heart (learned from the Indians), and the importance of hawthorn and walnuts for cardiac support. This is only a partial litany. She's daring and undaunting, unabashedly tries and uses everything, and isn't afraid to experiment on herself.

We joke about why dancers have to be obsessive-compulsives to muster the drive and daily follow through to maintain their bodies, but it's practicing several arts in rhythmic tandem that has insured her being. I watch her lie on her back or sit in a yoga

position, take hold of her heel and smoothly stretch her leg completely over her head or laterally out beyond her shoulder with easy agility. We're fond of bemoaning the incredible amount of time body maintenance requires, irrespective of actual creative time. Why can't we be like cats and leap out of sleep?

Rehearsing with her is challenging because she's also a keen director quick on the uptake who tirelessly interrogates possibilities. Collaborating with her let me test her imagination, spurring her to summon a varied array of archaic gestures while weaving a sharper attack into her innate sinuosity.

At one rehearsal I prodded her to try another kind of vocal placement while singing by dropping her voice into her throat, chest, and solar plexus as it gathered momentum, in addition to letting it vibrate in her nasal cavity, forehead or resonate in her cranial crown.

It was inspiring to hear and see how she persevered through initially difficult and scratchy efforts to open the glottal stops and drop the octave range into her lower thoracic cavity. Suddenly we were both surprised as her vibrato caught and shifted the entire vibratory production of overtone registers, enhancing deeper reverberant timbres. It didn't happen easily, but she savored the challenge of directorial feedback, too, as if instinctually sensing there are always options just beyond any given margin. Frances is relentless about testing herself and rallies to opportunities with an easy perseverance.

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Frances performed in James Cunningham's and Tina Croll's production of *The Horse's Mouth Meets the Millennium*, presented with a large cast of veteran dancer-

choreographers by the Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church in October, 2000. She captivated the audience by telling a very whimsical anecdote about a teaching residency in Bar Harbor, Maine where she met Guido, the future father of her daughter, Francesca, in unusual circumstances when he drove up on a motorcycle.

She mistook the gorgeous curly blonde hunk for a Greek God and fainted on the spot! They fell madly for each other, made love in his pup tent, and a scandal ensued to the outrage and chagrin of the local wags. Yielding to Eros opens channels, too, and she's savvy about love and gender politics, secure enough with her body and sexuality to appreciate and be open to others' differences and lifestyles.

LifeTime TV spent days videoing Frances for a documentary of celebrated older Americans and the changing faces of glamour during the summer of 1999. They filmed her in her East Hampton home, on the beach, and in her New York studio while she prepared for performances in the Downtown Arts Festival. But when the program finally aired, she deemed it a bust. All the extensive footage, fabulous takes, and hours of interviewing ended up on the cutting room floor because the editors succumbed to the media's penchant for quick commercial bites.

Put Frances in front of a camera and she displays an uncanny charismatic empathy that magnetically engages the lens with instant ardor, like evoking another self or becoming her own best other. I wonder how she learned to do it, or even if she's cognizant of *what* she's doing. Frances radiates an easy erstwhile charm as if suddenly diverting a passing stranger's attention by piquing the tiniest registers with the simplest twist of the head, flick of the wrist, or change of gaze that instantly summon up and vividly materialize implicitly dramatic transparencies.

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The sea is her Mecca and refuge, and the beach her temple. The body houses her being, cells are its mirror adjuncts, and genes are its seeds and circuits. She bridles when people attribute her longevity and staying power to her genes. As a gift, she gave me one of her double-sided painted stones. On one side is the alert head of a braying donkey and within its outline a small suspended spaceman. It posits an imaginative reverse reciprocity, the homunculus of a highly evolved being glimpsed through the window of animality.

But her understanding of the animal powers as a poetic mystery is attuned to the genetic. One day she tells me that scientists have discovered the similarity between the DNA of animal and human genes, a fact underlying all life. Afterwards, I envisage how her intuition of continuously interacting timed and timeless continua could, though constantly self-renewing periodicities, completely redefine recurrence and reincarnation.

Dance opens the window of time. Temporality is not only the repetition of the personal, but a transpersonal cyclic continuum, so that the transmissivity of life's modes and codes become circular and timeless, and thus renew and recycle. Only our given bodies are restricted to a single lifetime of species-specific experiences and uniquely self-referenced movement and identity.

But identity made kinetic opens onto a larger field, that possibly even exceeds the collective. The genes themselves insure this virtual continuity through the ancestral distribution of codes, insuring the continuity of thought, language, organic form, physical capacity, art, and intelligence.

The genome, too, is poised on the edge of revolutionary discoveries—longevity and recurrence are transforming our entire experience of temporality. And, of course, it's not how long we live, but the quality, consciousness, and personal sense of fulfillment that are important. The dance *is* a grand circularly renewing circuit like the spiral, seashell, and cocoon. Simone de Beauvoir: "...*Aristotle's dictum, 'Life resides in movement.'* And he himself states that '*activity is necessary to happiness.*'" Indubitably!

Kenneth King is the author of *Writing in Motion: Body—Language—Technology* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003). His essay, *War & The Sex Goddess: The Iraq War Meets Anna Nicole Smith*, appeared in the Winter issue of *The Rio Grande Review*. Other recent essays have appeared in *Hotel Amerika, /nor* (New Ohio Review), and *The Gay & Lesbian Review/Worldwide*.