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Sculpting Time

Sara Rudner in Her Studio

Emily Coates

Eleven years before “self-isolation” entered the public lexicon, in a quiet studio south of Houston Street, I warmed up with Sara Rudner and a group of dancers. The cohort stretched and chatted about things: the proper colored bra to wear underneath a white costume; a contestable review of Yvonne Rainer’s newest piece, which I had danced in. Sara wore white sneakers and black woolen tights, a t-shirt, and a close-fitting gray sweater. She made even blue-striped bobby socks seem sexy. The young women hovered between late twenties to early thirties and had all studied with her at Sarah Lawrence College, where she was the director of dance. Megan, Ashley, Chia Ying, Rachel, Lynne, Maggie, and Lori were regulars.¹ After about half an hour of individual rolling and flexing, we got to work. “Let’s start with an improvisation,” Sara suggested. She scanned the room, sensing what our bodies and hers needed. “How about this?” A pattern in her feet welled up: heel-heel-heel-toe, heel-heel-heel-toe ... a rhythmic lightning bolt, or just another way to begin.

Carolyn Brown, Merce Cunningham’s original principal dancer from the 1950s, has called Sara “the embodiment of ecstasy.”² The dancer-choreographer Vicky Shick calls her “the embodiment of embodiment.” When she was sixty-six, the former chief dance critic of the *New York Times*, Alastair Macaulay, noted, “it is still easy to believe Ms. Rudner is the greatest dancer in the world.”³ Arlene Croce, our toughest critic, praised Sara’s awe-inspiring range, as “an acrobat of dynamics.”⁴ A dancer’s dance-maker, Sara has helped shape late-twentieth century American dance history. Yet due to the absence of sustained writing on her work, her distinctive legacy as a choreographer is disappearing.

Sara rose to prominence in the 1960s as one of Tharp’s original muses and lead dancers. In one view, Twyla provided the structures, Sara provided the body. The outstanding qualities of Tharp’s early work—that sly, internal sell—spilled out of Sara when she moved. For twenty years, Sara transformed Tharp’s hyperbolic dances into gold. In contrast, Sara’s own choreographic vision markedly shifts the

emphasis from the stage to the studio. She accumulates choreography over decades as opposed to weeks, only to have her dancers perform the dance once or twice, or never. Her public presentations—which are rare these days—tend to exceed the typical duration of concert dance. Her last full work, *Dancing-on-View (Preview/Hindsight)*, in 2009, lasted four hours. The piece itself reworked a marathon group dance she first presented in 1975 and again in 1999. I saw a version in 2007, performed in the corner Cunningham Cage studio at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, with a golden light deepening each hour, and a backdrop of barges crawling languidly south along the Hudson River. It was as if Sara had choreographed even the boats and the photons.

Ironically, the dance “on view” was about dancing *out of view*. The four-hour work included movement material that she and her dancers had invented over the decades in the studio in order to question performance, process, repetitive practice, and rhythm. In their intricate coordination and dynamics, her movement phrases encode human experience. None of that studio time is captured on video.

I first met Sara in 1999, when I was dancing with Mikhail Baryshnikov’s company, then again during the two years I performed with Twyla Tharp. Five years later, Sara reached out to me to perform *Heartbeat*, a solo she had developed, conceived by sound artist Christopher Janney, and later performed by Baryshnikov. True to her vision, Sara could not simply set choreography on me: I needed to join her in the studio with her dancers, which I did, twice a week for three hours, over a period of six months. Perhaps a hundred and forty hours to perform a solo less than fifteen minutes long. And that did not feel like nearly long enough to find myself through Sara’s method of becoming.

The period in which I danced with Sara was also the moment I began to write more seriously. I mirrored Sara’s devotion to *practice* in writing. I wrote every day, about everything I encountered. I had the urge to write a profile of Sara, but I felt it would have to be gathered over years, to genuinely reflect her artistic practice. I wanted to disentangle her from Tharp’s legacy and articulate the uniqueness in her vision. Yet as I wrote, I realized that disentangling the two artists is impossible. Get Sara talking about her art, and Twyla comes up. Rehearse in the studio with Twyla, and Sara comes up. It would diminish Sara’s choreography to call her dances a reaction to her years with Tharp. Rather, she transforms her formative influences to amplify the artistic concerns that matter most to her: the poetics of dancers and the studio practices that forge them.

Attending so closely to people in practice is not only about the people or the practice. In a more profound and formalized way than any dance artist I know, Sara’s dances enshrine the thrum of everyday time. To work in this way, an artist must attentively value everything that happens in the studio, as part of her art:

chit-chat, standstills, aging, and things harder to see, like grieving, spiritual awakening, or falling in love. I posed a basic task to myself back then: could I create a written portrait of Sara's art that mirrored her capacity for folding life into her dances? I have been writing this essay for years. Some bits I wrote ten or twenty years ago, others just yesterday. I jump around chronologically, just as Sara's choreographic compositions do. I accumulated 60,000 words, distilled here into one-tenth. What follows is a portrait of Sara Rudner in her studio, sculpting time.

After we all danced around, feeling our heels, Sara added an arm phrase on top. We had practiced that arm phrase so many times in so many different scenarios that it seemed to hang in the air long after we'd left for the night. Still, adding the arms to the ditty with the feet was a challenge. "There you go," she said, standing out to observe. Or, "Think about it this way," and she demonstrated some new facet or possibility to the coordination. Sometimes Sara prods material with her eyes, by watching the group, but mostly she proposes with her own body, from the inside. "I would much rather dance than watch," she has told me more than once.

Sara added another element: the rhythm of a waltz in the feet. Too easy, so she tried a four-square spatial pattern with the feet against the three-beat waltz, while alternating feet—heels forward to the front, first right then left, and then right toe back and left toe back. Maintaining these foot rhythms, she proposed to put each arm gesture on a single count—far more difficult than free-flowing coordination. One of the dancers then posed the possibility of falling on every third down beat, such as one could. "Oh, that's good!" Sara said, and tried it out. Vicky Shick described for me Sara's way of coaching in the 1970s: "She was like a firefly watching rehearsal—flickering and bopping along non-stop with you on her stool—fully involved, noticing, deciphering and understanding everything." That all still applied, thirty-five years later.

A dancer who had dropped away for water returned and stared at what was happening. "Try it out!" Sara said welcomingly. "I'm just not sure what we're drilling," the dancer said, questioning like a monk withdrawing from the order. How to respond? I suspect no one knew exactly. We were tuning our bodies to accept complexity. Very little of this material would end up in a final dance. At one point, Sara set the arms on a single count rhythm, but then allowed herself to draw out certain gestures. She executed the tricky coordination—feet keeping time in her thin white sneakers, arms knowing the pattern without getting confused. She had developed a similar movement phrase for her first company, three decades ago. "Feet on five, arms on seven," as Sara says. The group dubbed the phrase "Brain Damage." Sara was articulate even when she failed. We were working on the *effort*, not on the problem perfectly solved.

In the early 1980s, at her studio on 18th Street, Sara began to teach a class she called "Problem Solving." For five dollars a class, dancers could join her in deconstructing the phrases they had learned in their morning technique classes.

The practice built upon manipulations she had worked on with Tharp in the sixties and seventies, in which an action is thoroughly rearranged: forwarded, reversed or retrograded, opposed, inverted, dramatically sped up or slowed down. These “deconstructive aesthetics,” as Sara calls them, are about taking apart and reassembling—enlivening the muscles and mind, by introducing new pathways and coordination, and forcing the dancer to think through polyrhythms. Problem Solving was about “getting used to process,” she tells me. “How to think about something, and also how not to think about something—how to just try to do the problem, and not get too upset about it.” The dancer gains technical capability, and a greater elasticity of dynamics. But the process takes time.

Sara was the executive decision-maker that day, but in classic women’s leadership style, she accepted suggestions. There were group decisions about how to indicate the gesture on both sides: would it be possible simultaneously or did it require first right, then left? With each gesture, this question had to be answered. There were some discoveries as well. When we got to a gesture that drew an “S” shape downward, Sara tried it simultaneously on both sides. “I don’t get that,” the interrogative dancer said. “How does that relate to the phrase?” Sara or someone else noted that she had simply divided the gesture in two—at once leaping to the movement’s dissection and reassembling the gestures into a new form. Repetition, repetition, repetition is key.

At some point in all of this work, Sara mentioned that she made chicken stew the day after her birthday, and that her husband’s niece had sent her a baby elephant video as a gift. She later sent us the video via email. It would not win highest hits for the funniest video. It seemed like more would happen, but very little did. The creature danced in the surf, running in and out of the rolling waves as they crested and hit the shore. Every now and then the force of the water tossed its cumbersome body about. At one point the baby elephant ended up pitched on its back—purposefully, I believe—with its big orange elephant feet sticking up out of the froth.

The video made me think of *Dune Dance*, a film that Carolyn Brown and the photographer James Klosty made in 1975, in which Sara trips lightly in and out of the surf along a beach in Cape Cod. In another shot, she and a group of dancers skip and stumble down a sand dune, their obvious gracefulness disrupted by the uneven terrain. I wrote back to Sara to tell her this, and she replied to say she had thought immediately of *Dune Dance* as well, but her husband’s niece didn’t know the film, which was not widely released, only her love of elephants. In the video, the elephant is mesmerized by sensations, approaches the problem differently each time, and above all relishes moving. It’s very Sara.

The movement we worked on in the studio seemed to absorb this small talk about arbitrary things. Eventually, newly forged choreographic material gets mixed with movement created years prior. Everything is usable, and everything continues to evolve.

It's May 2003, and I am in a studio at City Center with Twyla Tharp and another dancer, Charles Hodges, working on her seminal piece, *The Fugue*, which she created in 1970 with Sara Rudner and Rose Marie Wright. Charlie is Sara, I'm Rose. We are working on a falling quality: "Falling but on your leg, able to pull it together at any moment," Twyla explains. And at the same time, she says, "you are using your feet into the floor as if you are wading through mud and connecting your back to round out the corners." A little giggle attack—I call Charlie a "fucker," and then give the tempo, very slowly, facing him with my back to the front: "Aaaannndddd" ... our legs turn to jelly. Twyla up front exclaims, "What's going on? Pull it together!" But she's laughing, too. We correct a few body facings and figure out the last three counts for Rose. "Note that, Charlie," she says, as he is documenting the details of the restaging.

Twyla created *The Fugue* on a farm, away from the distractions of New York City, during a pivotal moment in which she renewed her commitment to making dances. With Sara and Rose, the trio lived, worked, and danced together, producing some of Tharp's most iconic early choreography. In *The Fugue*, Twyla establishes then rigorously deconstructs rhythmic themes. Performed in silence, the floor amplified by microphones, the piece hits like an overzealous woodpecker studying tango: a "rat-tat-tat" might melt into a swoon, or disintegrate into an even faster *ratatatat*. The sixth fugue features Sara and Rose moving unusually slowly. Twyla explains sardonically: "They wanted to go slow and be boring. They liked boring. So I decided the only way I'd let them was to make it very hard, as hard as it can possibly be, with slow sustained relevés and holds." Her affection for her original dancers infuses her words.

The hardest part about dancing *The Fugue* is staying in control while making it seem free and easy and even, at the extreme, out of control. Twyla asks us why *The Fugue* was a seminal work in the American dance canon. I offer: solid construction, a well-executed concept? No, she replies, she meant from a dancer's perspective. Charlie throws out another suggestion, which she bats down. "It's a classic because it displays intelligence," she says finally. "The only thing you have between yourself and the audience is your intelligence and your body. It is a pure display of the dancer's mind at work, unfettered by music or costumes or tricks."

I came upon this scene in my journal, seventeen years later. Tharp's description of their discoveries—a pure display of the dancer's mind at work—succinctly captures Sara's process. In reality, Charlie and I were attempting to *be* Sara and Rose. Or we were trying to, as freelance dancers working in New York City in the early aughts.

Twyla encouraged us to practice the material outdoors. Charlie suggested the L train platform might be interesting, an idea which she quickly swatted down: "Bucolic, Charlie, bucolic." As I began the material, she yelled out, "Think you're in a field! Think acting, Emily! Think writing! Like you're writing it!" And so we worked to find ourselves, through the bodies of Sara Rudner and Rose Marie Wright.



Sara Rudner in a final run-through of *Some "Yes" and More*, Lucinda Childs's loft, 541 Broadway, New York, NY, February 1976. Photo: © Nat Tileston.



Facing Page: Top: Twyla and Sara at Sunrise, Fort Tryon Park, New York, NY, June 4, 1971. Photo: James Klosty.
Bottom: A rehearsal of *33 Dances* at the Merce Cunningham Studio, Westbeth, New York, NY, February 1977. Photo: © Raymond Kurshals.

The first time I spoke to Sara was after a performance of *The Fugue* at the Joyce Theater. She came up beside me in the lobby and said quietly, “Emily, I’m Sara Rudner. Thank you for your dancing.” Sara was smaller than I’d expected—legendary dancers have a way of blowing up in one’s mind. Her dark eyes were full of compassion, and that evening slightly red around the edges, like she had been crying. I told her we’d been watching her performance in *The Fugue*, and how stunning she was. She steered the conversation back to me: “I hear you’re going to school.” I nodded. At twenty-nine, I was about to pause my dance career, upend my life, move to New Haven, and finish my undergraduate degree at Yale. After years of dancing for others, I wanted to find my own voice. But at that moment, the decision felt traumatizing. She moved in closer and took my hand. “You know, it doesn’t go away. It will all still be here.” She gestured to the body; mine, hers. “You can come back to it. And when you do, it will be in a different way.” I was grateful she didn’t ask me questions about what I was going to study, or the assumption I often heard, “so you’re retiring?” She spoke soul to soul, as the people around us drifted away. I think my mouth was open. “I will be back,” I said. “Yes, and when you do, it will be different,” she said. “I know this very well.” She glanced at me reassuringly as she turned to go.

I knew the story of Twyla’s career. When I told Twyla I wanted to write, she gave me two books, her 1992 autobiography, *Push Comes to Shove*, and the writing primer *Bird by Bird* (1994) by Anne Lamott, both of which showed up on my dressing room spot, in a theatre in Scottsdale, Arizona, among the many ways Twyla shows love, pragmatically. But at that time, I didn’t know Sara’s.

A head of silver curls appeared, froze for a moment, and then cried out: “Emillyyyy!!” Sara and I found each other on a screen. She was in her loft in SoHo, I was in my East Rock apartment in New Haven, and we were at the beginning of a global pandemic.

Sara wore a sweatshirt over a sweatshirt, and her brown irises were as large and penetrating as ever. “Her eyes, they take you somewhere,” Mikhail Baryshnikov once observed.⁵ I could feel her body’s innate grooviness, wriggling to get comfortable atop what I guessed must be her kitchen stool, just beneath the frame. She was sheltering in place, as we all were, which in her case meant total social isolation. At seventy-six, and a widow, she was in “that demographic,” she said. Having canceled a March trip to California to be with her son, his wife, and their dog, her only expedition was to her roof, where she could dance.

She launched in with characteristic wit: “These tiny things that live in our bodies are resourceful, persistent, *creative*. We are always fighting stuff in our bodies. We go into the studio and move around and do all sorts of stuff and we have *no idea* what’s going on in there. Maybe my next piece will be about bacteria. Bacteria who

want to be recognized." Here was an artist passionately committed to the everyday, who possessed intricate knowledge of her body, trying to make sense of Covid-19.

I had asked her to choose a few photos that were especially meaningful from her career, given our inability to look through the boxes together, which she stores in a closet in her bedroom. The first photo that Sara held up was a candid shot of her with Twyla. The caption read "Twyla + Sara at Sunrise, June 4, 1971, Fort Tryon Park, New York City." Sara's long black hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, and Twyla's dark wisps escaped from a polka dot scarf. They both wore sweaters: Sara's repeated "Peace" with an infinity of peace signs running down the front. She held a stick or a reed behind her head, and her very familiar, massive doe eyes looked smartly off to the left, as if perceiving something in the distance. Twyla's eyes were closed and she appeared to be mid-statement, exuding total confidence. The photo captured their dynamic: Sara is present, listening with her eyes askance to Twyla, who leads.

The second batch of images Sara shared came from the first choreographic works she created in her early thirties, during her hiatus from Twyla's company, when she left to find her own authorial voice. She held up to the screen a photograph of one of her initial choreographic forays, a solo consisting of thirty-three dances, which she composed for her thirty-third birthday in 1977. Her right leg was bent, toe propped behind the left leg, her arms extended delicately outward. She wore thin, full-body black legwarmers that had a hole in one knee, and white Keds. This was her second long solo, which she presented at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio. Her hips and thighs were round and full, and she appeared to be bowing. She had forgotten the name of the solo, but liked the image, and had spent the morning thinking about why. Her pelvis, she pointed out, was tipped, not in a Western classical stance. With her forward gesture, she welcomed the viewer into the dance. "What I look at now, and value now ... what is that odd moment, the moment in motion?" she wondered, her voice trailing off.

Studying herself dancing is rare for Sara. She never filmed the solos. The photographs and a small number of reviews are all the records that exist of that work. Declining to engage in the cycle of moving, videotaping, watching, and moving again that many dance artists have adopted since the 1970s, when the technology became more widely available, Sara has always preferred to feel her way from the inside—mainly, to dance.

She showed me another photograph, this time from her very first solo, in 1975, *Some Yes, and More*. Hovering a foot above the floor, her sneakered toes point downward, against an upper body so thoroughly relaxed, her arms and hands dropped by her sides, she could be waiting at a bus stop. Only her white pants, blown sideways by the momentum of the jump, gave away the effort. In another

photograph from that same solo, the camera caught her at an angle, left arm and gaze punching straight out sideways, while seemingly just passing through, en-route somewhere to her right. Her black curls, suspended straight up in the air, added another trajectory.

After a nine-year stint, in 1974, Sara took a break from dancing with Tharp. The reasons behind such shifts are always complex. She was physically exhausted, as the repertory had become more and more strenuous. Tharp had “moved from minimalist, to maximalist!” Sara explained. A full evening consisted of three works, and more often than not she, Twyla, and Rose performed in every one. But a more internal foray had begun as well: she needed to self-identify. She needed, she explained to me, “to grow up.” Tharp’s early dances both produced and magnified Sara’s gifts: the ability to ride momentum, to be casual and virtuosic at once. She found herself as a dancer, within Tharp’s vision. But she needed to pass through the experience of making her own structures and setting her own limits. Twyla suspected she wanted to have a baby.

Given the run of the house, Sara needed a new home: she rented a 2,000-square foot loft at the corner of Canal and West Street for \$165 a month, had a hardwood floor installed, and set up a live-in studio. A dancer-turned-choreographer must figure out the questions that most interest her, and some sort of process by which she will create. “I am essentially a dancer” is Sara’s common refrain, one who has been “addicted to the experience of dancing with others.” Her first works then, and to this day, were thinly veiled premises for dancing, for as many hours and in as many configurations as possible. For her first group piece, she proposed a ten-hour marathon dance to Barbara Dilley, head of the newly established Danspace Project. “How about five?” Dilley replied. Sara accepted, and with Risa Jarislow, Wendy Perron, and Wendy Rogers, meeting regularly over the course of a year, she filled three hundred minutes with dancing. In June 1975, they presented the work at St. Mark’s Church, where the sanctuary’s red linoleum floor and large cross propped in the corner framed their world.

Her solos were occasion pieces for her thirty-second, thirty-third, and thirty-fourth birthdays—“like, you dance at a Bar Mitzvah,” she said. “So I made dances to celebrate each birthday.” And yet choreographing in isolation, she might not have been as detailed, or as rigorous. So she worked up specific movement material with other dancers around her, and then said goodbye to them and tried to teach herself how to go it alone. The choreographic set-up she created resembled her early work with Tharp—all that experimentation into movement potential, and tight group bonds. “I was back where we were in those first five years,” Sara told me. “I was a throwback. And I did things I never could have done with Twyla.” She pressed more deeply into questions of physicality and presence, and interrogated the conventions of concert dance time, while Tharp moved on to other interests.

Sara's corner of the dance world is far from the "isms" or aesthetic trends in dance that interest the art world. "Postmodernism" as defined in dance history is as close as she gets to claiming an aesthetic affiliation, and it is the 1960s postmodern dance pioneers to whom she most closely identifies, after the influence of Tharp. This is also where aesthetic lineages get complicated: whereas Twyla eventually veered away from making dances such as *The Fugue* into almost Wagnerian maximalism—sets, costumes, stories, pop music, haircuts by Vidal Sassoon—she, too, began with postmodern minimalism, in a concert at Judson Church, and her first, brutally spare work, *Tank Dive*. But by the mid-1970s, Twyla had set her sights on breaking out of the modern dance world and into ballet, film, television, and popular culture. Sara's heart remained with a love of pedestrian gestures, movement-as-task, and performing as no one other than yourself.

"Performing as yourself" is something of an illusion in early 60s postmodern dance. For even the walkiest of the artists—Steve Paxton, who claimed to have invented walking—were highly trained, extraordinarily intelligent movers. The postmodernists acquired physical information in order to question it; as Sara noted, they were "ultra-specialists, reciting their ABCs." She met Yvonne Rainer in Mia Slavenska's ballet class, of all places to encounter the soon-to-be iconoclast, and became enamored of her fierce, quirky directness. In the lineages of Martha Graham's modern dance, to which Sara had been exposed through early studies at Connecticut College with the dancer Pearl Lang, she lined up in the wings and recited her mantra—"With joy as my witness!"—before rushing onstage to perform goddesses or archetypes, anything other than Sara Mae Rudner from Brooklyn. Yvonne and her cohort presented Sara with a welcome alternative. While Sara had watched all of the members of Judson Dance Theater, the groundbreaking 1960s collective, at the peak of their dancing, Rainer stood out most of all. "I will never let go of the image of this woman warrior, who pulled me into this downtown world," Sara recalled.

We discuss Yvonne Rainer knowingly, for I have danced with Rainer for the past twenty years. Neoclassical ballet-trained at the School of American Ballet and a former member of New York City Ballet, I never could have imagined at the start of my career that I would spend most of my time performing with postmodern dance pioneers. Because I know Rainer's work well, I know the lineages in which her work gets situated: Dadaism, Duchamp, a bit of Futurism and Fluxus, and Minimalism. She incorporates found texts which are often politically strident, uses the strategy of radical juxtaposition religiously, and writes edgily and playfully about her practice. But Rainer's is another dance world, one embraced by the visual arts, film theory, and art history—not, in fact, Sara's corner now, and notably so, I think, because Sara has remained so much an artist of process, and a lover of pure movement and the potential of human anatomy. A high priestess of the body repels the theorists. Nothing there like words to hold onto.

Sara's major contribution to dance emerges from synthesizing postmodernism's direct action with Tharp's sensuous style to create a pedestrian-inflected virtuosity that is difficult to replicate—largely because it's paratechnical, shaped by the experiences Sara has passed through, and eventually created for herself and others in the dance studio. Jodi Melnick, an esteemed dancer-choreographer who came of age as a dancer working with Sara, describes the result as "the absolute specificity of Sara's body which never got stuck in a technique." If I were to propose "isms" for Sara's work, I would put her forth as a pioneer of "experientialism": art that engenders situations for herself and others to move through, which she then reframes as pure choreographic form.

Going paratechnical also means that while the movement is significant in and of itself—it, too, is a vehicle for something else: for psychology, for memory, for fantasy. The choreography becomes a means of sharing flights of the mind with an audience. "Sometimes I think about what I do as an internal monologue-dialogue," Sara says, when I press her to put into words what she's doing when she dances. "A dia-monologue?!" In the past, during rehearsals, when I have asked her what she's thinking, she has told me she's not thinking. Today, her answer changed slightly, and she returns—as she inevitably does, in so many of our exchanges about her work—to Twyla: "I am having experiences that I hope are observable and communicative. I didn't grow up having to sell anything or pretend I was someone else. That was the gift Twyla gave me. It was a faith in the movement. And then the parts in her dances that allowed me to, within a very specific structure, to improvise. That set me up. It was like, I want to do that, I want to do that!"

Twyla built memorable solos for Sara out of basic elements, never more than a few minutes long, which do magical work in the middle of a dance. In "Mournful Serenade" in *Eight Jelly Rolls* (1971), and "Got to Know the Woman" in *Deuce Coupe* (1974), the rush of steps quiets down, and the audience suddenly peers into a woman's psyche. As performed by Sara, a sense of character and emotional expressiveness radiate from the ultimately task-based choreography, much like the transformation in classical mythology, when a tree dissolves into female form, or a siren rises from the sea. Basic building blocks, ignited by the power of the imagination. "Minimalist vaudeville," Sara coins it. "It's connecting the dots," she explained. "But it's personally connecting the dots. Instead of going 'HI!' it's sort of like, 'hi ...' inviting people in, instead of demanding their attention. Although there are moments theatrically where it's important to stop. Stillness, demand the attention, and then go back. Which leaves you a way of presenting different aspects of yourself and of your inner dialogue and your reaction to the world. So it's not just all one thing."

To differentiate herself from Tharp, Sara needed to start hearing her own voice in her head. She stripped away the proscenium stage and presented the solos she had

made for herself in a studio—Lucinda Childs’s loft, or the Merce Cunningham Studio. There, she could see the whites of people’s eyes. And she practiced imagining engaging with watchers. “I wasn’t particularly emotionally ready for it then,” she confessed to me, ready for that way of being in performance with others in such close proximity, as one’s self, moving as one moves, “as I am now.” Her compositions were instinctually felt: “When I needed to rest, or go slower, I made up something that would let me do that,” she explained. “All of these things, when I think about them now, there was stuff in these solos that were definitely ... the choice of material was unconscious, physical, conscious level. Action in meaning, quote unquote, in the body language, what followed what. Especially where the focus went.” The photographer Lois Greenfield observed that Sara’s dances were like the perils of Pauline. Adventurous things happened to Pauline, a silent film star, and “at the end of every episode, she’d be, like, falling off a cliff, or tied to a railroad track,” Sara recalled. “At the time I laughed and kind of understood somewhere in my gut what that was. Looking back, I can say, yeah, there’s a lot of stuff going on that I was feeling and doing the movement with a certain kind of feeling. It was all body language. It was not being filtered through any other kind of story stuff.” She said this to me while peering at the photographs over Skype, trying to remember how it felt to do her dance.

Sara said that the dance historian Sally Banes “took her to task” for pandering to the audience, in a review of one of her solos. Arlene Croce was none too happy as well, praising Sara’s dancing but wanting more choreographic structure. It seems that those early works were only partially legible to the critics. It’s not surprising that Banes and Croce missed the point, when Sara’s point was to deflect away from the emphasis on finished *works*, which the dance industry so valorizes, to *working*.

And work she did, building the Sara Rudner Performance Ensemble with the help of Performing Arts Services, an organization created to support downtown New York musicians and dancers. But as it grew, Tharp kept calling, and she kept going back, until the tension of juggling it all took a physical toll. She could have withstood the business of dance if it allowed her to do what she wanted to do, she told me. But what she most wanted to do fell outside of touring concert dance formats: she simply wanted to dance. This may be why there are no lofty universal claims in Sara’s art, and no grand pretenses. The specificity of the person moving, as they pass through that practice with others, constitutes the composition.

The second time I performed *Heartbeat* was in the central atrium of the National Builders Museum—a vast hall several stories high, with thick polished stone columns and a fountain in the middle. They had set up the stage immediately inside the main museum entrance, facing into the hall, which was filled with gala tables. I stood backstage for a good two hours, directly in front of those doors. A heated wind blew in every time a door to the outside opened, repeatedly knocking over

a sign propped nearby. The marble floor felt warm under my socks. We went on at 10:30 P.M., after a long evening during which I did not stop moving. “Why did you not stop moving?” my father, who was there, asked pragmatically. I tried to explain Sara’s movement vocabulary—the continuous switchbacks, the fluency of polyrhythms, and the disjointed coordination of the upper and lower body: the arms go this way, the feet go that way. To get to it you have to short-circuit your usual habits. I worried that if I stopped moving while I waited to go on, her practice might slip out of my body.

Following the earlier spacing rehearsal, Sara remained after everyone else had cleared the stage. Her feet quickening in her sneakers, she tapped out the rhythms in her head and ran through the material we had assembled for my improvised solo: the complicated arm gestures (as noted earlier), a smattering of 1960s social dances, a curved, “S”-like position, a little ballet, and a lot of swivel feet. Unexpected changes of mind, an idea whose idea is redirection, caught her body by surprise, as much as anyone watching—a dancer aware of her own dancing, dancing entirely for herself. She flattened her palms into a bent-at-the-elbow high-five, maneuvered out of that into gestures from her arm phrase, sneaked back into something that looked like Indian classical dance, and then she discovered the “Pony monkey combo,” which she eventually brought over to share with me. “You’ve still got it,” Janney noted to her. The moment ended. “You might use this,” she said to me, and demonstrated: arms do the Pony, feet do the Monkey. Typical of Sara, her discoveries were meant to be shared, and she was still in process.

Christopher Janney had been a research fellow at MIT’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies in 1981 when he began to explore the potential of customized heart monitors, using the latest technologies to isolate the sound to the purest beat. That same year, the arts impresario Jed Wheeler introduced him to Sara Rudner. In addition to knowing her by reputation as Tharp’s principal dancer, “I knew she was an inventor,” Janney told me. Sara visited Janney in Boston in the fall of 1982 to experiment with his novel designs, and immediately took to the wearable instrument, which amplified her heart’s rhythms against her intrinsic polyrhythmic bent. Declining to videotape her rehearsals, she made clear to Janney, “I’m not interested in what I did. I’m interested in what I’m doing as I’m doing it.” In striking opposition to the prevailing culture at MIT, Sara brought embodied knowledge, not meditation. She reacted to her heartbeat, and she danced. They premiered the piece a year later, after rehearsing more on the phone than in person. Sara had officially left Tharp’s company, but she kept getting pulled back in.

In the late 1990s, Rudner and Janney set a version of the piece on Mikhail Baryshnikov, titled *Heartbeat: mb*. The solo changed, inflected by a string quartet and Baryshnikov’s incomparable imagination, which relishes the darker depths of the soul. Many other variations later, I stepped into *Heartbeat with the Persuasions*.

Each iteration, Sara has served as Janney's choreographic adviser, and crafts a dance with the dancer before her.

I asked Janney what he had learned from collaborating with Sara all these years. "Good question," he replied after a beat. "Sara was like ... holy shit, she doesn't even know what she's doing. That's what it is, *that's* talent. In spite of yourself, you're doing interesting things. She just wants to dance and be in the moment. It gave me license to let go in my own work. Especially when I'm making something where I'm putting myself in some kind of improvisational place: don't hesitate. You've got to try the most radical thing."

During our tech rehearsal at the National Builders Museum, Sara watched from across the great hall. The Persuasions crooned through one of their standards, "Stand By Me": "I won't cry, I won't cry, no I—ii-iiii-iii wo-oh-on't ... shed a tear." As I moved, I watched Sara travel sideways under the archways in a smooth line, her head not changing levels, as if she were on a conveyor belt. I suspected she was doing her crazy feet. And then she slowed and stilled the leftward travel and remained in place, her body swaying and tilting gently side to side—shoulders here and there, a far-off look in her eyes. She stayed mostly in the shadows, against the bright wall behind. I absorbed her dancing.

Jodi Melnick told me this story: "I was at her studio on 18th Street, just her and I, working on a sequence we had made. There was a 'washing machine' gesture, something forward with the hips, the material was complicated and detailed. We weren't talking. We had talked a lot before and after, but when we were moving, we didn't speak. It was obvious to us what we were doing. In one moment I was behind her, and I felt I *entered her body*, her physicality, and came out the other side with a sense of myself, my own body, and my own physicality as a mover."

One time a student got upset about retrograde, and to address her feelings Sara raised philosophical questions: "What does it mean to retrograde? What does retrograde mean in our lives? Is it memory? Going back through things in our lives?" After decades of doing this rote, this work of deconstructing movement, she began to want to ask, what *are* these manipulations? What are their resonances? "Like, what is the inversion of happiness?" she posed rhetorically. I asked her: what *is* the inversion of happiness? "Probably loneliness," she replied after a pause.

I wrote this after one rehearsal with Sara: "This was thick stuff to then start dancing through, and I felt so for her. But such is the world of Sara that the dancing emerges out of the talking no matter the subject matter, offering a plumb line to sanity, an escape, a rising, restoration, affirmation of self and spirit. Dancing offered, as she said to me once, 'a way to keep busy and stay off the streets.'" Her husband Christopher would soon be diagnosed with cancer. Several years later, my father

passed away from cancer, after a two-year illness during which I was unable to work on this essay.

As much as I loved the dancing, I sometimes felt restless during those many rehearsal hours with Sara's group. I had emails to answer, a to-do list for my teaching job. I itched to check the *New York Times*, to be sure the world was still out there, while we practiced polyrhythms between our sternums and heels. Life creeps in. I believe one reason we were all there was for her presence to act as a reminder, *this has meaning*. The belief that physical research is worth doing. Sara credits Tharp for that belief. "Not needing a performance is beautiful, magical and radical, to not end in a performance," Melnick told me. "It can be frustrating not to get the employment, the booking, etc. For me that was never it. I knew it was so much bigger than that."

"There is never a dance idea not worth exploring, Emily," Sara once said to me. It was a pep talk and a gentle admonishment. I had forgotten that something could be made from anything.

When the quarantine hit, Sara had no other dancers, and no studio. So she practiced improvisations on her roof. That day, she had worked on a "tango phrase" she had developed during her studio time. She practiced slowing down, and going faster. The dancing she used to do has mostly evaporated, due to the physical impairments of aging. Soon turning seventy-eight, she says her dancing is "more centered, less throw around, more like grabbing something in a smaller frame, but that has as much, maybe, emotional variation, expressed through time and rhythm." More and more for her, she finds dancing is about sculpting time.

As recently as 2017, Sara helped Tharp restage her work. Sara still feels addicted to that world. But she finds she needs to be clear, to herself, about preserving her boundaries—her health, her family time, or she would give that away, too. Once after signing in for a class in the 1960s, the teacher found Sara as she was warming up and showed her what she had written: "Twyla Tharp." "My admiration, friendship, love and respect for her ..." Sara trailed off, nearly sixty years later. "But I have to say, this is Twyla, and I am me. And I am different."

Thirty, forty, fifty years on, Sara's dances will be impossible to reconstruct, because no one will be capable of recovering her process. It would be like trying to pry a stone up out of the earth and discovering you are in fact holding on to the tip of a mountain and attempting to move glacial time.

Why make art? I can supply my students with historical examples of what others have done, but I can't answer that question for them. I struggle to answer it for myself. But Sara's choreographic practice feels like one answer. No choreographer working today does exactly what Sara does. No one is so content to work unseen.

"It was because she had that visibility with Twyla that we benefit from her like this," Jodi Melnick says. Is the point not to care about the public part of performance? Or is the point to care about how one chooses to live?

If life is art, in Sara's world, then I am writing an inversion: the ending of this essay is a beginning.⁶

Sara Mae Rudner was born in Brooklyn in 1944. As the second youngest of one brother and four male cousins, no one in her family paid much attention to what she did, so she did whatever she wanted. When asked where she learned to dance, she will say with bemusement: "doing interpretive dances on the streets of Brooklyn." She enrolled at Barnard when she was sixteen, where she studied Russian literature and swam a lot, and met Christopher, who later in life would become her third husband. Her exposure to modern dance began with a smattering of classes in Barnard's dance program, which were mostly like phys ed. She had very little formal training when she graduated in 1964 but thought she might dance. She took the civil service exam and she was offered a job in the Office of Social Security (a family tradition: her father had been a civil servant). Her grandmother tried to argue against pursuing a dance career—though it was the mid-60s, it felt like the 1950s. "I'll only do it for five years," Sara assured her. After the first year, Sara decided she'd quit, not having connected with the repertory of the small Graham-based dance company where she had landed a job. But then, serendipitously, she met Margaret Jenkins, a dancer who happened to be dancing with a young choreographer named Twyla Tharp. Twyla needed a third dancer. Margy brought her to a downtown performance. Sara was subbing in for a friend who had gotten injured. Twyla stayed three, at most five minutes. "She'll do," Twyla declared, as the story now famously goes. "Bring shoes." Sara showed up at Twyla's studio on Franklin Street in saddle shoes ... and they got to work.⁷

NOTES

1. The dancers present when I rehearsed with Sara were Megan Boyd, Ashley Byler, Chia Ying Gao, Rachel Lehrer, Lynn Schlesinger, Maggie Thom, and Lori Yuill.

2. Wendy Perron, "Looking Back on the 'Embodiment of Ecstasy,'" *New York Times*, June 13, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/13/arts/dance-looking-back-on-the-embodiment-of-ecstasy.html>.

3. Alastair Macaulay, "Where Light Replaces Sound, and Music Offers Comfort," *New York Times*, May 14, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/15/arts/dance/15weather.html>.

4. Arlene Croce, *Going to the Dance* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 14.

5. Perron, "Looking Back."

6. I began to assemble this essay in 2017, after asking Sara if I could write a profile on her. We did several interviews between 2017 and 2020. My writing kept getting interrupted by external factors: my father's illness, a global pandemic. Each time I fell away and returned,

Sara never questioned me, we simply picked back up where we had left off. The practice holds itself afloat even when you have to step away. One among many things I have learned from Sara is that you can eventually complete a composition, when you're ready. And if you are doing your job as an artist, you will have gathered up a lot of life, shaved away a good deal of it to find your form, then made clear that it, and you, are still and always *in progress*.

7. I saw Tharp's spectacular eightieth birthday celebration at City Center in November 2021. Relieved, I could sit back and appreciate the dancing because she had drawn entirely on dances she had choreographed post-1990—post-Sara Rudner. No one had to pretend and fail to be Sara.

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