ON THE FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY of the Summer of Love, the Lincoln Center Out of Doors festival celebrated the “spirit of the ‘60s” with a series of concerts by musicians Dave Brubeck, Arlo Guthrie, and Pauline Oliveros and performances by choreographers Trisha Brown and Paul Taylor. The Trisha Brown Dance Company’s evening ended on a poignant note with a performance of PRESENT TENSE, 2003, whose set and costumes were designed by Elizabeth Murray. Murray had died on August 12, 2010. I was not at the moment of sadness. Also on program was Can’t Miss Plants, 1997–98, a suite of dances from Brown’s extraordinary production of Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo. The mood of those dances progresses, like the Orpheus myth itself, from joyous to mournful.

A sorrowful note had already been sounded momentarily, for me, in the program opener, Accumulation, 1971. For this hallmark work, Brown invented a wholly new lexicon of ordinary movement performed with effortless directness—twists of the wrist and torso, turns of the head, shifts of body weight, lifts of the leg, steps backward and forward, turns of the arms—and you see that lexicon with absolute clarity through Accumulation’s simple additive structure. A gesture is performed and repeated several times; a second gesture is added to it, and these are repeated, another is added, and so on. I have watched Brown perform the dance many times—to the Grateful Dead’s “Uncle John’s Band”; while talking; interwoven with Watermotor, 1974, telling two different stories—A, B—plus Watermotor. Whether seeing it at its simplest or at its most complex and demanding (for the performer, that is; the audience experiences the prodigious mnemonic feat; an eerie silence takes over), I am always amazed at its conceptual economy and beauty. But the performance of Accumulation at the Lincoln Center Out of Doors was unlike any I’d seen before: Brown wasn’t doing it; a member of her company was. Of course, Accumulation’s series of distinctive phrases, not technically especially difficult, is extremely teachable. But never having seen the work danced by anyone but Brown, I guess I thought I never would. Accumulation’s movement seemed to emanate straight from her person. More than that, I’d watched Brown continue to dance so well over the years, into her middle age and beyond. Beginning in 1994, after a year, with her back to audience and looking onstage, she danced, wonderfully, if You Can’t See Me, the solo that Robert Rauschenberg “invented” for her. So I wasn’t prepared to see anyone but Brown dance any of her signature roles. It stopped me short, saddened me—and then my sadness was dissipated by Sandra Grinberg’s fine performance. In the intervening three and a half years, as Brown has devoted herself to restaging many of her early works, I’ve grown accustomed to seeing her former roles taken by other members of her company. At the same time, a younger generation of viewers has had the opportunity to see for themselves the relevance of Brown’s radical innovation of dance to the current vogue for performance in art institutions, beginning with the inclusion of Floor of the Forest, 1970, and Accumulation in Documenta 12. Together with her Judson Dance Theater peers (and under the influence of Minimal and Conceptual art), Brown originated ordinary movement and talking as dance, site-staged dance, and dance structured by the following of simple rules. As these grew true to what we now know as performance art, Brown moved uneasily to the supplie improvisatory choreography that her company now dances with such verve. But that, scaled down, could also be taught to opera singers working alongside their dancers.

The past year’s fortieth anniversary of the Trisha Brown Dance Company has occasioned a great proliferation of performances of Brown’s dances, both old and new. The high points, for me, have been the early work incorporating film; Planes, 1968, the legendary equipment pieces Matt Matajan’s Dance the Sidewall, a Building, 1970. Together with the Hall, 1971, and Sprat, 1974; Brown’s first proscenium piece, Glacial Decoy, 1977; and, of most of all, the unusual work that Brown danced with four of the women in her company at Dia:Beacon on May 1. When I arrived at the museum that day, Steven Evans, then managing director of Dia:Beacon, whispered conspiratorially, “Be sure to stay for the second performance, because Trisha might dance.” It was moving to see her dancing again, but more moving still to see the intimacy between her and the women in her company conversed. Compressed within the relatively brief improvisatory dance,
in 1962. (It didn’t warrant either of these words—
but those who did—Sima Form, Rainer—
are noteworthy sources.) But Brown’s overarching 
question, and you could see again what occasioned 
the opportunity to see Dia:Beacon, because I had no intention of missing 
Rainer’s dance made here. It is, after all, that force that pro-
vided the dancers so quickly and challengingly in their 
downward spirals until all ten of them are lying on 
the ground, feet still on the columns.

The image of Brown “lying down in the air” 
remains—and persists to this day—for Demme apparently doesn’t 
trust dance’s capacity to create its own story. As a result, he pro-
vides a narrative frame for the dance, setting in 
Brown’s studio and having members of the company 
arrive throughout and sit down to watch Brown 
dance. The opening shot is a close-up of Brown’s feet, 
accompanied by the sound of her black camera voice: 
“Start . . . starting . . . starting to talk while doing this 
dance.” Demme cuts to a close-up of Brown’s arms 
which Demme apparently doesn’t trust dance’s 
capacity to create its own story. As a result, he pro-
vides a narrative frame for the dance, setting in 
Brown’s studio and having members of the company 
arrive throughout and sit down to watch Brown

The point—or at least one 
way to perform a movement, and better, that is the right way is 
the way it’s performed.
 already in progress. We hear a few seconds of Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations” as the curtain rises, and then we see a solo dancer—two, one male, one female, standing perfectly still. The woman is slightly farther from the camera than the man and is partially hidden by a wing curtain. Right away we see another woman running through the space behind the pair in close-up, and Brown moves to a medium shot that follows this dancer as she runs upstage. Not only will this give the audience a sense of the stage left or right during. This unobtrusively is the only movement. She seems to trace a series of different paths around, across, and along the stage wings. She seems to apply to drawings themselves, now freed from their relation to the live performance. For most of us, that is the ineffable quality in the experience of dance, and one that no film can fully reproduce—how you move your knees, the way you move your elbows, the way you move your shoulders, the way you move your head, the way you move your neck, or dancer’s or crew member’s perspective—but it will be visible to them that produced the work’s intended effect. Indeed, it was the inability of performers along the stage point from which anyone could see the whole stage left or right way to perform the movement, or, better, that the dancers’ or crew member’s perspective—but it will be visible to them that produced the work’s intended effect. However, Brown was one of the first choreographers to cross-talk in a movie.

Brown borrowed filmic montage to interpret and flashback in a movie. In direct contrast to the dancer’s use of space, the movement she saw. For most of us, that is the ineffable quality in the experience of dance, and one that no film can fully reproduce—how you move your knees, the way you move your elbows, the way you move your shoulders, the way you move your head, the way you move your neck, or dancer’s or crew member’s perspective—but it will be visible to them that produced the work’s intended effect. However, Brown was one of the first choreographers to cross-talk in a movie.

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NOTES


3. “M. G.” stands for Michel Guy, who was France's minister of culture in the first administration of Jacques Chirac and was the founding director of the Festival d’Automne in 1972. He was a supporter of Brown's work and the commissioner of this work.
