

## Writing an Obituary for AIDS

David Gere

Earlier this week I viewed the 1990 film *Longtime Companion* for the umpteenth time, watching with the kind of obsessive fascination one usually reserves for a slow-motion train wreck or for the video-loop collapse of two gigantic buildings in lower Manhattan: you know what's going to happen, and you're horrified, and yet you simply cannot turn your eyes away. Written by Craig Lucas, *Longtime Companion* was the first Hollywood film to deal with the AIDS epidemic in the United States and, predictably, it concerns itself almost exclusively with gay men of the sort who spend part of each summer at Fire Island and part of every day at the gym, mediated for middle America through the point of view of a straight woman: homosexual culture for the masses.

But for all its shortcomings, *Longtime Companion* remains, at least for me, as riveting as it was when it was first released a decade ago, moving inexorably from 1981, when the first cases of a rare cancer were identified in gay men and reported in the *New York Times*, to 1989, when those gym boys with their Fire Island tans have reluctantly, through loss and anger, been converted into political activists.

And then comes that remarkable final scene, a kind of apotheosis of wishful yearning, in which our trio of central characters, Will (played by the divine Campbell Scott), his boyfriend, Fuzzy (Stephen Caffrey), butchly attired in an ACT UP T-shirt, and Fuzzy's sister, Lisa (Mary-Louise Parker), amble down the beach at Fire Island, musing upon all they've lost, meanwhile conjuring a wish that they might be there at the moment when the cure for AIDS is found. In a great unexpected rush, the peaceful solitude of the beach is suddenly rent by a surge of sweaty, muscle-y, mostly male bodies, many in fresh summer whites, whooping and shouting at their release from what must surely have been purgatory. For these are not just any pulchritudinous men, but rather the dead men of Fire Island, all revived, embracing one another, joking, camping, catching up on old times. The cure for AIDS has been found, and it is not only for those sick and still living, but also for those dead and long gone. This is a resurrection, of a distinctly gay disco variety, set to Zane Campbell's aptly titled "Post-Mortem Bar." And until the fantasy bursts in a final plummet to reality, a gay male viewer, especially one who lived through the 1980s in the United States, is suspended in pure bliss.

In his 1993 essay, "Dante on Fire Island: Reinventing Heaven in the AIDS Elegy," literary critic James Miller terms this final scene a paradigmatic example of the "anastatic moment," the word "anastasis" taken from the Greek for resurrection. In Miller's reinvigo-

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rated usage of the term, however, this is a resurrection from graves dug by failures of governmental agencies, by rampant apathy, and by homophobia as well as by a virus. “In AIDS elegies anastasis comes as a blessed moment of recovery,” Miller writes, “when the dead rise from the mass graves dug for them by the fatalistic discourse of public health and join forces with the living against the World, the Flesh, and the Virus” (Miller 1993, 266). Thus the anastatic elegy is both a consolation and a form of action.

In my research on AIDS and dance, which has now consumed more than a decade-and-a-half of my life—starting from the time when I was working as a newspaper critic in the Bay Area and first watching the collision of AIDS with dance, and dance with AIDS—I have begun to identify a series of anastatic choreographies that not only envision a time when AIDS will be cured but when those who have died of AIDS will be restored to us. This is necessarily a difficult, even twisted formulation, for if Marx could tag religion as the “opiate of the people,” the AIDS elegy could then be seen as the “opiate of the gay people,” an attempt to mollify survivors by creating images of a heaven where all is made right again, where old grievances are redressed and dead bodies are not just made whole but are quite literally beatified. Lord knows, those of us who have managed to survive AIDS need some consolation, but the wrong kind of consolation would tell us to be patient, to murmur quiet remembrances in private, and to refrain from upsetting the status quo.

But what if we could have our mourning and our militancy too, as activist Douglas Crimp would have it (Crimp 1989), our consoling and our street marches, our dreams of dead friends made whole again alongside our angry tirades against a system that ignores the deaths of those deemed immoral, unworthy, or just plain expendable. What if we could have both? What would it look like?

It might look like these three dance works, by David Roussève, Terry Creach, and Arnie Zane. In David Roussève’s 1995 *Whispers of Angels*, sharp social commentary mixes with the unabashedly sentimental to create a new kind of scabrous poetry for the AIDS era, one that is both melancholic and militant. The piece begins with a monologue in which Roussève details, perhaps autobiographically, perhaps fictionally—he never tells us for certain—his early quest to make it in show business. Standing at a microphone in the guise of a standup comedian, he regales us with tales of his first part in a soap opera, in which he ends up playing not a well-heeled party guest, as promised and expected, but a down-and-out black dude flipping burgers at a barbecue for those self-same guests. Thus, from the very outset, Roussève forces his viewers to confront the racial inequities that endure, even for an honored Princeton graduate, in the world of television image-making. A second monologue turns dreamy, spooky even, as Roussève recounts another soap-opera episode, with scenes set in sub-Saharan Africa, in which he is typecast as the victim in a ritual sacrifice. Race, AIDS, fear of death—these are the themes of the first half of Roussève’s piece, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and was performed at a string of major American venues by Roussève and his Reality company.

The intensity of the piece ramps up incrementally, unstopably, until Act I ends with a scene of Roussève dying, in a movement vocabulary that draws upon the grizzled, expressionistic body language of *butoh*. (The music, by contrast, is an aged whiskey version of “The Twelfth of Never” by black chanteuse Nina Simone.) As he slowly descends toward the floor, his nude body not so much falling as crumbling, Roussève exhales sharply in an urgent pattern that becomes a verbal drumbeat, insistent and punctuated, if at first unintelligible, until at

the final iteration he clearly articulates the words, “Hold my hand, I’m dying.” Meanwhile, a string of five nude dancers has remained face down on the floor, each dancer’s hands touching another’s feet, evoking a chain of paper cutouts. At the last, the nearest body in the string arches upward, a hand reaching out as if to grasp Roussève’s spirit into their shimmering constellation.

Jumping ahead now to the conclusion of the piece, the earlier death is echoed and won back in what I take as a perfect example of the gay anastasis Miller identifies in *Longtime Companion*, except that this heaven is not only gay in its sensibility but distinctly African-American. Roussève begins this final scene by repeating the verbal component of the earlier death, this time while sitting in a chair. “Hold my hand I’m dying,” he says, strongly punctuating each syllable. When the final death rattle is over, he stages a literal crossing-over to a promised land, decorated with the stuff of backyard altars and fantasyland gardens, and peopled with the long-dead members of his family, his grandmother in the rocking chair, his mother by her side. B. J. Crosby, a fabulous gospel singer with a powerful set of lungs, plays a sort of angel Gabriel, welcoming this new saint to Technicolor heaven. “Glory, glory, hallelujah”—she belts out this well-known gospel hymn while leading Roussève’s character across the waters represented by the dancers now lying side by side, rigid, on the floor. At the climax, the entire cast and audience celebrate by singing “For All the Saints” in lusty voices, finding ecstasy in a scene that had begun with a painful death. A gay man with AIDS is risen from the dead. This is anastasis redefined for the AIDS era.

Perhaps more obvious in its effects but nonetheless consoling and activist simultaneously is Terry Creach’s 1997 *Study for a Resurrection*. Made specifically for the serene atmosphere of St. Mark’s performance space in downtown New York, the piece is heightened by the live performance of simple polyphony by the choral group Lionheart. The consolation of this particular anastasis is contained in the smooth, soothing tones of these beautiful male voices, echoing and resonant under the high-pitched roof of this active church, but it is also embodied in the dancers’ liquid movements and in their soft touch (plate 1).

Creach has taken visual and aural images associated with a brotherhood of monks and adapted them to a context that is now about dead men, presumably dead gay men, depicted in a frame of shimmering spirituality that configures these men as saints. When I described this piece to my mate, Peter, detailing the succession of scenes in which up to six men tenderly hold one another, swirling from the arms of one partner into the arms of another, I wistfully offered a rhetorical question: “Doesn’t that sound like heaven?” Peter’s response: “Sounds like a back room to me,” by which he was referring, of course, to the darkened enclosure behind some gay bars where men meet for furtive, and anonymous, sexual assignations. Thus, *Study for a Resurrection* is about spirituality, yes, but it is also about sex...and about falling into the abyss of death, only to be lifted out of it again—literally, as per Creach’s title, resurrected.

One of the most enigmatic titles for a dance in the AIDS era is Arnie Zane’s 1987 *The Gift/No God Logic*. Reviewing the work in June, *New York Times* critic Jennifer Dunning (1987) mused, “Whatever could that title mean?” In fact, it was an open secret that Zane was ill with AIDS—he would come out in July on the *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*—but perhaps Dunning felt some need to protect him. With the benefit of hindsight (Zane died March 30, 1988, nine months after the New York premiere of *The Gift*) the meaning of the title now seems self-evident: the piece was a final gift of himself, and it was created at a fraught moment for Zane when he could not fathom the possibility of a just or loving God.



Plate 1. Terry Creach's *Study for a Resurrection* (1997). Photograph by Sue Rees, used with permission, courtesy of Creach/Company.

The choreography itself is an abstract study, a series of variations each beginning with four dancers in the shape of a pinwheel, shoulder to shoulder, then falling back into a neat row. In this sense it is situated in the center of Zane's compositional practice, his astringent post-modernism. But layered upon the sharply drawn choreography is a set of semiotic qualifiers that reconfigure abstraction in raw emotional terms. The music is by Verdi, two arias from *La Forza del Destino* (The Power of Destiny), sung by Zane's favorite soprano, Montserrat Caballé. The lighting, by Robert Wierzel, with its harshly angled rays and fog effects, suggests one world being gazed upon by another. And then there is the bow on Heidi Latsky's back (costumes designed by Jones/Zane company member Demian Acquavella), the bow that renders her and the piece itself as a kind of present, to the people Zane loved and to posterity. Indeed, of the twenty-two works identified by Elizabeth Zimmer and Susan Quasha (1989) as having been created by Zane alone (as opposed to in collaboration with Jones), this is the piece most frequently performed by the Jones/Zane company in the thirteen years since Zane's death. It remains firmly in the current repertory. The piece itself is therefore a kind of anastasis: Zane is dead but his choreography lives on. Those of us who see the piece may even feel soothed by this sense of continuation (plate 2).

Less obvious on first view, however, is the fact that *The Gift/No God Logic* is a very angry piece, made at a time when Zane was furious at having to face imminent death. In an oral history conducted by Lesley Farlow in December 1987, just three months before his passing, Zane railed against governmental injustice, against traditional gender displays in ballet, against gay choreographers who try to "pass" as straight, and he even had a bone to pick with

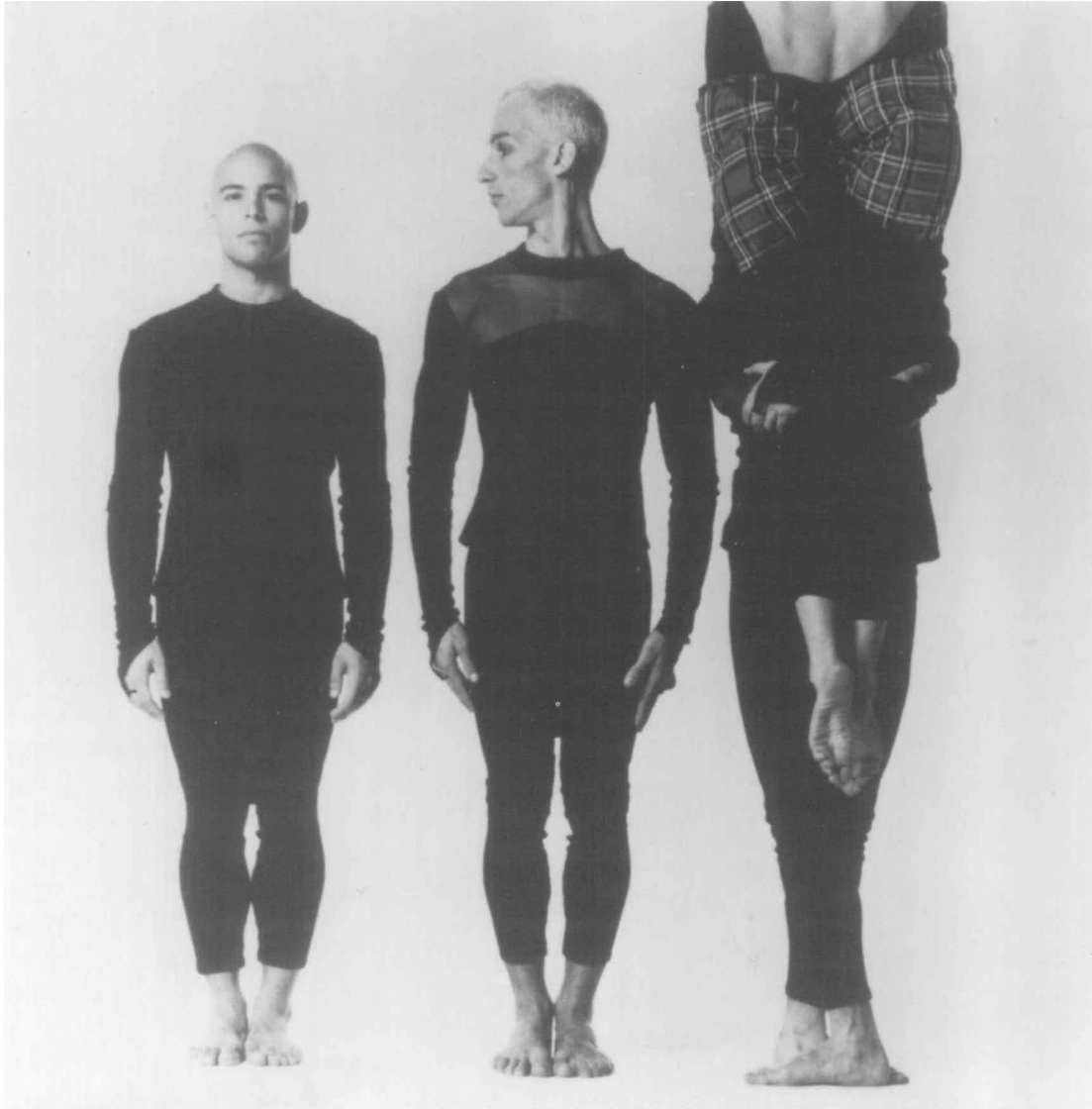


Plate 2. Dancers of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company in Arnie Zane's *The Gift/No God Logic* (1987). Photograph by Lois Greenfield, used with permission.



a critic whom, on the whole, it is clear he respected a great deal, so much so that she was designated to speak at his memorial (Farlow 1987). Deborah Jowitt (1987) had written a joint obituary of several figures in the dance world and, bowing to the wishes of family members, she had not indicated AIDS as cause of death, even when this information was well known in the downtown New York dance community. Zane's response was that, with lives literally at stake, this was not the time to be concerned about hurting feelings, and certainly not the feelings of somebody's parents.

Having been in Deborah's position and having made a similar decision regarding cause of death in an obituary, I can imagine the struggle she must have gone through. What are we as critics to do in such cases? Is it our job to "out" dancers and choreographers who die of AIDS? It seems one thing to do so to a person in a position of power, or someone evil, or both, like a Roy Cohn, but a poor underpaid and underappreciated dancer?

Still, it occurs to me that there are things a writer can, and should do, at times such as this, and that one of them is to mourn loudly, to keen over the deaths of our dance artists, without being constrained by the sort of emotional reserve generally expected in the obituary form. And in this, Deborah has distinguished herself like no other dance writer. Thanks to Elizabeth Zimmer and Ann Mazzocca, who meticulously pored over all of Deborah's essays published in the *Voice*, I hold in my hands a sheaf of Deborah's published tributes to the dead, and they are remarkable in their tenderness and emotional range. Here are some examples:

Robert Joffrey: "We will have to manage without him. It will be very hard."  
(1988a)

William Carter, dancer with American Ballet Theatre: "He had a realness onstage that drew your eyes. Whenever I sat down in a theater and saw his name on the program, I felt happy." (1988b)

Jeff Duncan, choreographer and co-founder of New York's Dance Theater Workshop: "Tall, narrow, boyish, he had a tremendous alertness onstage, a way of stretching up as if he'd just sniffed something wonderful or threatening in the air." (1989a)

Tim Wengerd, of the Martha Graham company: "Whether it's his arrogant Oedipus you cherished, or one of the sensual, virtuosic dances Graham made on his superb body, you know that an extraordinary man has left us." (1989b)

Alvin Ailey: "When I interviewed him on the occasion of the company's 25th anniversary..., he said, 'It's been a fantastic 25 years. I never thought it would go on this long.' Oh Alvin, I thought (hoped, prayed) it would go on much, much longer than this." (1989c)

Juan Antonio, a choreographer and longtime dancer with Louis Falco, along with Vic Stornant, who danced with Phyllis Lamhut, and Jones/Zane dancer Demian Acquavella: "AIDS is cheating us of future elders—the old codgers who'll tell our children's children for God's sake not to stand in fifth as if

they'd swallowed a poker.... We lose not only the presence of these men among us, but their future. Our future." (1990)

And regarding Joffrey Ballet dancer and choreographer Edward Stierle:

"I knew he was terribly ill and might be dying, but honoring his courage, I didn't want to write as if I knew. What follows is the review I owe him—revised in haste and grief to change 'is' to 'was,' 'may become' to 'could have been.'" (1991)

Deborah has written humane expressions of loss and grief for Harry Sheppard, John Wilson, Jude Bartlett, Art Bauman, Bruce King, Louis Falco, Gary DeLoatch, Manuel Alum, Christopher Gillis, Arthur Armijo, Patrick Kelly, Loremil Machado, David Steiger Wolfe, John Curry, William Douglas, Dale Harris, Chris Komar, and others, too many to mention here.

I have always respected Deborah for her extraordinary ability to describe the dancing, to make it live in words. In these passages of devotion and love she goes a step farther, giving word not just to dance steps but to feeling, making grief and loss live in words as if they constituted a kind of dance. She gives these dancers and our grief the gift of duration, enacting a resurrection, an anastasis, if you will. Oh for the day when she writes an obituary not for another dead dance artist, but for AIDS itself.

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