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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Frank Bicking

Koresh: In “Process,” Under Examination

by Kalila Kingsford Smith

“I have no ideas.” – Ronen (Roni) Koresh

In the context of a Q&A following an intimate showing of works inside the Koresh studios, this statement is meant to convey how artistic director Roni Koresh approaches his choreographic process. He enters the studio with his mind an empty slate, and through the movement generation process, his ideas and interpretation of the dance emerge.

Dear Roni,

I wish you would show me un-*confrontational stillness.*

This *In The Studio* showing was marketed originally alongside the question, “What Is the Choreographic Process?” With this question in mind, I expected to see Koresh’s actual process on display—works in progress and unfolding ideas, rather than completed dances. Instead, the event served as a fundraiser, presenting near-polished works in an intimate space to a small, wealthy audience. In the discussion following the showing, the audience was prompted to ask questions or make comments about how they interpreted each piece. The questions that emerged asked whether Koresh choreographs *to* the music, how much creative input the dancers have, does he start with an idea or does he start with movement, and so on. It was to the last question that he stated (and later repeated): “I have no ideas.” He went on to remark that he interprets the choreography much as the audience would, after relationships emerge from the movement.

I chew on this response as I remember the first dance on the program, *I’m Not Pretty*. Four men travel along a circle, hunched over, reaching out to touch each other’s shoulders. Their footsteps are loud as they lead with their heels. Presently, they break their

connection and begin stomping on the ground, feet flexed, arms and heads reaching up to the ceiling. It reminds me of Le Sacre du printemps. An audience member describes *I'm Not Pretty* as guttural and tribal.

Dear Roni,

Do you intend to convey "ritual" dance by choreographing groups along a circle, dancing with audible rhythm?

Midway through this dance, the women enter and replace the men, and I am immediately struck by the fact that they are silent. Their movements include battements, pointed toes, swooping rond de jambs, and rhythmic steps—everything done quietly. At some point, the women make a soundless "screaming" face—mouth open, teeth bared—which they then cover with their hands; this much-used contemporary-dance catch-all gesture stands for anxiety, for feeling repressed and trapped. I feel sure Koresh meant to invoke this interpretation. Placed next to the thumping maleness portrayed earlier in the dance, and especially considering the current media attention on women, sexual harassment, and the oppressive fear of speaking out, this highly gendered vocabulary created movement contrasts that I found disturbing. Was this Koresh's intention? – his non-idea?

Dear Roni,

If your ideas emerge from the movement and from the relationships among your dancers, do you then question these ideas? Do you go back to the movement, to the ideas, and edit to make the work cohesive? If you do, what do you edit? If you don't, are you employing any "craft" to generate "stream of consciousness" movement sequences?

I understand that artists take varying approaches to the creative process, and are always grappling for the right balance between their ideas and audiences' interpretations. I wonder, however, about the "make first, ask later" choreographic stance that Koresh claims. His work seems to rely heavily on facial and gestural expressions to communicate meaning, which is at times dramatic or comedic. But this method begins to appear shallow to me, as though missing a deeper internalization of the ideas that he says emerge from the process. In one of his responses at the Q&A, he mentioned that he was once criticized for choreographing a duet in two hours, because this is not enough time to do adequate movement research on a subject. His defense was that his life, career, and experience should be "research" enough to generate the kind of work that he is satisfied with. This gives me the impression that he takes the "make first, ask *rarely*" choreographic approach, and that he creates movement material for the sole sake of producing what he sees as beautiful dances. For me, the results fall flat.

Time and again, dance has featured women, choreographed by men, who express themselves silently. Consider ballet's history and this quote from Balanchine, for example. Consider also the gender imbalance of male to female choreographers (see Nicole Bindler's Ugly Numbers for some local details.) It's not just the gender inequality that I'm struck by, but the underlying assumptions of beauty that are replicated in American concert dance. I can't help but question *why* I so frequently see meaningless, pleasing, leggy, fleeting movement sequences on the stage. Is maintaining this kind of aesthetic, which becomes problematic when observed with gender politics in mind, the only way to impress an audience? It raises questions replicated in popular culture. For example, in the recent summer Olympics, why the focus on what women were wearing while men were lauded for their athletic abilities? As choreographers, should we question this "leggy" visual aesthetic in the same way we question the portrayal of women in the media? Does "popular" concert dance only and always take these forms? What of subtlety, stillness, softness, character development, narrative, contrast, counterpoint, theme and variation? While it might not be Roni Koresh's job to address these problems, I feel assailed by these questions when watching his choreography, and I wonder whom to hold accountable.

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