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# PILLOWNOTES

by Suzanne Carbonneau

*The PillowNotes comprises essays commissioned from our Scholars-in-Residence to provide audiences with a broader context for viewing dance.*

“It is said that the body doesn’t lie, but this is wishful thinking. All earthly creatures do it, only some more artfully than others.” —Paul Taylor, *Private Domain*

It was Martha Graham, materfamilias of American modern dance, who coined that aphorism about the inevitability of truth emerging from movement. Considered oracular since its first utterance, over time the idea has only gained in currency as one of those things that must be accurate because it *sounds* so true.

But in gently, decisively pronouncing Graham’s idea hokum, choreographer Paul Taylor drew on first-hand experience—observations about the world he had been making since early childhood. To wit: Everyone lies. And, characteristically, in his 1987 autobiography *Private Domain*, Taylor takes delight in the whole business: “I eventually appreciated the artistry of a movement lie,” he wrote, “the guilty tail wagging, the overly steady gaze, the phony humility of drooping shoulders and caved-in chest, the decorative-looking little shuffles of pretended pain, the heavy, monumental dances of mock happiness.”

Casting his gimlet eye on these commonplace deceits, Taylor could see extraordinary richness—nothing less than beauty—in such artifice. And these are lessons that he has taken to heart in making his abundantly detailed, carefully reported, and psychologically astute creations. Taylor discovered that in choreography, it took something like a fish story—not the body in its natural understatement, but movement extended, heightened, repeated, varied, structured, framed, costumed, lit—that allowed the audience to experience the “aha” of something that felt awfully close to truth. After early experiments with minimalism that ignored the audience, a dose of expansiveness, a measure of wishfulness seemed in order. “Calculated lies,” Taylor has called his dances.

In all this talk about lying, the irony is, of course, that there are few choreographers who have told us more truths than has Paul Taylor. The fecundity of Taylor’s imagination has sent him foraging through a breathtaking range of subject matter and styles in search of it. But these truths are never simple. In the nearly 150 dances he has made to date, Taylor has produced a repertory of enormous breadth that asks us to acknowledge the infernal complications of human nature and experience. Taken together, these dances present a portrait of life in our time that churns with ambiguity and complexity. (Fitting, of course, for a species addicted to lying.) It’s what we so much appreciate about Taylor as a dance maker—this is how it *is*, Taylor tells us.

Taylor has famously said that he is a “reporter,” that he choreographs what he sees. And it is true that for all their deep poetics, his dances are investigative rather than autobiographical, the choreographer standing outside his creations with penetrating and analytic gaze. But while his eye for preternaturally telling detail makes the dances seem like dispatches from reality, Taylor is probably more novelist than reporter because what he trusts as much as his eye is his imagination. (“This trust I have never lost,” he has written.) Taylor has said that he is sympathetic to an idea of novelist E.L. Doctorow who declared his historical novel *The March*—tethered by facts but even more rife with imagined events—“a system of opinions.” In responding to this idea, Taylor remarked that perhaps artists are liars or fantasists rather than reporters, that a dance is an accumulation of a person’s notions rather than the unvarnished truth.

Received wisdom has it that Taylor’s works fall into categories of Light and Dark, and certainly he has made some of the most tender and exquisite as well as the most black-hearted and disturbing works on the concert stage. How could the creator of *Airs* (1978), which suggests nothing less than the possibility of human perfection, be the same soul peering into the bottomless well of depravity in *Last Look* (1985)? But throughout his career, Taylor has presented us with such antipodes.

Still, the classic conflict between light and darkness doesn’t begin to come to terms with the real convolutions of Taylor, who seems always aware of the complexity of people, and their infinite capacities for the admixture of exaltation and depravity. Taylor is forever interested in what lurks beneath the surface of those wagging tails, those drooping shoulders. (Those lies!) His dances find glory in contradiction, with their suggestion that the labyrinth of human nature is not to be underestimated.

Taylor knows that not all lies are bad. Artifice is, after all, the basis of artmaking. In art, the world is idealized, given back to us in Platonic form with such devices as harmony, symmetry, proportion, order, structure. These are all the tricks of craft—Taylor’s “calculated lies”—that allow us, in seeing who we could potentially be, insight into who we actually are. Still, Taylor knows the difference between artistry and duplicity, and he is not afraid to tell us so.

So Paul Taylor is, after all, our Honest Abe—in Lincoln Kirstein’s estimation, “the shrewd democratic citizen” who understands his audience as “an electorate.” And for over sixty years, we the people have been voting for him in landslide after landslide. In the theater, thank goodness, there are no term limits.

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*Dance Writer Suzanne Carbonneau is currently at work on a biography of Paul Taylor.*