

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation / Thesis: **MAKING DANCE THAT MATTERS:
DANCER, CHOREOGRAPHER,
COMMUNITY ORGANIZER, PUBLIC
INTELLECTUAL LIZ LERMAN**

Lisa Traiger, M.F.A., 2004

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Washington, D.C.-based choreographer and dancer Liz Lerman, a MacArthur Award recipient, has been making dances of consequence for 30 years. Her choreography, her writing and her public speaking tackle “big ideas” for the dance field and society at large. Lerman articulates those ideas as questions: “Who gets to dance? Where is the dance happening? What is it about? Why does it matter?” This thesis investigates how Lerman has used her expertise as a choreographer, dancer and spokesperson to propel herself and her ideas beyond the tightly knit field into the larger community as a public intellectual. A brief history and overview defines public intellectual, followed by an examination of Lerman’s early life and influences. Finally, three thematic areas in Lerman’s work – personal narrative, Jewish content and community-based art – are explored through the lens of three choreographic works: “New York City Winter” (1974), “The Good Jew?” (1991) and “Still Crossing” (1986).

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PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL LIZ LERMAN**

By

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Preface

The first time I experienced Liz Lerman's choreography, I danced it.

In May of 1980, I was a high schooler and a member of a tiny civic ballet company, Prince George's Ballet. I performed in a piece of choreography Lerman called "May Dances" one warm Saturday afternoon on the grass and steps fronting the Lincoln Memorial as part of the Washington Performing Arts Society's CityDance '80 festival.

I was one in a crowd. One of 800 on those beautiful, sun-washed marble steps, parading before a panel of local dance critics, each group, from the professional companies to the tiny studios, basking in their moment in the sun. We danced the phrase as our teacher instructed us: simple semaphoric arms, closing together then opening upward, outward to the sun, to Lincoln, to the crowd of friends and strangers gathered there. How grand it was to be among 800 dancers from such a diversity of traditions – kabuki dancers and Irish dancers, jazz and tap dancers, folk dancers of every sort, budding ballerinas with pastel ribbons and proud African dancers displaying hues of green and orange and yellow, magenta and teal. We were all there to celebrate the dance community. And to dance. As the recorded strains of Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" rose above the crowd, we lifted our arms heavenward, faces pitched toward the sky. It was at once magnificent and incomprehensible.

There I was, a 17-year-old bunhead, an eager if mediocre ballet student, too short, too thick, with too little understanding of the breadth of the dance world in my

own community, let alone in the world beyond. But there it was, dance arrayed before me in all its multicultural glory.

I remember when my ballet teacher told us about the event in February of that year, we asked first about the steps and how difficult they would be. My teacher with her distinctive sniff and arched eyebrow noted that it was choreographed by “that modern dancer, Liz Lerman,” so it wouldn’t be at all difficult. And it wasn’t, for this majestic dance before the Lincoln Memorial wasn’t about the technique we practiced so assiduously day in, day out. It was about dance for everybody and every body. It was about the democracy of the body. It was about inclusion. It was about how arms upraised can overcome stylistic differences – and, by suggestion, cultural barriers – in ways that technique would never overcome. But I was a teenager and I had no idea what “May Dances” was about, what it meant or what it presaged. And I gave it little thought. Until recently.

I met Liz Lerman in 1986. By then she was a noteworthy dancer, choreographer and teacher as well as the director of two Washington, D.C.-based companies, the Dance Exchange and Dancers of the Third Age, her renowned and forward-thinking traveling troupe of senior adults and young dancers. She made dances at once politically provocative and humanely evocative. She taught masterful workshops that got even the most timid, the frailest of bodies moving. I met Lerman because I knew enough about her work to realize that I should sign up for a text and movement workshop she was conducting at the first international conference on

Jewish dance, “Jews and Judaism in Dance: Reflection and Celebration,” at the 92nd Street Y in New York.

Lerman facilitated in a room overcrowded with mostly eager, predominantly Jewish women intent on exploring how they could connect their Judaism with dance, how they could elicit choreographic ideas from the wellspring of Hebrew textual material; in this case she selected the English translation of the daily morning *shacharit* prayers. I was amazed that Lerman – with so many other dancers, choreographers, teachers, scholars and writers – was a part of sharing in the same search: seeking out meaningful ways to link Judaism and its cultural heritage to a love of dance. I was intrigued, too, by how easily Lerman connected with these students, some professional dancers or choreographers, others mere dabblers, some well into middle age, others barely 20. We spoke only briefly after the workshop, but I realized that as a young dance writer trying to begin a career in Washington, D.C., Lerman was someone I should know more about.

The story I wrote on that conference was among my earliest professionally published pieces. Over the course of my dance-writing career, I’ve had the opportunity to cover Lerman regularly in the Washington, D.C. area for nearly two decades. Every two years, on average, I can count on the chance to pitch a story on a developing Lerman project. Throughout, she has been extremely generous in granting me often-lengthy interviews that have over time evolved into conversations on the direction that art – especially her art – should be taking as it reshapes itself for the 21st century.

I noticed during our interviews – thoughtful chats really – that Lerman often asked as many questions of me as I did of her. At first intimidated that she was turning tables on the interviewer, I came to understand Lerman’s curiosity, her questioning for what it was, a hunger to learn and grow at every opportunity. Lerman is nothing if not curious, intent on learning, always. In some ways, these conversations and my experiences watching the evolution of her work, have helped shape my own views on dance and on the arts in society.

Lisa Traiger

September 2003

Dedication

To my husband, Kobi, without whom this would never have come to pass.

To my children, for whom I hope this will serve as an example that in life one never stops learning and growing.

To my father, who thought I was crazy.

Acknowledgements

This thesis grew from seeds planted by my mentors, colleagues, friends. Without Mim Rosen's passing remark, I would have never have considered returning to graduate school in mid-life. Without Karen Bradley's willingness to lobby for a non-traditional student in the dance program, I would not have turned 40 as a student. Without Suzanne Carbonneau's offhand suggestion, I would never have embarked on this research project, which has become very dear to me.

I thank, as well, Liz Lerman for generously and willingly becoming both my research subject and my research partner. Our meetings and conversations have been enriching to me both professionally and personally. I never leave a conversation with Liz without a new idea, a new angle, a new way of looking at something. I also thank the Dance Exchange staff, in particular, John Borstel, humanities director, who has graciously and tirelessly honored and shepherded all my requests. Finally, I thank all those listed in the bibliography who have generously taken time to speak with me openly and candidly about their experiences with and thoughts on the work of Liz Lerman.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Procedures

Mapping a Biography

I never imagined that I would attempt to document the trajectory of Liz Lerman's career, to write her life because so much of it has been lived, as it were, on stage. But, when I mulled the idea over, it came to make sense. I have been watching Lerman's dances since the mid-1980s. I've had the opportunity to speak with Lerman and interview her for feature and preview articles many times over the past 17 years. In fact, as I began this research project in September 2003, in my personal office files, the single manila folder labeled "Lerman, Liz/Dance Exchange" long ago outgrew itself and constituted two overstuffed hanging files, plus additional overflow material, including press kits, notes from panels she appeared on, notes from Dance Exchange workshops I covered and participated in, audiotapes of interviews, company press photographs, press clippings and reviews of Lerman's work in the D.C. metropolitan area and more. There must have been a reason all this material was cluttering my office, and here it was.

Planning to write an account of a living artist's life and work is daunting at best and I knew from the outset that I would have to limit my scope for this thesis project, even though throughout Lerman's career, limitations appear to be the least of this choreographer's concerns. Lerman thinks big and outside the box. She has pushed beyond boundaries since she first began making dances and making a space for herself in the often unforgiving and restrictive dance world. She seems to find herself in a new place, facing new challenges, asking new questions cyclically, about every three to five

years. And with each new challenge – whether it’s a choreographic project, a writing project, a reconfigured company or something entirely new and different – she has learned and assimilated both successes and mistakes from her previous projects. That information then gets filtered successively into her larger and ever more expansive artistic output. I relied on Lerman’s artistic model as I developed my own research project, first by asking a question, making a list and then pulling together ideas to define a thesis question.

My first step was simple, sort of: Sort through my own archives and transcribe my taped interviews with Lerman (the earliest dates from 1987 and I even found written notes dating from 1985). This provided a helpful overview and memory jog from which I began to map out my perception of the phases of Lerman’s career. For simplicity’s sake I broke down Lerman’s life into five phases: her childhood and background from 1948 through 1970; her early years as a dancer from 1970-1976; the first 10 years of the Dance Exchange from 1977-1987; Lerman’s second decade in the profession from 1987-1997; Lerman’s third decade in the profession from 1997 through the present. Under this simple rubric I began to list chief choreographic works or artistic endeavors. I then set about drafting a parallel list of possible associates to interview that matched up with the five phases I delineated. Again using the rubric of decades, I came up with about 55 names of people or the descriptive titles of people I didn’t personally know, although I knew that they had an influence on Lerman. For example, a Milwaukee rabbi she had as a teen, she has described as influential as she developed her Jewish consciousness, but he could not be found. She also had mentioned a history professor, Rush Welter, at Brandeis University, who died in 2001 after a long career in historiography. There was her first

husband, who was the catalyst for Lerman relocating to Washington, D.C. Other associates, teachers, rabbis, choreographers, dancers, composers, critics, immediate family and long-time friends of her parents also appeared on my interview list.

I then met with Lerman and Dance Exchange humanities director John Borstel to explain my project and request access to Lerman's archival material and to her current dancers and staff for interviewing purposes. Within a few days Lerman agreed to cooperate and has subsequently provided background material and sat down with me for numerous interviews over the past six months. She and Borstel annotated another list of Lerman associates, colleagues and friends to interview.

My final mapping step delineated five key thematic areas manifested in Lerman's works over the course of her career. This thesis will deal with three of her dominant themes: her use of narrative and personal experience as an artistic and political motivator; her use of Jewish thematic material; and her efforts in creating performed works that incorporate community members and professional dancers. This thesis will demonstrate how Lerman's background and her early years growing up as the daughter of a Jewish activist – her father Phil Lerman – and an arts elitist – her mother Anne Lerman – shaped Lerman and shaped her ideals and desires for creating socially and politically provocative choreography.

Over the past six months, I worked through my interview list, speaking in person or via telephone with approximately 40 Lerman associates. In addition, I met with Lerman five times in thematically directed interviews. In order to meet university requirements, I applied to the Institutional Review Board because I am interviewing "live human subjects." To satisfy this review board process, I created an informed consent

form, modeled after two examples, one from the University of Maryland's American Studies department Web site and the other provided by Mary Edsall, a researcher at Temple University. [See Appendix A.] At each interview I conducted, I explained this form and asked my interviewee to sign it, keep one copy for reference and return one to me. The IRB requires me to maintain these signed consent materials in perpetuity; thus they will become a part of my permanent personal archives at my home office. In addition, because this is a research project with longer-term ramifications, I audiotaped and transcribed the majority of these interviews. Of course, prior to taping, each subject was asked permission.

Because of my background as a journalist, the nature of this project, and my comfort level in interviewing, I did not use a specific set of predetermined, canned questions for the my interview subjects. Rather, I regarded these interviews as conversations, where I gathered information on the subjects' experiences with Lerman, on their recollections of events taking place in the surrounding world, and on their perceptions of Lerman's life experiences and work as a choreographer, as a teacher, as a dancer, as a public speaker, as an administrator, and as an initiator and propagator of new ideas. I interviewed colleagues of Lerman's from a variety of backgrounds, not just Lerman's dancers, former dancers and close company associates. I included family members when possible: her husband, one of her brothers, two aunts from either side of her family and her father's second wife. I interviewed colleagues who shared various panels and seminars in which she has participated and I spoke to critics who have watched her work for a number of years. I questioned rabbis and professors, community

leaders, public policy leaders and friends, querying them about how Lerman is perceived and accepted outside of the dance world.

As I became immersed in this project it felt like it was meant to be. Fated. In the Jewish world we often speak about finding your soul mate, your *b'sherte*, your intended. It's a term that indicates that something was preordained by a higher power. In a sense, perhaps this documentation of Lerman's life and work was *b'sherte*, was meant to be. I believe that an element of fate occurred in my embarking on this project at this time.

While tremendous in scale, overwhelming even, at the project's outset I was as excited as I was worried. In September 2003, as I embarked on this thesis, I wrote the following:

I worry that I am already too close to my subject, even though my years of knowing Lerman have been at a distance as a journalist. I worry that because I hold many of the same beliefs and that our cultural and religious backgrounds are similar, I will lose my objectivity. I worry that I will get so wrapped up in Lerman's life that I will fail to live my own. But words from Sharon O'Brien, a professor of American Studies at Dickinson College, have resonated for me at the outset of my project: "The biographer's objectivity is a myth. Emotional and psychological currents that we do not fully understand draw us to our subjects; if we are lucky, we do not lose either ourselves or our subjects in the resulting whirlpool." I should be so lucky.

Creating a Place at the Table

Looking at the trajectory of Liz Lerman's career tells its own story. She has been and remains a teacher, an art-maker, an advocate, a public speaker, a writer, but first and foremost, a dancer. In all these guises, Lerman has sought out a niche. This has enabled her to contribute ideas and liberally laced values about art and society, about community and the individual, that stretch the dance field beyond its insular world of technique and form toward a reconsideration of narrative and content-driven contemporary dance, and toward a reassessment of who dances and who watches. In

following her distinctive path, Lerman's public and community-based, project-oriented choreography has influenced the way much dance is now seen and produced. Today older dancers and older bodies have a place on stage alongside youthful dancers. Choreographers of all genres are now delving into the realm of community work. And communities and presenters, too, are seeking out innovative means to invigorate their constituencies by programming arts presentations into non-traditional venues. Lerman contributed to these changing perceptions of dance and dancers with the introduction of her Dancers of the Third Age, with her site-specific choreography and with her teaching residencies and community-based focus. Through an evolving network of presenters and funders, supporters, community-based participants and company members, Lerman has garnered a national reputation that is as prominent outside of the dance community as it is within the field.

Liz Lerman is and remains Washington's best-known, homegrown choreographer, yet she performs here infrequently, only about every two years. On tour, both nationally and internationally, Lerman has found a measure of support and commitment from a cadre of presenters and followers that she hasn't found or maintained in her home base. Yet, no other modern company in the Washington, D.C., area has attained the longevity, the national stature, the funding support and the prominence of the Dance Exchange. Lerman's most recently completed project, *Hallelujah*, sprawling in scope, spanned three years of collaboration, touring to 15 cities in the process, incorporating hundreds of performers and clocking in thousands of collaborative community service hours. When *Hallelujah* culminated in August 2002, with 11 days of workshops and two days of performances at the Clarice Smith

Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, her expansive view of where dance belongs in American society was as sharply delineated as it was on that sunny May day at the Lincoln Memorial 22 years earlier.

On the heels of her noteworthy *Hallelujah*, also in 2002, the MacArthur Foundation granted Lerman its so-called “genius” award for her contributions to the field of dance and community involvement and for her potential to continue making works that wrestle down the status quo, bind together diverse communities and in some ways take artistic risks to bring dance into public spaces and private lives outside of traditional theatrical settings. Over the years as I’ve watched her body of work evolve and I’ve listened as she’s pondered over her ideas of what dance should be, who should dance it, and how to make it and present it, Lerman has made a transformation from a public dancer and public choreographer to something much broader: public intellectual.

Lerman has found a place for herself and for dance at the table of public discourse with other public intellectuals – politicians, clergy, academics, journalists – those who participate in the public debates that shape ideas and ideals of Americans in the 21st century. She began early in her career, as a teacher, choreographer and advocate for senior citizen dancers. With her modest troupe of seniors and professionals, Dancers of the Third Age, Lerman gained a platform from which to advocate about the efficacy of dance as an activity that had both therapeutic and artistic values. Later, she created overtly political works that again gained attention and notoriety outside the arts pages. In her company’s second decade, she looked inward, to address her own Jewish identity with “The Good Jew?” and struck a chord

with others, Jewish or not, by posing broad-brushed questions with probing pinpoint accuracy.

“The Good Jew” brought Lerman to the attention of the mainstream Jewish community, where previously she was frequently considered a fringe element by Jewish funders and Jewish communal leaders. Increasing acceptance by the Jewish community gained Lerman an invitation to participate in a broad-based think-tank of Jewish leaders from across disciplines and denominations. As a member of the Synagogue 2000 task force, she urged Jewish communal leaders to take seriously involvement in Jewish arts of all genres as a basic communal need. This national prominence in the Jewish community and Lerman’s growing prominence in the arts community brought her to the attention of Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein, two well-known thinkers in the area of social capital. Lerman joined the Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government Saguaro Institute, a two-year program drawing from the best and brightest in a variety of fields. Academics, activists, politicians and religious leaders met regularly to mull over ideas and to devise programs to promote increased social involvement in communities across the United States.

Following these incremental steps, from activism in one specific field with senior adults through involvement in political, social and Jewish causes, today Lerman has become a sought-after and inspiring speaker, addressing arts administrators and city leaders, managing editors and financial planners, classical music directors and business administrators, instructing them on uses of creativity, instilling in her audiences a means to think outside the box and giving them permission to seek bold new ways to solve age-old societal and communal problems.

In brief, Lerman has found a place at the table of public discourse. She has become a public intellectual, as MIT professor Alan Lightman described it: one who speaks on a “discipline and how it relates to the social, cultural and political world around it” and one who “by invitation only has been elevated to something far larger than the discipline from which he or she originated.” This thesis will briefly trace and define public intellectual and begin the process of documenting Lerman’s life by exploring her early experiences and examining three thematic areas in her body of work that have cast her in the role of public intellectual.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The Search Begins ...

Looking for published material on Liz Lerman is a bit like opening up a hall closet in a grandparent's house, and getting inundated by the variety and quantity of items stuffed into that dark, tight space. Along with musty old car coats and fur-collared affairs, sundry other items tumble out: odd knitting needles, yellowing copies of *Life* magazine, cracked leather gloves, old 78 RPM records, a pair of rusted ice skates, perhaps even a few treasures thought long-disappeared – a favorite photograph or a long-lost wedding invitation, a hand-knitted scarf, the loving gift of a long-dead maiden aunt. The more one looks, the more one finds. The more one finds, the more time necessary to sort, to consider, to discard or to save.

I typed Liz Lerman in the search engine and the traditional library book catalogues came up with a few relevant publications, namely Lerman's own 1984 *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults*, of which I was well aware (Charles C. Thomas). Lerman's book, among the earliest proponents of age-blind artistic practice, is now out of print but it has served generations of teachers and students of dance, as well as geriatric specialists, social workers, psychologists, activity coordinators, counselors and others interested in developing skills in this area. The book, which began as her master's thesis, is part experiential textbook, part manifesto. It put Lerman on the map early in her career as she challenged the staid principles of contemporary dance. The book sets forth Lerman's ideal vision that anybody can dance, no matter age,

training or background and it describes Lerman's own learning while working with older adults. Many have found this book to be an invaluable aid in teaching them how to reach and teach older adults with both respect and creativity. Eldercare practitioners see Lerman as a groundbreaker in the area of senior adult programming, while many dancers and choreographers credit Lerman with changing the palette of the profession to allow for the introduction of more mature bodies and more mature dancers into professional companies. While Lerman acknowledges the therapeutic value of her work, she insists:

Modern dance classes focus on the experience of dance rather than the therapeutic growth of the individual...Art can also concern itself with the development of the human being. It can function to help integrate the individual and allow for the growth of the artists and the society around him or her" (5).

These words, a statement of Lerman's artistic credo a little more than a decade into her career, consciously placed her work into the artistic realm, not the therapeutic.

Lerman's handbook goes on to discuss the business of initiating and maintaining classes for senior adults. She divulges the benefits that young professional dancers can gain from working with senior adults: she tells us they frequently affirm that the older audience is supportive and attentive, appreciative and non-judgmental. But more intriguing, while not surprising, younger dancers feel more technically adept when working with senior adults. The most valuable gift they receive is a greater awareness of how expressive the human body – any human body – can be. Lerman explains that young dancers learn flexibility in adapting teaching strategies and movements for less well-honed bodies. This forced change in habitual

patterns, which many experienced teachers begin to rely on, allows youthful dancers to break their routine and explore other dimensions of movement and creative growth.

Lerman then explains and demonstrates through brief textual descriptions and photographs of two older women performing exercises how she conducts a typical class for senior adults. The bulk of the book features series of exercises, advice and photographs that will enable even novice teachers to begin teaching senior adults with more confidence. Finally, the dancer discusses goals and strategies for evolving choreography and planning for public performance with an interested and motivated group of senior adult dance students. Closing with ideas for the future, Lerman advocates for teacher training in order to make senior adult dance programs accessible to more people. She suggests that the older dancer, too, can successfully teach younger students and she acknowledges that further research is needed in the physiological and psychological benefits of both exercise and participation in the arts by the elderly. In 1984, when Lerman published this book, the idea of senior adults living an active and involved artistic life, especially in institutional settings, was anathema. In fact, the conception of senior citizens was what has changed the most in the two decades since Lerman wrote her manifesto. Dance has changed, in part due to Lerman's desire to integrate into her own professional company both senior adults and young dancers. Society, too, has changed. As the baby boom population ages, boomers expect as seniors to remain active, maintaining vibrant lives well into retirement and old age. Baby boomers, like Lerman herself, have no qualms about seeking out creative, intellectual and physical challenges well into old age. Lerman's contributions to the conception of aging – in a sense she helped re-envision how we

now age – have helped alter the American societal landscape while changing how Americans age and how younger generations regard growing older. Looking back, Lerman’s role in the reshaping of the concept of senior adult seems visionary and it was among her earliest forays outside the insular and rarefied world of dance, where she found technical ability prized over expression.

Other books that featured aspects of Lerman’s work included collections of articles revolving around a specific topic, as in *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance* (Univ. of Michigan, 2001), which examines the whys and hows of live performance when it seeks to promote change for marginalized groups or communities. *High Performance* magazine’s published collection of articles, *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena* (Critical Press, 1998), collects discussions on the purpose, responsibility and meaning of art that consciously locates itself outside of such traditional spaces as theaters and museums, instead finding venues in non-typical realms that often make contact with – and have an impact on – daily lives of spectators and citizen artists. A quite brief exercise credited to Lerman appears in *101 More Favorite Play Therapy Techniques*, a collection of exercises for child play therapists (Jason Aronson, 2001). Robert Putnam’s *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* instructs on how a dozen communities or organizations were able to sprout civic renewal in their home communities; Lerman and her Dance Exchange are featured in one chapter about the Portsmouth, N.H., *Shipyard Project* (Simon and Schuster, 2003).

Jan Cohen-Cruz, an associate professor of drama at NYU, contributed an article to *Performing Democracy* that explores the creation of Lerman’s 1997 cross-

community project “Shehechianu.” This overview, written by a clear fan of the dancemaker’s work and her artistic ideas, describes the process of working collaboratively within the multi-cultural, multigenerational company, as well as working collaboratively with various constituent groups based in Portsmouth, N.H., where many of the work’s central thematic material was gleaned to later be reshaped into a professional concert performance. The article provides a solid base for understanding the context and intentions of Lerman’s work. Cohen-Cruz points out that though deeply rooted in Jewish religious and spiritual practices,

“Shehechianu” is not assumed to speak only to Jewish audiences nor expected to be performed only by Jewish performers.... [S]tories from one cultural experience are made available to a diversity of people to explore (217).

That diverse affinity groups are affirmed while also enjoined as a part of a larger collaborative effort has become a key element of Lerman’s artistic practice, one that has attracted attention of many outside the dance field.

Linda Frye Burnham examines Lerman’s Dance Exchange and the Georgia-based theater director Richard Owen Geer in “The Cutting Edge Is Enormous,” a contribution to *High Performance Magazine’s The Citizen Artist*. Burnham, who later spent two years tracking Lerman and the Dance Exchange on the “*Hallelujah* trail,” for a Web-based publication by the Community Arts Network, here explores the challenges in creating community projects. For Burnham, collaboration is key, as she describes it: “Everyone and everything involved with the work of the Dance Exchange – from structural organization and fundraising through teaching, performance and critical theory – is a vital part of her work, and she of theirs.” Burnham reports on a Dance Exchange program in Raleigh, and on Lerman’s public

discussions on making dance and art that is non-hierarchical By asserting that Lerman and Geer, through their collaborative and community-based efforts, have changed ideas about art, the artist, art-making and art-viewing. These artists and others like them are getting to something closer to human reality, making art that's vital and meaningful. Burnham's Web-based "Everybody Say Hallelujah," provides comprehensive, in-depth coverage and commentary on the 1998-2002 *Hallelujah Project* (Burnham, 2003). On the site Burnham, who personally followed the project for two years, features articles from participating artists, programs of the performances in each partner city, schedules of performances and other material of interest. This is a rich and easy-to-access resource.

Robert Putnam's *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2003) collects case studies that grew out of his Harvard-based public-policy Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, which Lerman joined in 1997. The author of the influential *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), Putnam's goal is to reinvigorate American society, uncovering its civic crises and, through casebook examples, initiating means for communities to come together and mend the fabric of their cities. Lerman, the only artistic practitioner on Putnam's three-year Saguaro Seminar, which included 33 academicians, policy makers, politicians and religious leaders, was an obvious and natural choice for Putnam. In *Better Together* he investigates the choreographer's *Shipyards Project*, the community-wide, multi-year collaborative endeavor initiated by the Dance Exchange to mend long-standing rifts between the ship workers and the townspeople and to return the arts to prominence in the ship-building town of the

Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In addition to describing the project, Putnam's researcher/writer returned to Portsmouth to measure whether the project had any lasting effect. He found that the city named three poet laureates in five years, who participate in monthly readings. Other small victories Putnam noted included participants who have joined boards of arts agencies and arts administrators who have devoted their careers to community arts projects. One, former Portsmouth Music Hall employee Jane Hirshberg, now works for the Dance Exchange. Lerman's affiliation with Putnam and the Saguaro Seminar in its quest for community engagement will become a critical factor in placing this choreographer/dancer into the role of public intellectual.

In addition to perusing the library book catalogues, I cast a wide net in my database search by consulting databases that covered the arts and humanities, the performing arts, gender, age, philosophy, public policy, the social sciences, psychology, sports, education, music, alternative press, religion and more, because Lerman's work touches on a multiplicity of these issues and, as writers and journalists who have covered the choreographer over the years have frequently discovered, this type of boundary-crossing work makes great story copy. Most searches were fruitless or frequently ferreted out the same articles on a variety of subject indices. Databases I consulted included Arts and Humanities Abstracts, GenderWatch, which came up with some old reviews about Lerman's choreography, including one from *Off Our Backs*, a feminist journal based in Washington, D.C., and International Index to the Performing Arts, which came up with some recent reviews and feature stories, namely in *Dance Magazine*. Other databases I looked in included EBSCO, OCLC,

Biblioline, Music Index (which found reviews from the *Village Voice* and *Ballet News*), Women's Resources International, Arts and Humanities Search, Periodicals Contents, ERIC (education), Sport Discus, which found a single article in the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, Biography Index, in which her appearance in *Current Biography* in 2000 was noted, two years before she received the MacArthur Foundation's "genius" award.

Additionally I searched the Worldcat, which also found items collected solely at the New York Public Library, including performance videotapes and photographs. I consulted Ageline and some duplicate hits came up. Nothing came up on the Psychology, Philosopher's Index, Periodicals Contents Index, Public Policy, MLA or Social Sciences databases. On the Academic Universe of LexisNexis I unearthed just 125 hits ranging from my own reviews and previews in *The Washington Post* to transcripts of NPR stories. This database collected stories from a wide swath of the United States, attesting the breadth of scope of Lerman's most recent three-year *Hallelujah* project. The coverage she received ranged from big-city publications to small-town newspaper listings, including the *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times*, the *Winston-Salem (North Carolina) Journal*, the *New York Times*, CBS radio's "Osgood File," the *Dayton (Ohio) Daily News*, *Newsday*, *PR Newswire*, AP Online and the *Milwaukee Journal*. Surprisingly, the Alternative Press Watch found nothing on Lerman, while the Ethnic News Watch unearthed articles in the *Washington Informer* (an independent African-American publication), *The Forward* (a national Jewish newspaper), my syndicated article on the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and stories in the *Cleveland Jewish News*.

Few academicians have taken much notice of Lerman in scholarly journals. While a voluminous body of material on Lerman has appeared in the general, special interest and ethnic presses dating back to reviews of her earliest works in the mid- and late 1970s in Washington, D.C., the academic world has been, perhaps, wary of Lerman's singular blend of community outreach, age-blind artistic practice, spiritually imbued subject matter and unabashed narrative structure. Community-based performances cross lines and overstep boundaries, which typically relegate art, artists and communities to certain pre-ordained roles. The academy has not yet found a means to attach this humanistic blend of the spiritual and the communal, the artistic and the therapeutic, with the requisite theoretical rigor that academics demand. In fact, "the community-based performance movement remains relatively underdeveloped" in the more rarefied world of academia (Haddicke, 6). While newspapers, large and small, major and minute, have found much to write about regarding the many ideas and ideals that Lerman has trumpeted during her 30-plus-year career, academics haven't found much yet with which to wrestle. Following are the few articles that appeared in academically oriented dance and performance publications.

In the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, Cynthia P. Ensign, an assistant professor at the University of Northern Iowa at the time this piece was published, interviews Liz Lerman on the physical, social and psychological benefits of dance for senior adults. Ensign introduces the brief Q and A interview with "An Overview of Dance," one page instructing novices and non-dancers on the possible choices available, from aerobics to country western, modern to ballroom, to

teach to seniors. This article provides a very basic instructional introduction of Lerman's work with senior adults and is notable because it appeared in *JOPERD* in 1986 in an issue dedicated to senior adults entitled: "Moving Into the Third Age."

Former Lerman teacher and Washington, D.C., peer, Jan Van Dyke responds to Lerman's brand of community-organizing from afar in "Art and Place: The Local Connection," published in *Arts Education Policy Review* (1999). Van Dyke, currently a professor of dance at University of North Carolina, Greensboro, argues that local money spent inviting out-of-town artists into a town or city to develop community-based works during extended residencies, would be more wisely spent on local artists who remain rooted in that place and could create longer lasting partnerships for the community. Van Dyke argues that once an artist completes the residency, little communal activity or art-making occurs after the company packs up and leaves town. This article was written in reaction to observations the author made of audience response and long-term affects within two communities: one during a Dance Exchange residency in Greensboro, the other during Van Dyke's visit to Cincinnati to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Contemporary Dance Theater of Cincinnati. Van Dyke acknowledges that participatory activities and arts education are integral to the vitality of local communities; what she discounts is the practice of presenters and funders spending hard-earned arts dollars on outside artists when locally based artists are making creative work that is accessible, meaningful and may ultimately provide deeper and stronger local ties.

Cynthia J. Williams, a teacher in the dance department at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, in 2002 discussed Lerman's Critical Response

Process in relation to teaching choreography in a university setting. The article in the *Journal of Dance Education*, explains this step-by step process and how Lerman developed it. She concludes by noting the valuable dialogue that can evolve through guided discussions between audience and artist. While I disagree with her finding that the mediated use of language in this interactive dialogue enhances the community's discussions, this is one of the few articles in a specifically dance-related academic publication to closely address Lerman's work on any level.

In "Dance Camp for Grown-Ups: The Senior Institute at the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange," part-time Dance Exchange senior dancer Maggie Kast describes her experiences when, at 61 after a career as a professional dancer, she attended a Lerman senior adult intensive workshop. Published in *Contact Quarterly* (Winter/Spring, 2000), this article describes a typical day from a dancer's perspective and discusses how the writer's own views and experiences with dance were changed by the Lerman philosophy and technique.

From the online academic journal *Theatre Topics*, Paul Bonin-Rodriguez describes using Lerman's Critical Response Process in his own Jump-Start Performance Company, based in San Antonio (2003). Rodriguez found that with Lerman's process the company has refashioned the dramaturgical role. In "Between One and Many: Dramaturgical Praxis at Jump-Start Performance Co." the author discusses how the San Antonio-based group of diverse artists has used Lerman's Critical Response Process to move away from the single role of the dramaturge to a more experimental method for these artists that allows for knowledge-based critique that will facilitate artists' goals. A brief article in the online journal *Muse*, it focuses

on the situational needs of a specific company and how Critical Response works within that set up.

At least four academic master's theses covering specific areas of Lerman's work, mostly that with older adults, are available. Two of those master's theses were written at American University in Washington, D.C., under the direction of former dance department chair Naima Prevots. In 1992 Nancy J. Anwyll provided a broad overview of the structure of Lerman's company and then examined in depth a community-wide festival, "15 Days and 15 Nights: A Festival of Dance," held in and around Washington, D.C., from May 2-17, 1992, in celebration of the Dance Exchange's 15th anniversary. This thesis, "A Community Arts Festival: A Vision for the 1990s," includes quotations from interviews the author conducted with 13 individuals connected to the festival, either as organizers, participants, funders or board members. Lerman, as well, was interviewed and quoted. Additionally, the failings of the festival, including lack of funding, late-stage planning, lack of government and community understanding of the festival's goals, are examined. This research now can provide foregrounding for the larger community and nationally scaled projects that Lerman and the Dance Exchange subsequently tackled, with far greater success.

Kirsten L. Gamb's "Dancers of the Third Age, 1975-1993," also directed by Prevots, provided a general overview of the conception, lifespan and demise of Lerman's professional touring company of senior adults. Written in 2000, this project included just two interviews, one with Lerman and one with long-time Lerman associate and director of DTA Bob Fogelgren. This thesis cursorarily explored why

the DTA disbanded and then suggested actions to revive the group. Yet, Lerman subsequently enfolded selected DTA dancers into her fully professional company, Dance Exchange, and has not since expressed interest in reviving the earlier DTA troupe. Lerman's artistic aesthetic has been more fully realized by incorporating selected senior dancers into her full professional troupe.

Joan Hampton Beller's 1986 thesis, "Reflecting on Their Experiences with Dance: Interviews with Older Dancers," was written under the direction of then-George Washington University professor Nancy Diers Johnson. Hampton Beller asks a small sampling of 20 older adult dancers about their experiences with dance. She designed a questionnaire that she administered verbally to her subjects, took notes and concluded that dance can provide a fulfilling and healthful activity for senior adults. Hampton Beller's research provides an experiential approach and many vivid and lively quotations from her senior adult subjects. Many of the author's conclusions were articulated earlier by Lerman in her own book, *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults* (Charles C. Thomas, 1984).

Current *Dance Magazine* editor and former choreographer/dancer Wendy Perron's 2001 thesis at SUNY's Empire State College investigates five artists in "Imagining Justice: Artists Working for Social Change." Perron devotes one of her five profiles – which include writer Grace Paley, playwright Brad McCallum and dance teacher Katherine Dunham – to Lerman. Perron seeks to enjoin the artistic creative process with philosophical, psychological and sociological underpinnings in order to find the connections between the artistic and political worlds that these artist-activists inhabit. The thesis succinctly profiles the five artists and presents Perron's

transcribed interviews with them. It concludes with her personal reflections and finally a selection of quotes from a variety of sources that probe the social role of the artist in society.

Reviewing the literature written on Lerman would not be complete without a discussion of the choreographer's archives and her own writings. I am fortunate that Lerman has generously granted me access to many files, clippings, brochures and videos she and her staff collected over the course of her 30-year career. An initial perusal of the archives indicates that press clips date back to 1977 and include 956 individual manila file folders, (mostly) labeled with the date, name of publication and title of article. Each folder typically contains a single article: the original and sometimes photocopies. These files, not quite meticulous, but thoroughly maintained, have been stored in cardboard file storage boxes, old photocopy paper boxes, and in the metal drawers of beat-up filing cabinets. The articles span a broad range of publications from major interviews and feature stories and reviews in *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*, to small-town, and off-the-beaten track publications, like the Bennington College alumni magazine, the *Montgomery* (county Maryland) *Gazette*, the Sandy Spring Friends School newsletter, the Rural Electrification magazine, *Movement Research*, clips in Swedish from a 1991 Dance Exchange tour of Sweden, and many, many more publications. This material is, of course, invaluable for the breadth and depth and fully colored picture it paints of Lerman, her Dance Exchange and her ongoing influence in communities and cities both large and small across the country.

These materials, too, indicate the wide-ranging number of critical responses to her work from accolades to critical pans and everything in between. Clearly, whether reviewers over the years loved or hated her work, they had something to say about it. Also collected are minutia, including calendar listings, captioned photos published in newsletters and magazines, every mention of Lerman or one of her dancers merits a labeled folder placed in these archives. The way these press materials have been carefully maintained demonstrates tangibly the care Lerman, or one or more of her Dance Exchange staff members took in creating and preserving these press archives over more than 20 years. It also illustrates something, too, that Lerman's choreography professor while she was at the University of Maryland noticed at one of the young choreographer's early professional performances. Meriam Rosen, professor of dance at the University of Maryland where she taught Lerman, recalled a mid-1970s performance at Lisner Auditorium, among Lerman's first, where, she noted: "[Liz] had everybody who needed to be there, there. So the entrepreneurship was evident right away" (Sept. 5, 2003).

Is there a great deal of literature on Liz Lerman? Yes and no. The great majority of general-interest press coverage of Lerman discusses specific aspects of her work with senior adults, community members, Jewish themes, social themes, political and social issues. This writing has appeared primarily in the general press. Academic publishers have had little interest in Lerman's brand of community involvement and art making. And the academic theses focused mainly on Lerman's work with senior adults and, groundbreaking as it was, it reviews only one aspect of Lerman's body of work. No recent nor past academic research has examined the

multiplicity of Lerman's roles and how this woman – a dancer, a choreographer, a community organizer, a gifted thinker and public speaker – has been able to advance her ideas outside of the arts field to those known as contemporary public intellectuals at places like the Saguaro Seminars at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, at the Rockefeller's Bellagio Retreat Center, at the nationwide Synagogue 2000 conference, at private meetings with corporate executives, mayors, academics, religious leaders and public policy experts. But before Liz Lerman can don the mantle of public intellectual, a brief history and overview of the term is necessary.

Chapter 3: Defining the Public Intellectual: What Is It and Who Says So?

'I Know It When I See It'

Like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous 1964 classification of obscenity, "I know it when I see it," pinning down a pat dictionary definition of public intellectual, too, is easier said than done. Today true public intellectuals are hard to come by in a society overloaded with media stars, specialized journals of every stripe, free-for-all weblogs, and 10-second celebrity soundbites. Solid, thoughtful intellectual debate has gotten lost in the white noise of an over-stimulated public saturated by the media culture. But public intellectuals – those who think, write and comment deeply on the issues and ideas that matter to contemporary society, often academics, journalists even, sometimes, artists – have held a valued place in American society for nearly a century now.

For the most part public intellectuals have been writers, thinkers, historians, literary critics, academics, sometimes government officials – Henry Kissinger comes to mind – and much less frequently artists. In academic circles, the work and ideas of the public intellectual have long been examined, tracked, discussed, historicized and commented on, both positively and negatively. For by unearthing the history and legacy of the public intellectual and the debate that intellectuals engender, one can learn much about the social, cultural, political and artistic mores of the society in which these intellectuals lived and worked.

While we've come to understand the public intellectual as fitting into a certain mold historically and intellectually, which will be discussed in this chapter, a new definition of public intellectual for the new millennium should include practitioners in specific fields who expand and extend their knowledge and experience to realms broader than academia. Defining who is a public intellectual in current parlance may take more outside-the-box thinking than in eras past, but it is time to look outside of the halls of universities and think tanks. Away from the typical haunts of public intellectuals – academia, journalism, public policy – thinkers and writers of substance today are coming from fields including science, social services, politics and the arts. Choreographer and dancer Liz Lerman has been, over the course of her 30-year career, evolving a new model for the public intellectual: her own. She is a working artist, a practitioner and a teacher. But she is also a writer and a speaker and through an astute combination of her work in the dance field – much of it innovative – she has found an entrée into the halls of public intellectuality by speaking and writing on her experiences in the dance world and demonstrating how they overlap and influence public life on a range of levels. Lerman is among a small group of practicing artists who extends the idea of what is typically thought of as a public intellectual. (Others in the arts may include Ysaye Barnwell, singer/composer; Bill T. Jones, dancer/choreographer; and Peter Sellars, theater and opera director.) But, interestingly, at this point in her career, Lerman still consciously chooses the traditional path of the public intellectual by speaking and writing, not yet venturing frequently into new areas of discourse on electronic media and the Internet. While that may develop in time, Lerman remains both a groundbreaker and a traditionalist as a public intellectual. She comes from an

unusual field as far as typical public intellectuals are concerned, but she does what they most typically do: she speaks, offering her insightful keynote address to all manner of groups and organizations; she writes, her articles most often appearing in journals and smaller independent publications; and she teaches, at her own studio less frequently than in previous years, and at workshops and seminars for other teachers and advocates. But, less typically for the traditional public intellectual, she performs and choreographs. Lerman has devised a way to become a public intellectual without breaking her attachment to her own field as a dancer and choreographer.

In looking at the more traditional path of the public intellectual, sociologist Charles Kadushin, in his extensive 1973 study of the social networks of the American public intellectual, noted: “There are almost as many works about intellectuals as there are intellectuals” (Kadushin). Indeed. A body of historic and critical literature that examines the intellectual history of the United States deals with this question of the public intellectual, who he is (much less frequently she, for the vast majority of public intellectuals, even in recent years, have been men), and his place in society. But the public intellectual is not a recent innovation of a media and academia starved for recognition and interview slots on the Sunday morning talk shows to debate public policy and political issues. The fifth-century BCE Athenian philosopher Socrates provides an early model for the ideal of the public intellectual. Although none of his own writings survive, we know of Socrates from the written legacy of his students, especially Plato. Socrates, a one-time stonecutter, spent his days in the marketplace, debating with students and others, teaching them that inquiry – questioning truth – was the highest goal. Socrates’ belief in truth above all, and in the value of philosophical debate in a quest for knowledge, remain his greatest

moral legacies. This example of deep inquiry into moral issues in society provides an ancient prototype for defining a public intellectual in today's media-frenzied marketplace.

Emerson's Mensch: 'One Man'

Before the word intellectual even came into popular use, Ralph Waldo Emerson articulated in his essay – an 1837 address to the Phi Beta Kappa society in Cambridge – “The American Scholar” that to fulfill one's destiny in society one must shape oneself into the ideal of “One Man.”¹ In Yiddish, that is called a *mensch*, a good person.

Emerson said that to embody all of human potential – to take up current buzzwords – to be a complete person, one is not just “a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all.” Emerson continued, “Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier.” In industrialized societies especially, where division of labor is necessary for efficiency, jobs get parceled out to the best or least educated, to the most suitable, who acquire positions for their skills and their level in a class-based society. Emerson, though, argued for a complete man, not an assembly-line man. A scholar who uses his intellect only, in Emerson's terminology “Man Thinking,” without the knowledge and experience of life's other endeavors – tilling the soil, watching the sun set, becoming a wise judge of both the book and the person, learning to be the soldier and the artist, the man – would not be a complete person. And, Emerson also contended, “each age must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.” In his essay Emerson argues against the catholicity of book learning only. “Books are the best of things, well used,” he advised, “abused,

¹ The idea of connecting Emerson's “One Man” to a definition of public intellectual comes from Alan Lightman's article “The Role of the Public Intellectual,” <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/lightman.html>.

among the worst.” An admonition that should suit as well the contemporary era as it did his.

Emerson described the scholar as ahead of his time: “Genius looks forward; the eyes of man are set in his forehead not in his hindhead: man hopes, genius creates.” This was Emerson’s prescription for the Man Thinking: to shape himself (or herself, one would hope in a contemporary era that Emerson would include women) into a person of action; later he even remarked, “inaction is cowardice.” Thus, Emerson, more than 150 years ago, wrote a prescription for a public intellectual – in his terms an American Scholar or Man Thinking – as one aware of his surroundings, or the labors of the natural world as well as the ideas of academia. As Emerson says, “He who has put forth his total strength in fit actions, has the richest return of wisdom.” And he added,

Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary...a great soul will be strong to live as well as strong to think. Does he lack organ or medium to impart his truths? He can still fall back on this elemental force of living them. This is a total act. Thinking is a partial act.

A scholar, a public intellectual, in Emerson’s view was one educated by books and influenced by action; to be One Man, a whole person, a *mensch*, required both scholarly and worldly experiences.

Other Western intellectuals include thinkers and writers like Voltaire, Locke, Machiavelli and Milton (Posner 26), all of whom left published collections of their philosophical beliefs as their legacies. Kadushin notes that in nineteenth-century Russia, references to the “intelligentsia” presage the development of intellectual workers, from engineers to poets (3), and a mid-level class of workers, distinctly different from agricultural or industrial laborers, and different, too, from higher-echelon

members of society, landowners and the like. Even at the onset of the industrial era, factory work, while offering a steady if hard-earned income, was not the ideal that the educated aspired to; a higher standard, a worker who used his or her brain, was the desired thinking person's level of class-elevation in a changing society.

The Public Intellectual's Roots in the Dreyfus Affair

Yet the word intellectual didn't enter the language in its contemporary sense until the 1890s (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/ACLS98/charle.html>), when, by dint of the Dreyfus Affair and its ensuing debate on the very nature and makeup of French society and beliefs, a public uproar escalated in France. As debates swirled throughout France and Western society about the issues surrounding the trial of a French captain, a new breed of discourse evolved. Articles and commentary appeared in the newspapers, and at salons and dinner tables the issues were heavily discussed. Interestingly, much of the discussion had a Jewish bent because Dreyfus, a Jew, had his French loyalty and nationalism questioned purely because of his religion. Robert Boynton in a 1995 *Atlantic Monthly* essay traced the coining of the term "public intellectual" to the 1894 Dreyfus Affair, when writers, Emile Zola among them, came to the defense of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, the French Jewish officer who was accused of spying for Germany. Kadushin concurs, as well, on the nature of the Dreyfus Affair as the historical beginning of the modern-day intellectual (4). That the accusations against Dreyfus were larded in anti-Semitism aroused much published discussion from writers and thinkers in France and other Western nations. Aside from Zola's famous essay "*J'accuse*," a Jewish journalist from Vienna, Theodore Herzl, in covering the trial grew to understand that Jewish assimilation would never assuage deeply imbedded cultural

and religious anti-Semitism. Herzl went on to write “The Jewish State” in 1896 and founded the first Zionist Congress in 1898. While this may have been the first time an issue of Jewish importance was widely discussed in secular society, it laid a foundation for a number of writers, thinkers and activists, many of them Jewish, to begin debating publicly about issues of importance, both Jewish and otherwise. Thus since the term’s coinage in wake of the Dreyfus Affair, a significant Jewish cast has been associated with the public intellectual.

Boynton traces in the Jewishness of the Dreyfus Affair a connection with the later evolution of the popular and popularly discussed New York Jewish intellectual type. For as the Dreyfus Affair was occurring, Jewish emigration from throughout Europe was swelling the streets of New York’s Lower East Side. From these immigrant roots mainly in New York’s Lower East Side, a cadre of outspoken writers, thinkers and activists evolved. Young immigrant Jews found places to converse and to publish their intellectual writing in a cadre of modest but rigorously edited magazines like *Commentary*, *Partisan Review* and the *New York Review of Books* among other publications. These New York intellectuals grew up well-read and well-rounded their educations mostly public, their generalist stances and their love for vociferous debate on topics of interest to both the specialized academic class and the general public. Kadushin, who cites an astonishing 50 percent Jewish representation in the public intellectuals he studied (24), though, doesn’t put forth any reasons for the overwhelmingly Jewish presence in the status of public intellectuals, other than citing that the Jews were predominantly professors (60 percent), which may have accounted for their likelihood to partake of the lively intellectual debate. Jewish immigrant culture

put a high demand both on learning and assimilating. The left-wing, communist-leaning political stances of many early immigrants, as well as their love for debate, likely stemming from a shared cultural history in Talmudic discourse, explains why so many Jews took up the mantle of public intellectual, even gadfly, in many political, social and cultural arenas of that and subsequent eras.

Christopher Lasch, in his social history of intellectuals in the United States, notes that while all literate societies have supported intellectuals, only with the growth of industrial and post-industrial states has the intellectual arisen as a distinct class unto itself (x-xi). He points out that Alexis de Tocqueville's travels in America, even in 1831, discerned an evolving middle class – ubiquitous merchant types, well educated and well dressed, mannerly in a bourgeois way. This ascent of the middle class in America – shop owners and tradesmen, not farmers – captured so early by Tocqueville, spurred on the ideals of a growing literate class enamored of anti-hierarchy of America. The United States, in principal, supported educational opportunities for nearly all along with possibilities for advancement economically and socially. This democratic idealization of education and achievement was very unlike the rigidly stratified societies of Europe, in particular, and the Far East, which both ultimately supplied many immigrants to the United States. As industrialization took hold in the capitalist hotbed of America, a universal belief evolved that through hard work and know-how, striving and bootstrapping, anyone could succeed and anyone, too, could gain access, through public education, to the culture of ideas.

Interestingly the term “intellectual” as it is currently known – etymologically late-Latin in root form – was born in France, and in that context it connotes the idea

that public debate and discussion is inherent in the word's meaning. As the intellectual and his or her ideas became a part of the fabric in countries aside from France, it also assimilated to suit its chosen society. More recently, intellectual debate in Europe, Britain and France especially, aside from a few who wrote for a general readership, took on a tone and style that has been labeled "esoteric, jargon-laden, obscurantist" (Posner 26), referring in particular to theoretical scholar/writers like Roland Barthes, Jacques Lyotard, Jacques Lacan and Michel Derrida.

The Public Intellectual in America

While these Continental intellectuals (mainly of France) have predominantly influenced the academic world's infatuation with critical theory in the United States in particular, the intellectual generalists of the mid-twentieth century seemed to navigate different byways, their writings freely straddling general audiences and specialized ones. In 2001, Richard Posner, a federal judge for the 7th Circuit Court and a lecturer at the University of Chicago, published his treatise on the public intellectual, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, which defines and tracks a cadre of contemporary writers, academics, public officials and commentators. Posner contends that the public intellectual in America is on the decline (an idea like the decline of Broadway, that has been bandied about for decades, at least). Among his definitions, the intellectual is a person who applies general ideas to matters of general public concern, but then Posner adds:

When we think of the great intellectuals of the twentieth century, such as John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Max Weber, Arthur Koestler, Edmund Wilson and George Orwell, a common thread is that all either wrote directly about political or ideological questions or, in the case of those intellectuals who were literary critics, such as Wilson (or Lionel Trilling,

or F.R. Leavis, or C.S. Lewis), wrote about literature from a broadly political or ideological perspective (20).

Posner contends that the “intellectual” is “seriously and competently interested in the things of the mind” (17). No surprises there. And when he proceeds by quoting Paul Hollander that intellectuals “are usually seen as generalists rather than specialists,” one discerns this wistful desire for the era when American literary and social critics from the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s – illustrious authors like Philip Rahv, Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, Daniel Bell – formed a salon of sorts around one of their intellectual house organs, the *Partisan Review* (Posner 18, Boynton 1). The *Partisan Review* era was an ideal one for the loquacious left-wing intellectual. The modest monthly, founded in 1934 by Rahv and William Phillips, and published for nearly 70 years, featured in its pages a who’s who of both American and European intellectual elite, among them James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett, Italo Calvino, Albert Camus, Ralph Ellison, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Doris Lessing, Cynthia Ozick, Katherine Anne Porter, Philip Roth, Delmore Schwartz, Susan Sontag, Gertrude Stein, Lionel Trilling, Robert Penn Warren. In its heyday, from the 1930s through the 1960s, it was the voice of left-leaning thinkers of all stripes, anti communist but not anti-revolutionary; its articles stirred up controversies and debate on culture, politics and literature. In its latter years, under a publishing agreement with Boston University, the *Partisan Review* intellectuals lost some of their fevered bite, but that could be related to the general decline in American intellectual discourse, which Lasch, Kadushin and Posner all discuss in their works. When the *Review* ceased publication in April 2003, it was with barely a gasp of protest from either public intellectuals or other related intellectual publications.

While the *Partisan Review* is just one example of a publication that supported public intellectual debate, and many other small magazines and forums existed for social, political and literary criticism, many of the writers and intellectuals who were a part of this salon-like society were of a particular type. Mostly New Yorkers, predominantly male and Jewish (Boynton), they were widely read, frequently unattached or only peripherally attached to an academic or other day job. They seemed to spend their days thinking, writing and arguing about ideas, arts and letters, politics and the stuff of the mind. But most importantly they were liberal minded and they were generalists. Too, “they held convictions about the primacy of high culture and the special role of the intellectual in society” (Boynton). They were true essayists rather than master of the 600-word op-ed pieces that most commonly represent intellectual debate today. They penned long, thoughtful idea-laden essays that ranged widely and did not demand that a thinking reader interpret arcane and technical jargon – these writers wrote in plain if beautiful English prose. “These essays moved easily between literary and political judgments before bringing them together in a larger moral conclusion,” Boynton praised.

In the 1930s, '40s and '50s, little credence was given to the rarefied and isolated world of academia. The intellectual elite of this period thought of themselves as being in and of the world that they wrote so assiduously about. They often disputed prevailing norms and wrote with an unbridled polemical spirit. They also wrote about ordinary subjects in extraordinary literary fashion. Robert Warshow, an early editor at *Commentary* wrote a provocative essay in 1948 on “The Gangster As Tragic Hero,” in a non-academic style accessible to the educated but general reader (Boynton). A more

recent example is Susan Sontag, who in 1977 wrote eloquently *On Photography* in a groundbreaking essay that changed the way many people thought about looking at and seeing photography as an art form.

In *Commentary*, another popular public intellectual magazine, one writer lauds the mid-century essayists as “ambitious in choice of subject, sometimes aggressively polemical in spirit, unhesitant in authority, often brilliant in execution” (Epstein). With the truth-seeking morality of Socrates and the “Man Thinking” idealism-in-action of Emerson, this mid-twentieth-century period was one where curiosity, individualism, excitement about ideas and polished expression flourished in shaping and defining the public intellectual.

In the intellectual hothouse, especially of the 1930s, radicalism, liberalism, socialism, progressivism were all of a type, and that type was what the public intellectuals, the New Yorkers especially, embraced. As Lasch put it: “The distinctions between them mattered less than the vision, common to all, of a ‘cooperative commonwealth’ in which reason would take the place of force” (286). So for a time liberalism thrived – even defined – intellectual debate, becoming in a sense its official creed. Founded in 1914, *The New Republic*, another public intellectual house organ, held a symposium in 1931 on the future of liberalism; one of the speakers, journalist Benjamin Ginzburg, opined, echoing Socrates,

[I]f we have lost our sense of values, we cannot find it by betting on some plan of economic or political action; it is rather by clarifying our sense of values that we ensure intelligent political action (Lasch 291).

The question was not liberal or conservative policies, politics or economics; it was “the relation of political action to cultural and intellectual values” (292).

This example of public intellectual debate demonstrates how an intellectual, in this case Ginzberg, a PhD in philosophy from Harvard, along with his debating partners, Edmund Wilson and George Soule, displayed his craft. A public intellectual “writes for the general public, or at least for a broader than merely academic or specialist audience on ‘public affairs’ – on political matters in the broadest sense of that word, a sense that includes cultural matters” (Posner 23). Posner notes that while the intellectual applies his ideas and arguments: he is “result-oriented” (24). This is, in a sense, a description of the Emersonian “Man Thinking.” The term reflects on that American democratic ideal that anyone can take part in free-ranging intellectual debate in a democracy.

The appendage of “public” to “intellectual” is a more recent construct and is one that reflects what British scholar Helen Small terms “a new and predominantly American anxiety about the viability of what is still sometimes called ‘the profession of thought’” (1). Russell Jacoby, a UCLA professor and historian of the American and European intellectual, has been credited with actually coining the term in his 1987 treatise, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (26), which recounts the demise of the great mid-twentieth-century generalist intellectual thinker. He mourns the passing of the once vaunted, general-interest writers who displayed their intellectual wares for a likewise generalist audience of educated but non-specialized readers: those who gleaned their ideas about politics and culture for dinner-time debate from *The New Republic*, *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, the *New York Review of Books* and other little magazines that dealt with great ideas.

But the mid-twentieth century has passed, and with it most of the public intellectuals' favored little magazines, which have folded or changed hands, and their insular salons where they once debated literature, liberalism, culture and the like. The current era has shaped a new breed of public intellectual, an affiliated thinker, attached either to a university or a think tank, perhaps a retired political appointee making a go at a second or third career in the public domain. This new intellectual still writes and comments, but with the upsurge in the demand for academic publishing and the growth of university and independent think tanks, it's much more competitive and frequently specialized according to academic compartmentalization. This new intellectual has learned, as well, to be media savvy, to look and sound good on television talk shows and news programs. "The traditional intellectual is on his way out," laments Epstein (*Commentary*). It is now more important to be concise and well spoken on the air than to pen a thoughtful and well-written essay for a magazine. The new breed is well pressed, well coifed and well spoken, but never rambling nor redundant, for, in television's stop-watch-timed minutes, every second counts.

The death knell, then, has sounded for the old-style New York public intellectual. As so many writers have in recent years, public intellectuals themselves note their own breed's decline is imminent and signals an overall cultural shift to the more rapid pace of the 21st century here such technology-oriented media as television and the Internet take primacy. Another reason for decline is, according to Lasch, the problem of decreased American intellectual debate and the increasing difficulty of being an outspoken radical or liberal (286) in a growing politically conservative climate.

Posner is merely among the most recent of intellectuals to write an obituary for the public intellectual in his lengthy and list-filled treatise (where he does include himself in the extensive list of public intellectuals). Jacoby more than a decade earlier tolled the death knell by citing the rise of contemporary academia with its pinpoint specializations as a prime culprit in the disappearance of sophisticated generalists of the like of Edmond Wilson, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe and a slew of others (Boynton, 2). Jacoby argued – and Posner echoes – that increased specialization and corporatization of academia, with ever more insistent requirements that faculty research and publish in academic journals – has ground most public intellectual debate to a halt. No longer are great ideas being synthesized and explored in commonplace magazines and op ed pages; instead they are overly theorized and nitpicked in small-circulation, academic journals aimed at elite, single-interest professorial partisans.

Posner notes that many of the earlier New York intellectuals lacked what today would be essential qualifications: a PhD and academic tenure (30). Those early intellectuals were free agents: they taught, lectured, wrote, reported, edited and found other work of the mind. They wrote literary fiction, poetry, essays, literary criticism and social commentary. British author George Orwell comes to mind as an example of a public intellectual who had great effect and influence on the general public; non-university educated himself, he wrote essays on war and politics, socialism and class hierarchy, and his novels *1984* and *Animal Farm* were of critical importance to generations of readers around the world. Posner calls Orwell, along with Socrates, Thoreau, Nietzsche and Camus, “truly untamable individualists” (31).

When *The Nation*, another modest intellectual house organ, covered a panel of public intellectuals of some repute sponsored by Basic Books in 2001, the title – “The Future of the Public Intellectual” – echoed Posner’s cry of imminent demise. Moderator and Basic Books publisher John Donatich poked fun at the idea of serious discourse in an era when anti-intellectualism thrives.

The very words “future of the public intellectual” seem to have a ... nostalgia built into them, in that we only worry over the future of something that seems endangered, something we have been privileged to live with and are terrified to bury
(http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?I_20010212&s_forum).

Jean Bethke Elshtain, a historian and professor at the University of Chicago, worried that the public is frequently overtaking the intellectual in intellectual discourse:

[T]he problem with being a public intellectual is that, as time goes on, one may become more and more public and less and less intellectual...I didn’t exactly mean less academically respectable, but ... less reflective, less inclined to question one’s own judgments, less likely to embed a conviction in its appropriate context with all the nuance intact
(http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?I_20010212&s_forum).

She sees public debate on hard questions of ethics, morality and societal change disappearing – not only among politicians but among interested lay parties. She suggests questions of genetic engineering as an area of debate where public intellectuals must take a stand and wrestle with moral and ethical issues involved in scientific experimentation. But she opines that the rise of the “therapeutic culture,” with its emphasis on personal growth, self-actualization and self esteem, has overtaken more compelling societal questions in what amounts to current public intellectual discourse.

The Public Intellectual: Guardian, Gadfly, Gatekeeper and Revolutionary

The intellectual, public or otherwise, functioned best, then as societal critic (Epstein). Part guardian and gatekeeper, part revolutionary and flamethrower, the intellectual had and still has the dual job of both building up and tearing down the status quo of society. Posner sets out a clear definition of the public intellectual: he expresses himself in a way that is accessible and focuses on matters of general public concern. The job description that Epstein called social critic may feature a university affiliation, full- or part-time. The public intellectual may be a writer, an editor, or an artist. In recent years, he or she may work for quasi-academic institutions called think tanks, where speaking and writing, research and debate (but no teaching of undergraduate students) is a part of the job description. Public intellectuals comment on current controversies and sometimes voice their opinions on political talk shows or on op-ed pages (Posner 35).

More simply put by physicist-turned-novelist and MIT lecturer Alan Lightman in his brief essay on the role of the public intellectual, one becomes a public intellectual when one “decides to write and speak to a larger audience than their own professional colleagues.” Like Posner, who in his treatise set up a complex system of genres required of a public intellectual, Lightman demarcates the role, but more simply into three succinct levels. Lightman defines someone on the first step of public intellectuality as one who speaks and writes exclusively about one’s own discipline using clear and simple explanations of a topic that requires specialized knowledge, for example, explanations on how genetics or cancer research work for the general public. The second rung for Lightman features relating one’s own discipline with others in the social, cultural and political worlds surrounding it. He cites Steven Weinberg’s essays

on science, culture and religion in the *New York Review of Books* as an example. The highest level of attainment in the rarefied world of public intellectual, Lightman notes, is via invitation only. This is when a person, the intellectual – a scholar, a writer, a scientist, an artist – becomes “elevated to a symbol, a person that [sic] stands for something far larger than the discipline from which he or she originated.” This person is invited to speak and write for a broad range of audiences on a wide-ranging array of public issues, not related to the author’s own specialty. Albert Einstein is cited as an example for his public discourse on religion, education, ethics and philosophy. Lightman also names feminist author Gloria Steinheim, along with Noam Chomsky, Steven Jay Gould, Sontag, the late Edward Said, Henry Louis Gates and Camille Paglia, among others.

Lightman, too, offers caveats to the public intellectual. (He seems to be speaking from experience, as if, he himself is one, though he is not so bold as Posner to include his name on a list.) Often the public intellectual must speak outside of his or her area of expertise so care must be taken in acknowledging limitations. A public intellectual of the highest order must enter that world with caution and respect, Lightman says, freely admitting his or her personal prejudices, open to possible consequences that what is said or written may have repercussions beyond his or her own field of expertise. A public intellectual, then, is in a sense, like a modern-day Hollywood celebrity, public property, for the ideas, the debate, the intellectual fodder that the public intellectual engages in is itself part of the greater public arena. “He has become an idea himself,” Lightman says, with “enormous power to influence and change.”

What, then, does it take to be or become a public intellectual today? Are the doors open to anyone with a bold opinion and a brash ability to be outspoken? Academic tenure and a publishing contract with a good academic press seem to be the route many so-called current public intellectuals have taken to attain their prominence. A position with a popular think tank that allows for publication and speaking engagements around the country demarcates another path into public intellectuality. Being outspoken as well on a particular issue or subject or sparking a controversy within the ivied walls of academe might well propel one into the public arena. The late Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West, Stanley Fish, and Catharine MacKinnon come to mind as current public intellectuals who reside with a foot in both the academic and public arenas. In other words, there are few, if any independent generalists, of the old style public intellectual around today. Joseph Epstein complained that today's crop of public intellectuals "are the inheritors of a mantle for which one now qualifies not by any particular mental power but by going public with one's intelligibility and one's mere opinions" (Epstein). Herbert Gans, a Columbia University professor and older-school public intellectual, whittles it down to the current fashion of being a pundit:

[P]ublic intellectuals are really pundits ... of the educated classes, the pundits of the highbrow and the upper-middlebrow populations, if you will....Most public intellectuals function as quote-suppliers to legitimize the media....if no journalist calls for a quote, then I'm not a public intellectual; I just sit there writing my books and teaching classes
(http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?I_20010212&s_forum).

With the growth of the academically affiliated public intellectual and with the decline in thoughtful debate and discourse in an increasingly mediated and electronic age, the death or the decline of the public intellectual seems – as so many are wont to

say – imminent. The future, the decline and the ongoing status of public intellectuals continue to be debated, but mostly by public intellectuals themselves and the rising wannabes of the profession. But there's no training, no degree nor insignia that grants someone the right to be called a public intellectual. Even with the recent introduction of graduate degree in the so-called field – from Florida Atlantic University – one cannot call oneself a public intellectual without acknowledgement from colleagues, publishers and the high-brow media. A PhD in public intellectualism: Who would have thought it?

The development and decline of the public intellectual mirrors the state of thoughtful, public debate in contemporary society at large. The status of ideas and moral, social and political issues remains the topic of most interest and concern to public intellectuals, while general society finds more of interest in popular culture and Hollywoodized media. The United States has become mired in an era of anti-intellectualism. As John Donatich queried in 2001 to a panel of public intellectuals: “A new generation of public intellectuals waits to be mobilized. What will it look like?” (http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?I_20010212&s_forum). Not much like the one of the past century, surely. Public intellectuals of the 21st century will have to evolve news skills to survive and to reach their intended audiences. Whether those skills will be displayed on electronic media – television and the Internet come to mind – or in more traditional ways, remains to be seen.

Aside from the manner in which future public intellectuals will reach their audiences, is the question: is there space at this shrinking table of public intellectuality for that new generation? For outsiders, non-academics, non-New Yorkers, non-tenured, non-think tank types, non-PhDs? Can an artist, a dancer like Liz Lerman, achieve access

to the ivy-covered if now-decaying halls of public intellectualism? Would Lerman pass the test of Posner, who demands of his public intellectuals that they “either comment on current controversies or offer general reflections on the direction or health of society” (35)? Or how about Boynton’s requirement that an intellectual must be someone “engaged in the public realm”? Then there’s Norah Vincent’s, that the public intellectual “should play the role of the proverbial gadfly who questions and picks apart conventional wisdom and received opinion.” The *Los Angeles Times* columnist adds that the public intellectual should “scrutinize the larger picture, not just as a means of discrediting other people’s bad ideas, but as a way of offering better ideas.” Finally, “communication,” she writes, “is central to a public intellectual’s task” (Vincent). And Lightman elaborates on that task with his three-level definition of a public intellectual: beginning by speaking exclusively within one’s own discipline, communicating outside of one’s discipline, and finally, participating in “invitation only” events related or not to one’s field.

As an artist, a dancer, choreographer and teacher, can Lerman stretch herself into the both traditional rubric of public intellectual, while continuing to break new ground? Does her work in the dance field and in the broader community at large define her as a public intellectual? Forthcoming sections will explore her childhood background and the forces that shaped her intellectual ideals as well as examine three thematic areas in the context of Lerman’s choreographic work – personal narrative, Jewish culture and community-based work. Can Liz Lerman, a dancer and choreographer, make the leap from studio and stage to the podium of public discourse? Or has Lerman redefined what it means to be a public intellectual for the 21st century?

Chapter 4: Defining a Life of Dance and Action

Born To Dance

Liz Lerman may have been born to dance, but she was destined, through the influence and providence of family history and background to somehow change the world, to make dances that matter. Elizabeth Ann Lerman was born on December 25, 1947, Christmas Day, in Los Angeles, the second child and first and only daughter of Phil and Anne Lerman. Her parents announced her arrival into the world via an engraved birth announcement on which they printed the following:

In the time that it takes to read this report, 1,000 Americans will be born. These new Americans will come into families whose religious faiths are a roster of all those which men hold sacred. Their names will be strange and varied, echoes from every corner of the world. Their skins will range in color from black to white. A few will be born to riches, more to average comfort, and too many to poverty. All of them will be Amercians [sic].
-- From Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, 1947

This passage, drawn from the introduction of the report commissioned by President Harry Truman "To Secure These Rights," was issued October 20, 1947, by the Civil Rights Committee, just two months prior to Lerman's birth. Truman remarked at that time: "I created this committee with a feeling of urgency. No sooner were we finished with the war than racial and religious intolerance began to appear and threaten the very thing we had just fought for" (Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition, Jan. 6, 2004). Indeed, Truman's commitment to Civil Rights in post-War America had a profound effect on the Civil Right's movement's evolution and often federal government intervention, regulations and actions paved the way

before states and the private sector took up the cause of equality. Phil Lerman, Liz's father, was a Truman loyalist. Looking at her birth announcement, Lerman acknowledged: "It so defines the social action piece of my world. It's like from the 'get go' I had no choice" (Dec. 17, 2003). Indeed.

Lerman has often described her father as a populist and her mother as an elitist. These two means of pigeonholing her parents indicate how fully Lerman's personality and ideals have been shaped by her childhood upbringing. She is both a great populist choreographer and a guardian of artistic integrity. This dual vision of herself as populist and elitist has become a self-fulfilling prophecy manifested through the years by the manner in which she has crafted and presented herself and her work to the public. That Liz Lerman created a life for herself that blends artistic practice with community-based organizing, elitism with populism, is not at all surprising. In fact, looking back, it couldn't have happened any other way.

Even before Elizabeth Ann Lerman could hold her head up, her parents – like all parents – had great dreams and even greater expectations for their black-haired, six-pound-six-ounce girl child. Phil Lerman was a political activist with a radical streak, no matter whether his day job was as a regional director at B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League or selling tires in the family business. Anne Lerman was quieter, more reserved, and she valued the finer things in life, not consumer goods, but art and education. Both parents lived their lives and raised their children according to their ideals.

Phil and his twin sister Esther were born May 17, 1919, in Milwaukee to Ben and Rose Lerman, and were welcomed by their older brother Jack into the tight-knit Lerman clan. Ben and his young family lost Rose to the Spanish flu epidemic just six

months after the twins were born. A quick second marriage also ended in tragedy when Ben's second wife died in an automobile accident. The Lerman children, Jack, Phil and Esther, were shuttled between an assortment of Milwaukee relatives – the Holtzmans – while Ben tried to get back on his feet after the quick and painful loss of two wives. In the 1920s he opened a gas station, eventually Lerman Tire, the family business that comfortably supported two generations of Milwaukee-based Lermans until it was sold in the 1980s. Ben Lerman's children were frequently left to their own devices growing up in downtown Milwaukee; they changed schools frequently as they moved from relative's house to relative's house.

When their father Ben remarried Rose Feldman (another Rose), a widow with three children of her own, the Lerman youngsters finally acquired some stability in their young, rootless lives. Together in Rose's large Milwaukee flat, the Lerman and Feldman families blended, though not easily. Bernadine Lerman, Jack's wife and Phil's sister-in-law, said that Phil, Esther and Jack held their tongues about their distaste for their father's new wife because they were acutely aware of how he suffered being widowed, not once but twice in close succession.

Ben Lerman had a radical streak that he brought with him from the Old Country – Eastern Europe – and this remained the most important legacy he passed on to his children, in particular his two boys. It's a legacy, too, that shapes the Lerman family psyche, and even to this day, Ben Lerman's grandchildren – Liz among them – and great-grandchildren take pride in being politically active and socially motivated. Born in a small Russian shtetl, Ben Lerman moved to Odessa, where his activist roots germinated. An ardent Zionist and territorialist, family lore says that he fled to America

in 1905, his life at risk because he was agitating against the czar. Bernadine Lerman recalled tales of Ben from her husband Jack:

[Ben belonged to] a revolutionary party. He was very active politically, but anti-czar. He was not a Communist, but a socialist in thinking. ... I don't think the czar's police were so happy with these young men who were plotting to overthrow the czar (Dec. 23, 2003).

Ben Lerman was a lifelong supporter of Israel, a traditional Jew, though not very observant – the tire business remained opened on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath, out of necessity – he didn't have much time for religion, yet he took pride in his Jewish heritage. He is remembered as a sweet, gentle man, another trait passed on to his sons, Phil and Jack. While the Lerman Tire Service was in business for nearly 60 years, it never made anyone a millionaire; though it remained a solid, family-owned business. Some say that both Ben and later his son Phil were too generous, too trusting to take a hard line on business issues.

Along with his generosity, Phil picked up his father's radical streak. As a young man, Phil's uncle, Sol Holtzman, as a favor to Ben, hired his nephew to work in Milwaukee's Holtzman Furs. Phil, rankled by inequities he saw in the store's working conditions, set up a picket line in front of the small store to force unionization of the handful of workers. "There weren't that many employees; but there were some," laughed Bernadine Lerman, recalling Phil picketing his uncle's store. But his actions caused a blemish in the relationship with the wealthier, more established Holtzmans. And, needless to say, Ben Lerman was livid.

Phil Lerman was a joiner. As a young man he and his brother were active in Jewish youth groups, including the progressive Zionist Hashomer Hatzair as well as other Jewish social justice organizations. For a short while, too, Phil Lerman belonged

to the Communist party, a decision that would come to haunt him later. Bernadine Lerman recalled one activist group that she and the Lerman brothers attended: “It was just a political group supporting the rights of the underdog and that kind of thing.” Her name along with a number of her friends even appeared in the local newspaper as a Communist. “But, of course,” Bernadine Lerman added, “once Russia and Germany, the Nazis, came to have an impact, most of us drifted away” (Dec. 23, 2003).

Liz Lerman’s mother, Anne Levey, was born in February 4, 1915, in Oakland to Myrtle Migel and Louis Levey. Anne was a West Coast Jew with all that that engendered. Two to three generations distant from the European *shtetl* lifestyle, California Jews assimilated easily, readily into the sunny Western lifestyle. Myrtle and Louis, Louie, were an uncomfortable couple; they divorced a decade into their marriage. Myrtle raised her two daughters, Anne and Miriam Ruth – or Patsy as she’s been known virtually since birth – by herself. Though a lawyer, Louie Levey was none too savvy a businessman: “My father,” Patsy Pinkus said, “was a dreamer; my mother really raised us. He took people [clients] who needed him, who didn’t have any money and he’d bring home weird things like oranges and birds and things that people gave him [in lieu of payment].” He became enamored with the order of Rosicrucians, a cult-like group of Christian mystics founded in the 1500s, which encourages members to explore the nature and meaning of existence in search of the wisdom of self-knowledge. He was not present for much of his children’s upbringing (Jan. 14, 2004).

Anne Levey descended from a line of strong, independent Jewish women. It is said that her grandmother came to California the long way, sailing around the tip of South America. But another story recounts her crossing the continent via the Fresno

Trail. Amelia Goldberg, Myrtle Levey's mother and Anne's grandmother, was notable as an early graduate of Mills, an elite, private women's liberal arts college in Oakland. But before settling in California, Amelia's mother, Augusta Drachman, in the mid-1800s, cofounded the first synagogue in Tucson with a group of 10 Jewish women. It was initially called The Hebrew Benevolent Society, later Temple Emanu-El. Once in California the family became more assimilated, less attached to old country Jewish ways, religious traditions and lifestyles. In fact, a number of family members became Christian Scientists, not an uncommon path for immigrant Jews and their children to take out in the golden sun of the far west. The big scandal wasn't that the family didn't practice Judaism; it was that they had a Christmas tree.²

Although Myrtle Levey never attended college, she became an astute and notable businesswoman at a time when women were more often consigned to homemaking or low-status employment. Concerned about her lack of financial independence, she tried all sorts of things before she hit on artificial flowers. At the height of the Depression, when she first opened the Artificial Flower Shop in the stately Sir Francis Drake Hotel on Union Square in San Francisco, Levey became an early starter in an up-and-coming business. "It was the beginning of silk flowers," Patsy Pinkus, her daughter recalled, "and she became very famous." The store prospered. "People would come just to see her store. It was the best of all [the other shops] and topped the real flower shops," said her daughter remembering the extravagant displays

² The Christmas tree, now anathema in many Jewish homes, particularly observant ones, was 100 years ago not an uncommon feature of many especially German-Jewish households, many of whom were affiliated with the Reform Jewish movement. Later, following World War II and the establishment of the Jewish state in Israel, American Jews no longer squelched their Jewish celebrations and Chanukah, the Festival of Lights also celebrated in December, took on greater importance and in non-intermarried families Christmas trees became less accepted.

and arrangements, artistically tended by Myrtle's own hand. With an entrepreneurial streak she eventually expanded to three shops, two in San Francisco and one in Oakland (Jan. 14, 2004).

Myrtle Levey worked hard to give her girls the best that money could buy, especially lessons and educational opportunities. For a while the girls lived with their mother in the Stanford Court on California Street, which were then rented flats and now are a hotel. Patsy, Anne's younger sister, was artistically inclined and studied ballet, dabbled in theater and even appeared on stage at the grand opening of San Francisco's venerable War Memorial Opera House. Anne, more studious, kept to her books, though she did enjoy music, especially piano. Myrtle bought her daughter Anne a beautiful, claw-footed mahogany piano and provided for lessons.³

Working at her elegant Victorian flower shop for so many years, Levey was wealthy enough to send her daughters to the best colleges. Her eldest, Anne, the 'smart one,' as her mother put it, graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, while Patsy, the 'cute one,' immersed herself in ballet, theater and other pursuits for which she was often tutored or registered for lessons of one sort or another. A patrician woman, Myrtle dressed impeccably, down to her white gloves, her well-coifed hair, her crisp dresses and her carefully applied lipstick.

While the Levey girls and their mother didn't participate much in Jewish communal life, they attended Sunday school at Shearith Israel in San Francisco, where Anne was confirmed at 16. Patsy was uninterested. In fact, when their grandmother

³That piano proved a great investment, later traveling with Anne Lerman across the country following her marriage. For a time in the 1980s, it was in Lerman's Dance Exchange, though now it has found another home.

lived with them as youngsters, Pinkus said, “We were really raised in Christian Science. We used to go to Christian Science Sunday school” (Jan. 14, 2003). Judaism just wasn’t an essential part of their lives. For Anne, of course, that changed when she met and married Phil.

Following Berkeley, Anne Levey continued her studies at Stanford University earning a graduate degree in engineering; she could have remained on to earn a doctorate in math – family stories note that she was an excellent student – but with World War II raging, other concerns took precedence. Anne Levey took a job as draftsman and volunteered with the USO in San Francisco, where she met a strapping young soldier with a shock of black hair. At the Fort Mason USO, Anne played classical music on records for soldiers on R&R. She was kind hearted and modestly popular with the young men; sometimes she invited one or two back to the house for a home-cooked meal. At the USO, Anne also distributed opera tickets to soldiers on leave. Phil Lerman was one of the takers. They met at a concert at Symphony Hall. Phil Lerman recalled meeting his first wife:

This woman, Anne Louise Levey, who was a mathematician working in science. A week later I jumped post because that was the night of the transfer. I was angry. And I called her. She’d given me her phone number to call. Her mother invited me to dinner. So I came and three weeks later we were married (Harding, Dec. 27, 1996).

They married March 23, 1944, on base at Fort Mason. The first thing Phil did was place a call home to Milwaukee.

It’s war time honey. It happened to a lot of us. Called my father on Saturday and said, ‘Pa, I’m getting married on Thursday. Send me \$200.’ The first question he asked, ‘Was she Jewish?’ I said, ‘Yeah, Pa, her name is Levey. But Jews like this, you never met before in your life.’ (Harding, Dec. 27, 1996).

Anne Lerman, a war bride, saw her bridegroom shipped out shortly after their wedding. Phil Lerman served in a medical unit of the 10th Mountain Division, 87th Infantry Unit, the Ski Troopers. In the Italian alps they fought valiantly against five German divisions toward the end of the war. Anne Lerman, pregnant with the couple's first child, stayed in San Francisco with her sister and her sister's young family.

While Phil was still overseas, Richard was born in December of 1944. Phil Lerman returned home after the war's end and a brief stint assisting young soldiers who were earning their GEDs, high-school equivalency diplomas, before discharge. Back in the states, Phil settled his new family in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, where Liz, Elizabeth Ann, was born two years later. In L.A., Lerman planned to work in labor organizing, but had a hard time finding the right job; that earlier brief affiliation with the Communist Party hurt him.

There in sunny California, Liz Lerman danced her first dances. They were undoubtedly Isadora Duncan dances, free flowing, creative, energetic, expressing the spirit and unstoppable verve of a preschooler. Duncan, too, was California-born and her dances spoke of the freedom of the body, of sun, and sand, and solar plexus, which Duncan determined was the center of the body and from which all her movement emanated. Duncan became the earthy mother of what would become a decidedly American form of modern dance. While Duncan had little to offer the many young acolyte students she taught, mostly in Europe, in the ways of technical exercises – codified modern dance would come to the fore with later founders, including Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, whose Denishawn school was for a while on California soil, and

grand dame Martha Graham. As a preschooler Lerman was a self-invented dancer, a living-room leaper and backyard ballerina, at least in her imagination.

Liz would spin in the living room and in the grassless backyard, muddy after it rained. She practiced her grand leaps on short four-year-old legs, paraded on tiptoe.

And, even then, Lerman would dance for anyone, anywhere. In fact, she remembered,

They'd say, 'Dance for us, Liz,' and I would get up and spin around [Actress] Betty White was a neighbor of ours. She had a little local TV show, very early television. And ... for some reason she had me on as a guest. I have no idea why. But I remember sitting in the studio and there were cameras going and she said, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' And I said, 'I want to be a dancer.' And she said, 'Will you dance?' I ran around and sat down (Dec. 1, 2003).

In 1952, Phil Lerman, who had struggled to find suitable work that supported his growing family but also his principles of political activism and social justice, took an important and satisfying job. He moved the family to Washington, D.C., to work as a regional director at the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, an organization chartered to combat anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry. Anne Lerman cried during that move, after all she was leaving her home state, her California lifestyle and moving across the country into a new and unknown life. On the East Coast, the Lermans settled into a house in Falls Church, Virginia, and Liz entered preschool while her older brother Richard started elementary school. But the family wasn't comfortable in Virginia, especially Richard, who, Liz said, was required to say the Lord's Prayer in school. Shortly after they moved into northwest Washington, to a two-story house on 31st Street, NW, where they felt much more relaxed. Lerman observed,

We were so happy when we moved to the city. And that became a pattern; the same thing happened in Milwaukee. We first moved to the suburbs and

then we moved to the city. It became kind of an organizing principal of our household, to live in the city (Dec. 1, 2003).

Immediately after moving to Washington, Anne enrolled her daughter in a Saturday modern dance class. Anne Lerman sought out the best and found it in Ethel Butler, a serious dancer and a teacher, who taught her students, even the youngest ones, serious Martha Graham technique including contractions, falls and bounces. Butler, a former dancer and close associate of Graham's, had settled in Washington in 1944. Butler's classes were nothing like the free-form creative movement classes offered to most five-year-olds: Only once in a while the class would close with an improvisation. Butler's studio, decorated with artistically shot photos of ballerinas and Graham dancers, at that point on Florida Avenue (now the home of Nora's Restaurant), had an outdoor shower where in the summer months the girls would rinse off after a rigorous class. "I remember heavy-duty warming up, heavy-duty standing, bounces ... and then I remember improv circles, but not every week. I loved that," Lerman said (Dec. 1, 2003). Lerman recalled that Butler noted how she shone best during those infrequent free-form moments at the end of class.

All the girls wore black leotards that zipped up the back and they danced barelegged. Lerman had bangs like the majority of young girls and she pulled her dark, wavy hair back into a single ponytail. "What I remember most about those classes was driving down Massachusetts Avenue on Saturday mornings to a game of name-the-embassies," Lerman said (April 26, 1987). Her father typically drove her to class and picked her up. She said, "Ethel would let him beat the drum for the last part of class, that was a big deal." And for Phil, who had been a college chum of another modern

dancer, Anna Halprin, that must have been a grand time to show off before giggling little girls. Those classes began the foundation of Lerman's life as a dancer: "From the beginning I thought this [a dancer] is what it would be" (April 26, 1987). A picture of Lerman snapped in front of her house at 31st Street, shows her wearing an apple-red, one-piece bathing suit. She has chin-length brown hair and on her then-round, soft face was a joyful smile, sun glinting off her cheeks, her arms upraised, encircling her head in a ballet dancer's high fifth port de bras. The dancer she thought she was going to be, Liz Lerman was on the way to becoming – a dancer and more.

Style Versus Substance

Anne Lerman always sought the best for her children and family, especially when it involved education. But Anne was also an iconoclast. In California, when they bought a new house in Venice Beach, Anne asked the builder to flip it around so it wouldn't look like all the rest of the houses on the block. Later in Milwaukee, she planted lettuce and other vegetables instead of flowerbeds in the front garden and insisted on moving the door over to one side so the two-story center-hall colonial wouldn't appear so symmetrical. Anne and Liz developed a close but complex relationship. While Lerman mostly speaks about her father and his social activist influence, it was Lerman's mother who insisted on the dance lessons for her daughter, the music lessons for her sons. (One, Richard Lerman, is now a successful new music composer.) Phil Lerman may have captured the limelight with his gregarious personality and long list of social and political activities, but Anne Lerman, soft-spoken, had her own quiet but undeniable influence over her children, especially her daughter, Liz. So different, in fact, from her father, with his extroverted demeanor, his politics and heart-on-his-sleeve activism, his

ceaseless outspoken stance for social justice, his love of people from every walk of life, Anne asserted values of a different sort.

By the time Liz Lerman was nearly eight, her brother Richard, ten, Phil Lerman got entangled in internal political maneuverings at the ADL. He had been involved in nurturing early Black-Jewish civic relationships but Phil Lerman couldn't stomach dissent from higher ups and community leaders. He was reprimanded and saw the writing on the wall. Phil Lerman's sister-in-law, Bernadine Lerman, remembered the events of that period:

Jack had to go to Washington on some business. And when he saw Phil he said, 'What's the matter?' He could tell by his demeanor that Phil was a very unhappy person. And Phil said if he stayed on in this job it would be a kind of corruption of his true feelings, values. He felt he could keep the job but his heart was no longer in it because, I guess, there was some straying from what he thought the group was when he started the job. At that point Jack said, 'Look, come back and go into our business.' (Dec. 23, 2003).

He accepted his brother's offer and by 1955 Phil and Anne brought the family to Milwaukee where Phil became a partner in Lerman Tire.

The loss of his ADL position was a tremendous disappointment for Phil Lerman, his activist spirit and his garrulous nature bruised, his opportunity to work for social justice undermined. But his daughter Liz learned from her father that he didn't hold grudges against the Jewish community. She said:

My father was unwilling to be bitter. It just amazes ... you know it always just bothers me. He never took it out on the Jewish community. He was angry, angry about aspects of the Jewish community that moved more and more to the right. But he didn't raise me to hate Jewish life (Dec. 1, 2003).

In fact, over the years as Liz Lerman developed her own sense of her life's work as integral to Jewish ideals of social justice and *tikkun olam*, repair of the world, and an

on-again-off-again relationship with organized Jewish life, she often reflected back on her father's experience with the ADL, among the most prominent of Jewish political and social organizations. "My father always said to me, 'Don't confuse the style with the heart of the matter,'" Lerman noted (Perron 65). That advice has been something Lerman has returned to periodically, over the years. Early on as a college student, she was discontented with the institutional trappings of a dance department that proved a mismatch for her temperament. Later as a Jewish woman working on the fringes of the Jewish establishment, unable to get an entrée, even a modicum of support or an invitation to stage her early Jewish work in synagogues or Jewish community centers, she eschewed bitterness and sought other avenues to present her work.

While Phil Lerman found a way to move on and still love the Jewish and social justice work he set aside upon leaving the ADL, Anne Lerman was, her daughter said, "pissed as hell" (Dec. 1, 2003). Over the years Anne showed little interest in or commitment to the organized Jewish community; she never joined the temple sisterhood or such Jewish women's groups as Hadassah, like many other middle-class Jewish mothers of her generation. Perhaps she held a grudge for what happened to her husband in his first professional job in the Jewish world; perhaps she never felt all that deeply connected to Jewish life in the first place, her roots after all in California were as much Christian Scientist as they were Jewish. Her daughter reflected: "She was so angry about those kinds of things. They would add up for her." And perhaps they added up because she bore the brunt of the fallout, moving her young family across the country and halfway back again, in response to the ADL job and its loss, watching her

husband struggle to assert his liberal convictions in the face of conservative societal and community standards.

In Milwaukee the family moved to a house on Lakeview Avenue in Whitefish Bay, where they lived for a year and a half. Repeating the pattern begun with their stay in Washington, D.C., they felt out of place, for at that time Whitefish Bay was an all-white, suburban enclave. The family settled on a house downtown on Summit Avenue, and younger brother David Lerman was born in the summer of 1955. While older brother Richard was temperamentally closer to his mother, and he was also mathematically and musically inclined, Liz was and remains much more like her extroverted, politically and socially motivated father. She said:

I'm a lot like my dad. I could fit in anywhere. I made a point of fitting in. I was busy. I would take three buses to dance class after school. ...By the time we moved into the city, I was going three or four times a week [to dance class] ... and my dad would pick me up on the way home (Dec. 1, 2003).

Phil and Anne Lerman affiliated with the Reform Temple Emanu-El, where his brother and sister-in-law, Jack and Bernadine, attended. Emanu-El then was still located in the city, while the other prominent Reform congregation at the time, Temple Shalom, had already moved out to the suburbs. Liz Lerman, though, remembered that most of the members at the synagogue lived upwardly mobile lives in the suburbs. The Lerman family's schedule was often full: Phil frequently away on travel to sell or buy tires; Liz busy with dance lessons and other extracurriculars, Richard, with music, and even little David, was signed up for classes like creative movement and piano. The family didn't attend synagogue services weekly, but Liz Lerman has fond memories of going to synagogue with her father: "I liked going to synagogue. I liked going with my dad. We

would go ... how often? Maybe Friday night, once a month.” She loved it partly because it was an opportunity to get dressed up, and partly because she relished the time alone with her father. Anne chose not to attend, and the boys, especially Richard, didn’t much enjoy the ritual either. Liz found temple a social experience: “I liked seeing everybody. I didn’t mind sitting there.” More often than not Phil, after a long week, would fall asleep during the sermon. Tuesdays she went for a short while to Hebrew school at Emanu-El, and later her father taught there but his radical ideas of social justice, which he imparted to his students, got him fired.

Lerman attended Riverside High School, or East as it was known, and did well, receiving mostly As and Bs, and one C in French, but she didn’t feel excited or challenged either academically or socially. Nor was she among the most popular girls in the class. None of the Lerman children dated much and none had boy or girlfriends, she says.

It’s not like I wanted a social life. I remember in high school saying, ‘It’s just not interesting enough.’ I remember it was more interesting to actually be around my folks at home. I was part of the group that was smart, got good grades. I loved my history classes. I liked school. It was fine. I did my work. I don’t remember until college being ignited (Dec. 1, 2003).

Riverside High attracted students from a diverse cross-section of the city, and Lerman’s friends, all girls, were likewise smart, talented and not much interested in boys or in the undertones of the early ‘60s counterculture, drugs, sex and rock and roll, infiltrating urban campuses. “By the time we got to high school we were all, well the girls had all moved into this group of steadfast friends.... It sustained us all through high school. It was pretty great with my girlfriends” (Dec. 1, 2003). Liz’s brother Richard was more

adventurous by that point. Three years ahead, Liz felt he looked down on her conventionality.

Lerman was a joiner, signing up for extracurricular activities that sounded interesting or different. She played the flute in a school orchestra, joined pep band, something she recalls as flag waving and, not surprisingly, she was a pompon leader and she even helped in the choreography. She and her friend, Julia Nowicki, choreographed numbers for the spring high school showcase. And Richard, an early hippy, looked at his younger sister and cringed. Liz Lerman said: “I was made to be embarrassed by my older brother, who thought all this stuff was really stupid. I did eventually drop out [of some school activities] to be more hip.” Lerman remembered arriving home from school and finding her brother and his friends in the house’s darkened living room, candles lit, reading poetry. She remarked: “He was way ahead, way ahead. He was definitely in another world, literally. And I wanted to emulate that, but I didn’t have anybody to emulate that with. None of my friends were into that at all” (Dec. 1, 2003).

Shortly after relocating to Milwaukee, when Liz was still in elementary school, Anne Lerman sought out dance classes, to build on her daughter’s early foundation laid by Ethel Butler in Washington. Again, her mother found the best, not the most popular teacher, Florence West, who had a studio on the second floor of a three-floor walk-up on Milwaukee Avenue downtown. West had trained with Ruth Page, the Indianapolis-born dancer, choreographer and company director who had her own company in the late 1930s but is best known for her work with the Chicago Opera Ballet, later renamed Ruth Page’s International Ballet. West had also studied with Martha Graham, and, like

Butler, taught her serious dance students seriously, introducing them to both classical ballet and to Graham-style modern dance.

Modern dance pedigree in America throughout the twentieth century had just a few antecedents. Martha Graham, Pittsburgh-born but raised in California, studied with the founding mother and father of modern dance, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. Their Los Angeles Denishawn School taught a curriculum that blended iconic images borrowed from Oriental exoticism with ideas culled from Christian Science, Buddhism, American transcendentalism and the writings of Francois Delsarte, the French rhetorician who sought to codify body movement and gestures as a means to attain clarity of expression. An early Denishawn dancer, Graham broke ties with St. Denis and Shawn in 1923, first performing as a solo dancer and eventually forming her own company, which today remains a living repository of her body of contemporary choreography and among the longest-lived modern dance troupes in the world.

Shortly after her break with Denishawn, Graham, like her dance colleague Doris Humphrey, became enamored of the power of the group. Humphrey wrote: “Now individualism must give place ... The universal is being made manifest through the employment of mass” and “... the group can express more subtleties, more power, more variety than one single dancer ever could, no matter how intelligent or talented he might be” (Jowitt 178). While Graham choreographed a body of early works representative of this need for a unified or created society, many of her works, too, featured herself, a solo dancer highlighted against the group. Her works often emerged as revolutionary in both form and content and many too cultivated and captured the restless pioneer spirit of America. As a student of Graham, these ideals of group set

against individual, of form integral to function, of the universality of narrative materials as diverse as Native American myths, classical Greek sources and Biblical dramas, surely rubbed off on West, who, in turn, meted out these concepts to her students.

While a student at West's studio, Lerman dedicated vast time and energy to meeting her teacher's demanding expectations. In fact, Lerman thinks that West, always no nonsense, even intervened by calling her mother, Anne, about the other extracurricular activities that took her daughter away from West's tutelage. By the time she was about 11 and ready to dance multiple days a week, West made a phone call firmly suggesting that Lerman drop other activities that would interfere with ballet classes. "There came a period of decisions that I made all in a row and it had to do with dancing," Lerman said.

First it was Brownies and whether I could continue to stay in Brownies because of how much my dancing was taking. Then it was all the kids in school were taking social dancing and I couldn't take that. Then it was my Hebrew lessons. And it was a pretty traumatic decision to give up my Hebrew lessons and just be confirmed and not to be bat mitzvahed [sic]. I also gave up my flute. It was really in a streak of like three years; it was boom, boom, boom ... stripping away all the other activities [with which] I was involved to just study dance (April 26, 1987).

Sixteen years later Lerman remembered it this way:

I think West definitely had something to do with the flute part. I think the scouting part I didn't mind. I was happy to just be dancing It didn't feel sacrificial. The only time I felt sacrificed ... was a ten-week course that you could take through school, social dancing, and boys and girls could take it. We didn't have the money and I didn't have the time. Money was a piece of it. (Dec. 1, 2003).

But money didn't seem to prevent Anne Lerman from seeking out the best in extracurricular programs for her children. At some points, the grandparents, Myrtle Levey in California and Ben Lerman in Milwaukee, chipped in to cover dance lessons

and leotards. Money in the Lerman household was tight, especially in the early years, but Anne and Phil chose to live modestly, not ostentatiously, spending their disposable income on their children rather than on the latest fashions or best cars, which was something that Liz Lerman's younger brother, David, noticed as a distinct difference between Phil Lerman's family and some of his cousins and friends. At nearly nine years his sister's junior, David Lerman recollected the family situation this way:

It's not to say that they probably couldn't be called middle class earlier, but it was always a little precarious because my dad's work was always at the beck and whim of somebody else ... In Milwaukee it was a family business [and] it was brutal in terms of the time but it was ... financially secure. Not by any means wealthy, just secure (Oct. 23, 2003).

By the time Liz was about 12, West had her firmly in place at the barre, stretching and bending, performing adagio and allegro four or more days a week. After school the girls would bundle up and take a city bus over to West's studio for class before heading home for dinner and homework.

At the Barre

Florence West's classes were hard, reported fellow student Robin Grossman Bell. She ruled with an iron fist, often yelling her instructions and corrections. By the time the girls were in fifth or sixth grade they were dancing four days a week, yet West's classes were never overly large, usually about 15 or so girls, and, as the sole proprietor of the school, she rarely had other teachers teach. Julia Nowicki, a friend of Lerman's and student of West's, noted that they danced Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Additionally, the girls took part in other activities; Nowicki and Lerman both belonged

to the orchestra, playing cello and flute, respectively. Nowicki, a grade younger, echoed Lerman's thoughts on school, "When you get down to it school didn't really seem all that relevant; we were dancing and doing music" (Dec. 9, 2003).

With fiery red hair, pulled back on the top, hanging loose down her back like Moira Shearer in "The Red Shoes," Florence West emanated drama with her thin, wiry frame and muscular dancer's legs. Former student Bell recalled that West had "tremendous thigh muscles, which must have been developed from doing too much of the wrong kind of training." She yelled, at the students, at the pianists, even at the parents. In fact, she went through pianists the way other dancers wear out tights. Classes lasted an hour and 15 minutes, but West, the boss, the owner, the self-appointed master teacher – in Milwaukee at any case – would often keep the girls over, and the fathers, picking up their daughters on their way home from work, would line up against one wall to watch and wait.

The studio, a light airy room with a bank of large windows across one wall, was expansive enough to hold dance recitals each year. West would coach her young charges not just in classic ballet roles, but she would also encourage them to explore their creativity through modern dance and improvisation. West worked to develop her own style of dance that she hoped integrated both ballet and modern. During the week the students studied ballet and on Saturday they experienced modern, Graham style. She called the more creatively based Saturday classes "Dance of Dimension," and they included a warm-up at the barre, floor work, not unlike the contractions, bounces and stretches of a Graham class, and for the final 45 minutes the group would work on a phrase that West choreographed and mixed up. Every other weekend, West arranged a

choreographers' workshop day. During the two-hour sessions, she induced her young students to draw, to paint, to sculpt, to improvise, to dance. Bell remembered:

One year we did – it must have been the imprint of Martha Graham – but we made and dyed these tubes of fabric in sort of purples, beiges and browns and she sewed elastic into the bottom and top of them and we danced inside these tubes. Another year we made slides out of just little pieces of colored transparency and danced, she put those up against the wall and we did a recital dancing against the colored slides we made. It was a completely different experience (Nov. 13, 2003).

Lerman once wrote of those sessions: "Anything was possible, except playing with scarves. I think Florence was afraid we might suffer the same fate as Isadora"

(<http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/introo-dance.php>).⁴ Lerman loved

West and absorbed not only her technical demands, but also her creative energy, if not her yelling. Bell recalls Lerman as one of the class's best dancers:

I had this one image of [Liz] in my mind, at the barre, really enjoying herself, smiling and clearly getting into the work ... not as a tortured as it was for me, I had so little flexibility, but really with zest. I guess I was envious because I was beginning to realize that you can't always get what you want (Nov. 13, 2003).

West was frequently an unforgiving taskmaster. She often yelled her corrections, intimidating some students, scaring others away for good. Lerman, in fact, compared her ballet teacher's yelling to her that of her mother's. Today Lerman says, "I never yell because my mother did." Bell felt terror every time West approached her with a correction; she felt like melting into the background. Nowicki recalled the unspoken power West held over her charges: "She represented this other world, you know, of sensuality and art. She was creating something." Nowicki, whose father was an artist and art teacher, continued, "She was very powerful because she just was such an excellent teacher and she was such a creative person and you knew you were in the

⁴ Her own scarf famously strangled Duncan as its ends became entangled in the wheels of her car.

presence of something very important, powerful” (Dec. 9, 2003). It seemed that the girls relished the less rigid Saturday classes the most. In ballet during the week, Bell remembered,

She was hard on us. She didn’t let anybody get away with anything. She would yell at the pianist. She would yell instructions out to us and she would yell when she wanted us to do a certain kind of adagio or choreography. It was tough (Nov. 13, 2003).

As the girls advanced, the best of them went up on *pointe*; the others began to drop out, arriving at the realization that some are cut out for classical ballet, others not.

Lerman was among West’s best students and when she was 14 she auditioned and was admitted to Interlochen, the National Music Camp, which included a dance track. At Interlochen, surrounded by young, competitive dancers, any naiveté that Lerman held about the glorious and precious world of dance was shattered during that six-week summer session. While Lerman felt competitive at West’s studio, there she was the big fish in the small pond. She remembered measuring her ability in class against her friend Julia Nowicki, but Nowicki never felt that same sense of competition. Rather she looked up to and admired her friend Liz for her hard work, her love of dance and her finesse in tackling the tough classes with aplomb. At Interlochen, where Lerman returned for three summers running, some of the most-promising young dancers around the country were accepted and taught intensively, both in technique and performance tracks. It was there, as a budding adolescent Lerman began to feel a dancer’s angst related to her body. Photos, including one when she danced for President Kennedy at the White House in 1963 with her Interlochen class, show a dark-haired, slim-hipped, long-legged teenager; she wasn’t overweight, nor was she skeletal. Instead she was a healthy growing adolescent. But Lerman remembers other campers’ –

especially the dancers – obsessions with food and weight, body image and fat; they tested themselves by trying to fit their hands around their waists.

Back home from that first summer at Interlochen, Lerman seemed, especially to her friend Nowicki, more urbane, more sophisticated. She began twisting her ponytail into a classic ballet bun. Lerman fondly wrote about attending West's class,

I tried to arrive early ... then I got invited into her one-room apartment/office/library that was off the main studio. She would show me books and pictures and make me touch different rocks and fabrics. She would tell me about yogis and Isadora; they all somehow blended in my mind (<http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/intro-dance.php>).

When Lerman was about 14 – the Interlochen year – West closed her modest studio and moved to New York. Nowicki said, “There was nothing compared to her. And it just all sort of fell apart [when she left].” Lerman found classes here and there. Sometimes Ann Barzel, a well-known Chicago teacher, would travel to Milwaukee to teach class. “I was a private student wearing a little Bluebird outfit,” said Lerman ruefully (Perron 1). She and her friend Nowicki would travel to Chicago alone, with directions on how to catch the El and where to eat lunch written on a piece of paper. Then they would spend an afternoon at a ballet matinee before heading home by train. They found other outlets in high school for dance: working on school productions. Nowicki remembered a duet that she and Lerman worked on, “Unsquare Dance,” with music by Dave Brubeck in 7/4 time. Then there was “Slaughter on 10th Avenue,” the Richard Rodgers-George Balanchine ballet that these two high schoolers reworked for a few of their classmates. Finally, a big 20-minute production number attracted singers and dancers for the year-end production; it was a take off on Bock and Harnick's “Fiorello.”

Riverside was an unusual high school in that it crossed economic and social boundaries, pulling in a swath of Milwaukee and including white-collar areas on the East side and the blue collar West side. Nowicki remembered East as “this mix of blue collar and white collar, and black and white. There was something of everything. In a way it was just perfect” (Dec. 9, 2003). That idealized perfection of an early 1960s Milwaukee public school was short lived, though, for Milwaukee was in the midst of a racial and economic struggle that would ultimately infiltrate the school district and contribute to the growth of the Milwaukee suburbs. At that point Lerman began to distance herself from her beloved dance; West was gone. She became involved in the political upheavals taking place in Milwaukee and around the country and turned her extra-curricular time from high school activities – pep band, pompons and orchestra – to demonstrations.

With Florence West’s departure, Lerman’s dance aspirations wavered. Dance had always been a major part of her childhood, her sense of self, beginning with her earliest twirls and leaps in her California backyard to her budding ballerina persona at Interlochen. With West gone, there was little to attract and hold Lerman and her other close friends, including Nowicki, to the demands of the insular dance world.

In the early 1960s Phil Lerman and a handful of other socially progressive Milwaukee Jews became supporters of interfaith activities and organizations, including radical activist Catholic priest Father James Groppi’s work with integration and youth programs for underserved urban minorities. Milwaukee was a segregated city. In fact even in 2000, U.S. Census figures found the four-county Milwaukee metropolitan area was the second most segregated region in the United States for black and white youths.

Like most American cities, segregation came to Milwaukee early and stayed. Sometimes known as the “Selma of the North,” Milwaukee’s racial inequities reach back generations. In the 1940s Milwaukee blacks accounted for less than 2 percent of the city’s population but occupied more than half of buildings labeled unfit, according to Census Bureau figures (Johnson and Schultz, 2001). Unemployment in the black community was rampant and available jobs hardly provided either dignified work or livable wages for black members of the community. Blacks were three times as likely as whites to live in poverty. Yet during the 1940s through the early 1960s, the black population of the city doubled, and within the next decade doubled one more time. A great many new black families settled into a strip of the city’s North Side where rundown single-family and duplex housing was standard.

By the early 1960s, when Liz Lerman was awakening through her father’s influence to the social ills plaguing both Milwaukee and the nation, Milwaukee itself was a dried haystack awaiting a match. The mayor and school board to improve black living conditions initiated commissions and investigations, but little resulted from the politically blighted process. When Lloyd Barbee, a Memphis-born black attorney, in 1962 confronted the Milwaukee School Board about the city’s segregation and he was rebuffed, he took action. “Barbee formed the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee. The group organized a black boycott of Milwaukee public schools on May 18, 1964, the 10th anniversary of the Supreme Court’s landmark desegregation ruling” (Bernard and Lueders, 1986). Phil Lerman joined the fray, participating in marches, pulling his children out of school with nearly 15,000 others – half the non-whites in the system – and sending them to one-day Freedom Schools where black and white

children participated in teach-ins on Civil Rights, equality and social justice. For a long time the school board was steadfast in refusing to denounce the de facto segregation of the city schools.

By the next year Father Groppi, who had worked summers in Milwaukee inner city youth centers and served a majority black parish at St. Boniface Church, became active in pursuit of equality because he believed he had a responsibility to integrate, not just for his own parishioners, but for the good of the entire city. Phil Lerman found a friend and fellow activist in Groppi, and supported his work to rid Milwaukee of substandard housing, segregated schools and businesses, and separate and unequal education for its public school students.

Younger brother David Lerman remembered that period as so politically heightened that it infiltrated the Lerman household.

It was always a topic of discussion at home. Even if it wasn't talked about, it was present at home because of people coming in and out of the house. I remember there were marches. I remember the marches more than the Freedom School. Being involved in the marches was a big deal (Oct. 23, 2003).

Liz Lerman has vivid pictures in her mind of her father coming home from one meeting or another after a long day at the tire shop. He'd burst in the door and say, "Did anyone see my name in the paper today?" "It probably only happened once or twice," Lerman allowed, "but I remember that so clearly." That Phil Lerman's name appeared in the local Milwaukee papers often enough that he would ask demonstrates his activist community involvement.

Liz Lerman described her teenage years as the period in which the forces of her life – dance and burgeoning awareness of social activism – came together (Perron 63).

After West left, Lerman's series of intermittent ballet teachers like Ann Barzel, presented a very staid, classical view of dance – far from what she learned in West's classes – and the larger world. Lerman was beginning to sort out her priorities: dance or everything else.

A combination of the Civil Rights Movement and my figuring out that ballet was not going to work for me ... all those elements We went to these Freedom Schools [that] would last a day or two and ... during the discussions about open housing in the city, early Civil Rights activities ... my life fell apart (Perron 63-64).

Lerman was referring to some horrible encounters with a ballet teacher at that time who told her she would never become a dancer, ever. Simultaneously, she watched Milwaukee divide itself into pro- and anti-desegregation camps as she observed her few dance teachers after West, too, divide dance into camps – ballet and everything else.

Lerman said,

That was the first time I tried quitting dance and devoting myself to social action. I was 15 or 16. I thought about [social action]. I was involved in a Jewish youth group. I tutored inner city kids, things like that. But I was miserable (Perron 64).

Phil Lerman's social activist and political activities – committee meetings, fundraisers and the rest of the obligations that come with community involvement – shaped Lerman family life, for Richard, Liz, and especially so for David, who as the youngest remembers attending all sorts of rallies, meetings and functions. Decidedly liberal politics, social activism and protest marches were simply part of growing up in the Lerman household.

And Liz Lerman was growing up fast. Lacking the intensity of West's ballet and modern classes and the demoralization she felt from her itinerant ballet teachers, she was ready to move on. With little to keep her challenged and interested in her public

high school, she cut her senior year short, graduating midway through in January of 1965. Lerman's older brother Richard had done the same thing and enrolled at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., to study music. Liz worked for a half year in a Milwaukee insurance agent's office to earn college money while awaiting acceptance letters. She didn't get her first choice, but she was accepted to Bennington College, a selection that her mother Anne favored for it was among the best women's colleges, especially known for its modern dance program.

Bennington College opened in 1932 with one of the nation's earliest majors in dance. Beginning in 1934, its summer School of Dance attracted the best and brightest, groundbreakers in America's young and revolutionary modern dance – Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and many others who came to Vermont to dance. Anne Lerman must have considered Bennington the Mills College of the East (in 1939, Mills was selected as the West Coast location for the summer dance program), an elite, liberal arts women's college that featured dance, drama, music and literature among its academic subjects. Her daughter, Liz, could continue the liberal arts tradition begun three generations earlier by her great-great-grandmother, Augusta Drachman. While the Bennington summer School of Dance was short-lived and discontinued during World War II, even in the 1960s Bennington still maintained that historic cachet as having a strong dance program, for it attracted teachers and guest artists from New York, the nation's dance capital, and drew a student body of intelligent, motivated young women to the quiet enclave in Vermont.

By the time Lerman entered Bennington, in the fall of 1965, she was not dancing much. Her mentor Florence West had been gone for a few years, she was

working an office job and she says, “I think I was a little heavy there. You know freshman year, how you pick up weight. I did pick up weight there.” Dancing was beginning to pose its own set of philosophical problems for Lerman. “Eventually it was not until I had quit,” she said in 1987, “over a lot of reasons ... one of them was the Vietnam War” that she would begin to wrestle with a way and means of making dance acceptable to her social activist sensibilities. “Somehow I felt like I owed a service to society,” she said, “and dancing was too self-centered an activity.” Lerman stayed at Bennington for two years even though she was unhappy there nearly from the outset.

There were about 100 young women in Lerman’s freshman class, about maybe a dozen of them dance majors, including choreographer and dance writer Wendy Perron and choreographer Risa Jaroslow. The rural campus served about 350 women and the few men in the dance department were called “dance fellows,” on scholarship to provide partnering opportunities for the women students.

Bill Bales, a former Graham dancer who had formed the Dudley, Maslow, Bales Trio with Jane Dudley and Sophie Maslow in the 1940s, headed up the department and taught composition (choreography). As a choreographer and dancer he was known for his socially conscious work as well as for his experience with form and content culled from Graham. His freshman dance course, “Style and Structure,” combined dance history and composition for prospective dance majors who would declare their majors in the junior year. Perron described it:

It wasn’t called history, it was just Bill Bales going on and on about what he had learned, who he danced with, different anecdotes about what went on backstage and onstage. I do remember the first assignment was the ‘off-balance assignment’ where we had to work in partners and be off balance with each other (Oct. 12, 2003).

Perron had entered Bennington with a classical ballet background and recalled how tough Bales was on mannered or stiff dancing. Ruth Currier, a former member of José Limón's company and assistant to Doris Humphrey, also taught modern as did Martha Wittman, who taught ballet and was then the youngest teacher there. Wittman, who had danced with Currier, taught at Bennington until the mid-1990s when Lerman invited her to join Dance Exchange, where Wittman, well into her 60s continues to perform and choreograph.

While Bennington in the mid-1960s was not a flashpoint of campus protest or activism, '60s influences ranging from the after-effects of the Kennedy assassination to the growing women's movement to the sexual revolution jumpstarted by the advent of the birth control pill did infiltrate the campus. Marijuana could be found on campus by the mid-1960s and many of the women smoked their first joints there, which would not have been the case even three years earlier. Perron said,

It was definitely an arts school. If you wanted to be a scientist you just didn't go thereThe arts were taken very seriously. And for me I felt like I had come home. I went to a big public high school in New Jersey where everyone thought I was a weirdo for studying dance (Oct. 12, 2003).

For many like Perron, Bennington became a haven where their individualism could flourish. A Bennington woman, then, was one who strove to be an original, especially artistically.

The dance department focused on modern dance; ballet classes were relegated to just twice weekly. Instead the faculty prized composition classes and performances, in the theater where Martha Graham herself once danced. The department included some strong dancers and Perron remembered it as quite rigorous. But the Bennington allure for dancers was not only because of technique nor its creative environment; the

college attracted top students because it allowed women to be openly intelligent and it challenged women academically far beyond what many of them had experienced in the past. “There were other girls in the literature classes,” Perron said, “who were just unbelievably smart, from my point of view, and articulate. I remember my heart would beat every time I raised my hand in literature class... there were so many smart girls there.” Lerman, too, found much to like about Bennington, outside of the dance department. She recalled a history professor, Rush Welter, who challenged her then-staid ways of thinking about history through his assertion that history was about the “Big Picture,” it was interdisciplinary, it was about the history of ideas and should not be confined to small, narrow-minded memorization and debates concerning dates and treaties.

Wittman remembered Lerman in her ballet classes as a “very young” freshman. “She did have this beautiful classical technique,” her former teacher recalled. “Gorgeous legs and feet. She had an earnestness and seriousness about her. That impressed me very much.” Lerman has forgotten most of her composition work at Bennington: “I can only guess that my stuff was just incredibly rudimentary. My frustration with Bennington was why didn’t they take me where I was at?” She added, “I just remember that I never felt like I reached anybody...at all.” Lerman felt at odds with the teaching style at Bennington, which expected students to fit into a particular mold especially in the arts departments. Ultimately, “It was a bad match,” she said (Dec. 1, 2003).

Wittman didn't at the time discern Lerman's unhappiness. Lerman herself was still searching for ways to articulate what she wanted to do with dance and with her life.

Wittman said:

[Liz] was coming out of a classical ballet background and I think because of the turbulence at the time, she was questioning everything about her classical background and wanted to find out more about modern dance. Even then, I think she was 17 ... It was a big political awakening during those years (Sept. 22, 2003).

For Lerman politics were indeed part of her awakening. But a personal awakening, and an introduction, ultimately changed her life. One weekend, a group of Bennington girls, as the women typically referred to themselves, drove over to MIT to attend a conference on urban planning. There Lerman, a sophomore, with long dark hair and a hunger for the political discussions she remembered so vividly as part of her life back home in Milwaukee, met an MIT senior, Arnold Kramer. The two quickly became a pair, infatuated both with each other and with the idea of being in love.

Kramer remembered weekend drives to Bennington:

I used to drive out from MIT in my little 1964 Volkswagen to see her. I had such intense feelings about her that when I would arrive in Bennington, the air became pink in my mind. It was really clear and I was really passionate about her. And it took a long time to get over that (Oct. 27, 2003).

Lerman and Kramer married in 1967 in Milwaukee, when Lerman was 20, Kramer, 23. Her parents were ecstatic; his mother cried. That summer they moved to Washington, where Kramer took a job at the U.S. Public Health Service.

Back in Washington, Liz Lerman reconnected with her first dance teacher, Ethel Butler, and began taking classes with her again right away. She took a job with an academic publisher in D.C. "I think I was just doing what I was supposed to do. I think

I was also excited because I was supposed to be excited. I was going to try hard and carry this [marriage] out” (Dec. 1, 2003). Every Friday she tried to clean the apartment and make a chicken dinner. Lerman worked, she took dance classes and, as she promised her mother-in-law, she took care of Arnie. But the marriage wasn’t meant to be. Lerman was feeling unsettled, uneasy with her choices, she wanted something more, but was unsure of what that could be. Kramer remarked that he didn’t marry a dancer, but someone who used to dance. Yet Lerman was always a dancer, even when she wasn’t dancing and taking class she still approached her life as a dancer and identified herself in that light. “I felt I was beginning to articulate ... that I had always wanted to change the world,” she said (Dec. 1, 2003).

I was trying to see if dancing wasn’t it, then was there some other way. I was so unhappy at Bennington and when I went to Brandeis in the history program, I felt like the history program had a particular way of teaching history that [also] didn’t work for me (Dec. 1, 2003).

What didn’t work for Lerman finally became a moment of revelation, giving her the tools to seek out what did work, to unearth what was missing so she could begin to build her life surrounded by the elements and issues that mattered most to her. Eventually, in order to complete her undergraduate degree, she convinced the dance department at the University of Maryland to accept her transfer credits from both Bennington and Brandeis. It took Lerman just a year to earn her degree. During that time she studied with professor and choreographer Meriam Rosen, then-guest artist Daniel Nagrin, who taught improvisation, and completed other requirements.

“She was in my group forms class,” Rosen recalled. “I remember that she did some work on Coltrane’s music. She was very interested in jazz at that time. And she did a work called, I believe, ‘Junk Dances.’” “Junk Dances” was just as it sounded, a

work that filled the stage of the campus dance studio with an assortment of collected junk. Aside from the choice of junk, Rosen was impressed with the wide-ranging musical interests Lerman's student projects exhibited, an influence Lerman credits to her musician/composer brother, Richard. "I remember that it was very different from anything else that had been going on in our department, at least at that time," Rosen said. "And I was very impressed with her from the start." Rosen remembered Lerman's intelligence and also her maturity, which set her apart from the younger, unmarried undergraduates. Rosen was struck by the lack of choreographic influences in Lerman's work. Most student work, especially early student work, resembles that of the student's mentors. That was not the case with Lerman (Sept. 5, 2003).

Lerman graduated from Maryland in 1970 and in the fall took a job as a history teacher at Sandy Spring Friends School, a private Quaker school out in the then-country of Olney, Maryland. The marriage was already on rocky ground. Lerman began spending more time in dance classes, serving as Butler's assistant and demonstrator.

Her husband Arnold Kramer said:

I think that I was jealous. And dance, once she got started again, completely engulfed her and she engulfed it. You know being a dancer is a big commitment of time and energy. And I was perhaps a little envious and jealous. I felt like I was competing for her with dance (Oct. 27, 2003).

Time Lerman didn't spend dancing, first at Maryland, later at Butler's studio, at the Dance Project downtown and at other venues, she spent immersing herself in journal writing. Kramer remembered stacks of bound journals his wife kept on the bookshelves of their apartment.

The two moved to an on-campus apartment at Sandy Spring, which then was a high school with a day and residential program. Lerman loved teaching history, but she

loved teaching dance as well. Soon enough she was doing both. The Sandy Spring campus became her studio and her experimental theater. Her students, her fellow faculty members, even the administrators, became her willing dancers. There were “Moon Dances,” done purposely at night outside on the grass, so no one, especially not the teenage boys, would be embarrassed. There was a “Snow Dance,” equally celebratory and communal, and a humorous dance about cars and traffic performed in a local shopping center parking lot.

At Sandy Spring, Lerman got her first inkling of what an ideal community could be like. Many of the students lived on campus, as well as a number of teachers, including Lerman. The setting was rural, tree-filled and bucolic, and the students were mostly bright and eager to learn. And Lerman was eager, too, to discover how to teach them. Hired as a history teacher, from the outset, Lerman taught differently than most high school history teachers of the time. History was not dry and dull dates and facts meant to be regurgitated on tests and essays. Lerman turning to the influences of her Brandeis history professors, made history live for her students, in a manner that pleased the headmaster and swayed some of the other teachers to her techniques.

The unspoken philosophy of the school was that teachers could teach anything as long as they got the kids excited enough that they wanted to learn more. She taught as if history was in each student’s reach and assigned them to conduct their own original research sending them over to the Friends Home, a nearby Quaker retirement center, where they experienced oral history research on their own. She incorporated dance, music and the arts into her lessons and, after her first year, Lerman was no longer teaching history, she was teaching dance. The headmaster was so pleased that he

became intent on putting up a building to house Lerman's high school dance enterprise. "That's where I put together a lot of my ideas about community, the relationship with dance to community," Lerman said. "And I loved being in a Quaker environment. It was really wonderful to be in a spiritual community, particularly that one. It was very exciting" (April 26, 1987). The Quaker environment also paralleled Lerman's political activism, for Quakers are traditionally anti-war activists and during the 1970s both students and faculty at the school often participated in peace marches and pickets at draft registration sites. Ari Preuss, now head of the history department at the school, in the 1970s taught German. He said, "I used to take them over, the kids, used to take kids all the time to the military industrial complex, we used to protest the draft. The Quakers were against the draft, we used to protest at the post office ... all sort of things" (Nov. 24, 2003).

At that time, the student body and faculty attended a daily traditional Quaker meeting each morning. There were no prayers, only silence, until someone was moved to speak. The topics could range from what was going on in classes and on campus to political and social issues. Preuss remembered those meetings:

People come and sometimes nobody says anything until announcements at the end. Sometimes you have what we call a popcorn meeting. Somebody comes up with something, somebody else you know comes up. You're not supposed to answer or put anybody down. But sometimes they all have the same sort of thing, same sort of concerns [to express]. When there's something or somebody's died, whenever people want to express [they can]. If there's something jubilant or ... it's a nice way to express. It's a real spiritual group. (Nov. 24, 2003).

This cohesive, spiritual community intrigued Lerman. Later, when she returned from a stint in New York, she became sporadically involved in a young Jewish community, Fabrengen, a collective group of young, professional, liberal-minded Jews, who met for

Jewish holiday celebrations, religious services and classes on a wide variety of topics related to Jewish practice, values and culture.

Lerman attributed both the communal activist lifestyle at Sandy Spring and at Fabrengen for influencing her developing ideas for a dance-based community organization. “There are Jewish communities that I’ve been a part of, like Fabrengen, with whom I totally share a worldview,” she said.

It’s an activist view. And Quakers are activists, too. I mean there are Quaker communities that are totally contemplative, but that is not true of this particular school. And I think it’s that piece of it: that relationship to spirituality and action in the world as opposed to spirituality and making a perfect life for oneself. That’s not too interesting for me. No (April 26, 1987).

Lerman, though, had her fill of Sandy Spring. Her marriage to Arnie was over. There was really nothing to tie her to the Washington, D.C., area. By the time Lerman left Sandy Spring after three years, the dance program was thriving and additional teachers had to be hired to replace her. Still even more notable, the headmaster had a cavernous dance studio built on the wooded canvas just for Lerman’s classes. But teaching, even teaching dance, wasn’t enough. She still needed to answer some essential questions for herself about dance and how dance could become part of her life in the most complete way. The only place she felt she could do that was New York.

Chapter 5: Talking Matters: ‘New York City Winter’ (1974)

Taking Flight

Lerman describes “New York City Winter,” a 15-minute solo with narrative text, as her first work of conscious choreography. For nine months during 1973-1974, Lerman lived in New York. When she left her teaching position at Sandy Spring Friends School in Maryland at the end of spring semester in 1973, her marriage to Arnold Kramer over, Lerman had to see for herself if she could make it in New York, the world dance capital. “I’d gotten to a certain point in my life,” she said in 1987. “I’d learned a certain amount and I probably needed to, at the time, test myself. I wondered if I did want to be in a company or not. I wasn’t sure about that.” She was sure, however, that she wanted to be a dancer. When she had left Bennington, it may have appeared that she was also leaving dance, and she did for a short while. Her ex-husband, Kramer, had even noted that he didn’t think he was marrying a dancer; at that point Liz was immersed in the study of history and political ideas. But Lerman realized that she couldn’t live without dance. She had to give New York a try, or she would never know if she could make it.

Like her own dance mentor, Florence West, had years earlier, at 25 Lerman headed to New York. She packed her belongings into a friend’s car and they drove up to Manhattan. Lerman sublet a six-floor walkup at Second Avenue and Third Street, which she shared with a roommate. Living on campus at Sandy Spring allowed her to save enough to cover basic living expenses in New York for a year. Lerman began doing what dancers do in New York: taking classes, going to auditions and scrounging for flexible odd jobs to earn money that paid for classes and studio time. New York is a

wonderful and a grueling experience for almost any young dancer. There's an intensity to the New York dance world not found anywhere else; many of the classes are the best in the country and the dancers that fill the studios and dressing rooms before and after class, too, are the elite in the field. They're in tip-top physical shape, and the finest among them, who make it through auditions, call backs, and interviews, have a chance to perform. But not all of these dancers perform on New York's world-class stages, City Center, Lincoln Center and the like. There's an entire dance subculture that vies its trade downtown, in converted lofts and warehouse spaces and one-time church sanctuaries. These venues typically attract a hip, modern crowd that doesn't mind the grungier side of risk-taking performances: trekking out to bad neighborhoods, sitting on folding chairs or pillows on the floor, crowding into poorly heated or ventilated spaces and suffering poor sightlines. For a few dollars, an adventurous dancegoer might come across something really phenomenal, as happened in the early 1960s at Greenwich Village's Judson Church, where post-modern dance was born out of an experimental composition class led by Robert Ellis Dunn.

Waking Up

But Lerman arrived a decade later, and the hallmarks of post-modernism had already spread and divided. Dancemakers had experimented with using everyday movement, spoken text, found objects, site-specific performance spaces, happenings and more to push modern dance beyond its love affair with physical technique and compositional form. An outgrowth of the post-modern movement was the idea that everybody and every body could dance. Lerman would pick up on that one-time groundbreaking concept and reshape it as one of her foundational values, her trademark as a teacher and

choreographer and, ultimately, as a public intellectual. Lerman also owes a debt to the Judsonian ideals of found movement and gesturally based choreography; these remain among her primary choreographic tools, which she returns to frequently both in her work with non-dancer community members and in her process-oriented artmaking in the studio.

While still at Brandeis, in January of 1967, Lerman saw Merce Cunningham and John Cage's "How To Pass, Kick, Fall and Run." For this young woman, a former dance major wrestling with whether or not she should or could be a dancer, struggling with whether dance could be more than a technique of perfectly aligned legs and torsos, the Cunningham work was a revelation. Prior to that Lerman had been steeped in the mid-twentieth-century regimented school of modern dance derived from Martha Graham, first through Ethel Butler, then through Florence West and later, at Bennington, through Bill Bales's composition class. Hints of the post-modern revolution going on in New York's Greenwich Village infiltrated even Bennington College in Vermont, but only hints. Cunningham, in Lerman's eyes, was something else altogether. A maverick in his own right, he had left the Graham company in 1945 to explore his own iconoclastic brand of choreography based on chance operations similar to those his friend and collaborator John Cage was using in music. He formed his company in 1953. Tossing coins, rolling dice, and charting a course with randomly assigned patterns became Cunningham's means to determine such factors as tempos, entrances, exits, numbers of repetitions, facings, and when and how steps or phrases occurred – meaning on the floor, in the air, alone or with one or more dancers.

“How to Pass, Kick, Fall and Run” was an exercise in rule following and randomness. At that performance Cage read passages –long or short – but no matter what, they had to end in 60 seconds. He equated the tempi to musical time signatures. For the dancers, choreography was set but each performance differed in what Cage came up with to read. In 1995 in an article for *Movement Research Journal*, Lerman reflected on that first Cunningham experience as revelatory:

Cage is sitting at the side of the stage telling stories. The dancers are moving in a fast clipped abstract form that I had recently been studying at Bennington College, but as yet had not integrated into my Midwest lyrical personal style...Suddenly, or rather during the course of the dance, my whole being woke up. I became alert, almost frantic with energy, and very determined to try dancing again. At the time I didn't have a clue as to why.

Lerman realized in retrospect that what made her awaken – body and mind – at the Spingold Theater in Waltham, Mass., was not so much the dancing, which was beautiful in its abstract, formalist execution with its runs and pauses, twists and skips, but the talking. Real words. Cage sat right up there on the stage with the dancers and he spoke, read, almost chatted, as the dancers circumnavigated the space. She came to understand that later as her ‘ah-ha’ moment. “The talking gave me a way into the movement vocabulary that even I, already seriously trained, could not link with. The stories brought me to a total engagement with the theatrical event” (Lerman, *Movement Research*). For Lerman, that initial realization gave her the idea, the permission even, to use text while she danced. Ultimately it led to her almost continual use of text and narrative in her choreographic work. Her search for a means to fully engage body and mind in a completely theatrical experience led her to use narrative, words and gestures, and it became a foundational way for her to work.

That Lerman found a relationship between Cunningham and Cage's use of abstracted text as accompaniment and her own desire for narrative, was, to say the least, unexpected. Cunningham is a formalist; what he absolutely is not is a storyteller. He has no interest in narrative or even in relating the elements that make up a single work to one another. But Lerman frequently makes conceptual leaps in thinking that others might find unusual. Both Cunningham and Lerman may be iconoclasts, but Cunningham was known for his desire to allow choreography, music, design, costume and lighting to be created independently of one another only to join together in the final stages of the work's creation. Lerman's distinction as a rule-breaker came through in her desire to move from resolutely abstract modern dance to dance that told human stories. This occurred to Lerman at a time when the formalist aesthetic – especially in the New York dance world – ruled.

Cunningham's dances are cool, crisp, sometimes impish, always cerebral, thought provoking. They're not easy to watch for viewers expecting a story or a means to relate stage action with their lives through relational narratives and Cunningham's pieces don't always elicit a gut-felt emotional response. They frequently reflect nature in their random patterns and physical and aural landscapes – derived not in collaboration with other artists – but separately. Another way to think of Cunningham's work is as an abstracted landscape that incorporates sensory elements from sound composition, scenic and costume design and choreographed bodies to create a fully kinesthetic experience. Cunningham chooses to allow his designers and his composers to work independently on elements of the dance; only on the first performance do sets, costumes, music, and choreography meet for the first time. With its unexpected

surprises, chance makes the process exciting for Cunningham. For Lerman, at the time, that aspect of the Cunningham aesthetic didn't matter at all. Later, she would learn to rely on improvisational structures and even chance equations played out in the rehearsal studio to develop her choreographic works, but at this point, Cunningham's program was most meaningful for giving her the idea that text, spoken word, could play a role, instill meaning, in modern dance, at least for her.

New York Struggles

Lerman's year in New York ended after nine months. It was an eye-opening nine months where she got a taste, sometimes bitter, of what it meant to be a struggling dancer trying to make it in New York's downtown dance scene. Before she left Washington, Jan Van Dyke, a popular teacher, studio owner and choreographer -- one of the mainstays of the young but burgeoning D.C. modern dance scene -- had given her student and fellow teacher Lerman a valuable piece of advice. Lerman recalled: "Jan Van Dyke's last words to me, which I will always thank her for, were, 'If you don't like it and you choose to leave, you're not a failure.' Which is what I now say to absolutely every dancer I know who goes to New York."

Lerman grappled in New York, both physically and existentially. "I think really what was going on for me was that I was saying goodbye to a lot of what I thought I was going to do with my life as far as dancing," she said (1987). She tried everything from experimental and post-modern classes in the East Village, to tap classes at Carnegie Hall and acrobatics in a class filled with budding performers and actors who played "Sesame Street" characters. Lerman found the opportunity of working with

dance-theater-music artist Meredith Monk cold and unforgivingly spiritless. “I essentially tried out many things there and took a look at the dance world pretty well,” she said. “I decided that I didn’t like it.” But it wasn’t dance that disenchanted Lerman, it was the world in which dance resided – particularly New York, with its hierarchical rules, its high-status and low-status companies and choreographers, its merciless practice of auditioning and rejecting masses of young, eager dancers with a curt ‘thank you.’

“I love dance,” Lerman emphasized. “I mean I wasn’t going to get that thing mixed up. I had previously dealt with the fact that dance wasn’t the problem,” referring to her struggles at Bennington and in her brief marriage. “The problem,” Lerman discovered, “was organized professionalism.”

This is something my dad used to talk to me a lot about [regarding] the Jews. My father would always say, ‘Don’t confuse Judaism with the organized structure.’ Helpful advice because it’s true in dance, too. So I wasn’t struggling any longer with my inherent love for dance. (April 26, 1987).

Lerman’s new struggle was with how to create a dance culture that satisfied her needs for community and social activism, political and personal expression, narrative and dramatic structure.

She quickly caught on to the unwritten rules of dance in New York and what budding dancers and choreographers needed to do to get seen and produced. “To me there were all these people running around taking zillions of technique classes a day, calling themselves dancers and as far as I was concerned they weren’t anywhere near in touch with what was the essence of dance.” Some dancers chose one studio or teacher/choreographer to align themselves with and took classes there exclusively.

Others spread themselves around, taking classes at a half-dozen studios a week, the better opportunity to perhaps get noticed and invited to understudy or audition. At one point choreographer Daniel Nagrin invited Lerman to join his small modern company, but after Lerman watched a performance, she found the work wasn't interesting enough to satisfy her intellectually.

"I found myself drawn to wanting to make dances for a lot of the non-technical dancers in my classes," she said. "I was taking a tap class over at Carnegie Hall and it was filled with these 50- and 60-year-old [women] and I thought they were amazing!" In the East Village, Lerman's apartment shared a block with a group of Hell's Angels motorcycle gang members and these big, burly tough guys, with their studded leather jackets, intrigued Lerman. "And I kept watching these guys. They'd get on their motorcycles and they'd go to the corner store to get their ice cream and they'd come home, ice cream bags in their teeth" That incongruity captured Lerman's imagination, but at that point not quite her nerve: "I really wanted to get them to be in this dance and I wanted to get little tricycles," she laughed, thinking of them riding three-wheeled trikes rather than Harleys. She realized how far out of line her ideas were in the New York dance environment of the time: "Clearly the imagery that was operating for me was not imagery I felt I could exactly experiment with in New York City. I didn't feel that I'd have the freedom to really explore that when I was in New York." She continued, describing herself as a 25 year old: "I can get pushed off my track by other people's comments and I didn't think I had the strength, particularly at that age, to withstand any misunderstandings of my work. Plus, I didn't know how to do it anyway." (April 26, 1987).

'New York City Winter' at St. Mark's Church

But that New York year, whittled down to nine months when Lerman decided in the spring to return to Washington (Van Dyke's advice a comforting thought), netted her one dance, "New York City Winter." She performed it at a poetry series at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery at East 10th Street and Second Avenue. The next day Lerman left town. The work wasn't reviewed there, but subsequently Lerman performed it in Washington, D.C., and on modest tours, and it remained in her repertory until 1987, when she performed it one last time at the Dance Exchange's New York "Fall Events" season at Dance Theater Workshop. At the time she felt it fitting to retire the work in the city of its origin. She was then 40, and performing a work about a naïve go-go dancer certainly had its challenges, especially to her body image, as Lerman bumped and jiggled in a bikini, one breast exposed.

"New York City Winter" was derived from Lerman's own experience as a go-go dancer in a New Jersey bar. She worked the go-go gig briefly to earn some quick, easy cash. She heard about the job from a classmate in her acrobatics class and, although Lerman, had arrived in New York with enough savings to cover her basic expenses, she wanted to splurge, so she took the job. As a work "New York City Winter" is humorous, wry and, in some moments, even insightful. Lerman's brother, composer Richard Lerman, mixed the soundtrack, a collage of mid-'70s music – Barry White, a bit of Beatles – plus a snippet of classical music. Lerman crafted the narrative monologue and the choreography, which are performed simultaneously, words and dance. As her first choreographed work it was her earliest foray into combining text and movement on stage. The text she developed improvisationally along with the

movement, working alone in the rehearsal studio before setting it down on paper as a script.

The piece begins as she enters stylishly mod wearing brown leather go-go boots and a white faux-fur mini coat, the actual coat that took her through that New York winter. Cool, hip, urban, she teasingly flashes us a peek-a-boo look at her crotch along with her playful smile. The work unfolds in four seamless sections – “Inside the Port Authority,” “Inside the Ladies Room,” “Outside With the Boys” and “Home” – as Lerman learns what it’s like to be paid to dance in a gaudy bikini under the flashing disco lights. “So I get on the bus and ride out to the Jersey suburbs,” she begins, her voice, small, girlish, with slightest mid-western flatness in her pronunciation. She puts on a tough-girl look and assumes a wide-legged, cowboy stance, but at the same time defensively clutches her collar tight against her throat. “I said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Over there,’” as she jerks her head. She has arrived at a seedy nightclub, maybe Manny’s or Paul’s or the Big Apple; she tells us she doesn’t remember the name, or maybe she does and doesn’t want anyone to know too much.

Much of this piece is theater: Lerman applies make up, removes her coat, talks to the club manager, the club patrons, and confessionally to the audience. She uses short, brief sentences and reenacts dialogue in equally telescoped fashion. She says, with the relish of a kid in a castle, of the ladies’ bathroom: “It’s all mine, cement floors, toilet, one light bulb.” There, in the space she just created with her spare description, she smears on clown-white makeup, bright-red lipstick and plops a ratty curly wig on top of her own frizzy, brown top knot. The audience is with her, laughing at the

incongruity of this young dancer making herself ugly to dance. “The first thing I think about is Martha Graham,” she confides breathlessly. She approaches the audience,

You’ve seen her movie, ‘A Dancer’s World.’ It’s a seminal dance film for dance aficionados that begins with Graham in her all grandiose glory at her dressing table, applying a dab of make up on her already perfectly painted face, pushing one last hairpin into her fully coifed hair. She’s talking about the nature of art, what it means to be a performer.

Lerman excitedly recollects the film for the viewers, a touch of awe in her voice. The bitter irony is apparent: Graham in that film was preparing to set foot on stage to dance in one of her famously Greek tragedies before a concert hall of high-paying patrons; Lerman stands in an imagined bare-bulbed bathroom, smearing on greasy makeup, readying to dance on a table in a sleazy go-go joint. “Lerman’s impish looks and sassy movement style,” *Washington Post* dance critic Alan M. Kriegsman wrote on a repeat performance of the work, “together with a certain nerviness and underlying melancholy, give her work a distinctive, sad-funny appeal” (Kriegsman, 1975).

Lerman talks about her grandmother: “She paid for my ballet lessons and also my leotards.” There she puts on a pair of strappy platform sandals: “I’ve been thinking a lot about my grandmother, my mother and me and that this is what happened to the way we look in our family.” Bitingly funny but unsparingly on target, Lerman skewers the needy desire of women who make themselves presentable by altering their appearance. But Lerman projects a hopeful demeanor, after all she’s about to go out and dance, her first paying gig, no matter that it’s in a seedy bar. She sees the glass as half full: “I look in the mirror and I think about all the other girls in all the other bars,” she shouts over the rising, pumping beat of ‘70s music, sounding like a rabble-rousing

union organizer: “Passaic! Union City! Brooklyn! Secaucus! And we are a community!” There, standing on a chair she removes that ratty mini coat, revealing a sequined bikini, one breast poking through a cut out in the bra top.

“I think we’re ready now,” she bravely tells the unseen club manager. Music intensifies, disco lights flash and there she is shaking her hips, thighs jiggling, parsing out Rosalind Russell calendar-girl poses, wishing for a sex-kitten persona. But this isn’t Lerman’s forte; she tries different moves: side leg lifts seated in the chair; *plies* and *rond de jambes*, classic ballet warm ups, clutching the chair as a barre; a pelvis-thrusting Graham contraction done with legs planted wide apart on the floor. Then it’s jumping jacks and jogging. She pinches at her body fat before undulating into an amorphous modern bit of muddled movement as the music meanders into space agey, bubbly sounds. She curves then opens her torso into a broad-stanced stand, traverses across the back of the stage, flings her arms then stops, suddenly.

“That’s the last dance,” she declares. “You might think there’s more, but really, there isn’t.” Quickly, Lerman bundles herself up in that white mini-coat and then she’s outside, talking to the imaginary bar patrons: “I said ‘no.’ I already have a boyfriend.” Next, Lerman is at home, sitting in that same chair that earlier served as her dressing table, her go-go platform, her ballet barre. Depleted, spent from a night of physical and emotional carnage, selling her body, her temple of dance in a seedy bar has ravaged her youthful eagerness. Slouched over, knees together, feet splayed out beneath her, she pulls a china teacup from her slouchy bag and takes a comforting sip. Finally, she huddles forward. No longer is this dancer, this persona Lerman created on stage, bright, keen on trying something new. She’s lost something selling her body, not for art, but

for commerce. She's paid her dues, so to speak, but in the process she's become not wiser, but jaded, deflated.

Speaking of Dance

"New York City Winter" is sharp and funny, poignant and even political. While the piece didn't garner notice in its one-night-only run in 1974 at St. Mark's Church, it did attract attention and comment on subsequent performances in Washington and other cities. In Richmond, dance critic and choreographer Frances Wessells wrote,

"New York City Winter," the story of a go-go dancer, had the audience in uproarious laughter even while it cut you to the quick with its pathos....[T]he gut reaction comes from the impact of the post-performance let-down at the end when we see what the real woman is going through under all the fakery. This is done with one carefully chosen gesture ... that tears at your heart (1975).

As part of a performance with the Washington Area Feminist Theater in December 1975 at the Hand Chapel of Mount Vernon College in northwest D.C., "New York City Winter" was part of a collaborative program of three choreographers – Lerman, Meade Andrews and Karen Bowie. Lerman's solo opened the evening, which was titled "Quartet" for its four works. In the long-defunct Washington, D.C., feminist magazine *Off Our Backs*, two critics wrote of the political leanings they observed in the work:

Liz Lerman explored beyond the usual demeaning paradox: the need for money opposing obvious exploitation [sic]. The whole piece came from a true experience but not just reminiscence, it is well worked through. The piece is not simply vented anger at the situation which forces women, who want to use their dance training, into such a corner (Kelly and Stevens, 1975).

The writers continue, examining the feminist issues this work describes:

Although it is impossible not to be oppressed by the situation, she is on top of it. Liz has really worked out her feelings toward the experience. It is stark and tense and so realistic and blatant a great deal of the audience, during the

performance I saw, didn't know how to react to it. But Liz was totally in control of the tension and formed it into a potent piece of dance (Kelly and Stevens, 1975).

Lerman left New York realizing that she wanted to be an expressive artist, she wanted to build a community for dance, but she was immersed in a world that, at that period, had eschewed expressionism and community for formalist ideals. By the mid-1970s the Judson movement with its everyday, community values was waning. Dancers began to again form single-choreographer companies rather than collectives, but some Judson inventions – emphasis on simplicity of movement, desire for simplicity of elements in performance ranging from practice clothes as costumes to no-frills stage design, and an adventurous approach to performance spaces – remained. Also holding out from Judson, movement wasn't strictly polished, slick or precious and the body became a work horse of sorts, especially in forms like contact improvisation, the off-the-cuff style where dancers move and riff like jazz musicians, playing their own bodies, balancing, lifting and sharing their body weight with one another in a no-holds-barred sport-like venture. Formalist ideas, borrowed from the popular minimalist trend in new music, influenced by composers like Steve Reich and Terry Riley, began to filter into the work of choreographers who emphasized simplicity of steps performed to complex or rigid rhythmic patterns as geometries of bodies unfurled into the stage space (Jowitt). These values were clearly not Lerman's. She would have, perhaps, found a more comfortable fit in the earlier Judson experimenters and throughout her career she continued to rely on Judsonian ideals to enunciate her dance values. In fact, Lerman expresses these values in a series of questions she began articulating in the late 1990s both in her speeches and in her company promotional material, though she has

been exploring these ideas since her first work: “Who gets to dance? Where is the dance happening? What is it about? Why does it matter?” It sounds like a post-modern manifesto. Lerman’s genius here was to make post-modernist concepts accessible for audiences of all types, not just hip East Village downtowners.

“New York City Winter” already hints at areas where Lerman would later concentrate on articulating her dance values. She wanted dance to speak, not just literally through the spoken-word narratives she seemed so interested in writing and delivering, but she wanted dance to speak to the heart and soul of the matter. She wanted her dances to be about something more than just the technique, the skill and facility of the dancers moving beautifully through her choreographed space. She wanted her dances to awaken something within. In “New York City Winter,” the dance was an awakening and expression of feminist sensibilities about women’s body images, women’s need to earn a living with dignity, and women’s desire for a community of like-minded women – that line about a community of dancers in bars around New York is both wildly funny and wonderfully prescient in relation to the community of dancers Lerman would begin forming in years to come in Washington.

Lerman wasn’t the first dancer to speak, many post-moderns and Judson Church dancers used spoken word, even Cunningham’s use of Cage’s spoken word, though not meant as narrative device related to the choreography, is an example.⁵ One long-time observer and critic of dance in Washington, D.C. and internationally, George Jackson, said, “Liz was not the only one. There was a time when a lot of the modern dance choreographers in Washington were talking more than dancing” (Sept. 5, 2003). But

⁵ On the West Coast, Joe Goode, a like-minded San Francisco-based dance-theater artist, was also beginning to use spoken word, voices, poetry and song performed by the dancers in his work..

Lerman would soon become known for being a talking and talkative dancer. Maida Withers, a professor of dance at George Washington University where Lerman would soon enroll and eventually earn a masters degree, said that Lerman's use of text wasn't uncommon in Washington, D.C. Withers cited her own text-based dances, sometimes with original narratives, sometimes with words contributed by local poets or writers (Sept. 25, 2003). Others, too, in D.C. during the 1970s, like Jan Van Dyke and Meade Andrews, brought words onto the dance stage. Lerman, perhaps, used narrative and spoken word to effect so frequently that she became most associated with the talking-dancing style in Washington.

Lerman's use of text, especially later when she devised narratives based on government reports or historical accounts ("Nine Short Dances ..." and "Russia: Footnotes to History" are examples), became her calling card. Her narrative talking style, too, lent her work a greater political visibility along with its narrative arc. There was no question to audience members that these dances were politically motivated when someone up on stage was reading excerpts from a U.S. government budget report, or rattling off predicted death tolls during a presumed nuclear war. The historically based texts, too, had their own thematic goals and power in the body of Lerman's works. This was the choreographer's way into dealing openly, publicly, with hot-button political and social issues that interested her. Her use of words, then, in tandem with her choreographic material, became a way for her dances to take on a larger, more targeted effect. This dance-theater work, too, became an early step for her into the realm of public intellectualism. Lerman, a self-admitted shy wallflower growing up, trained herself to speak on stage.

When her choreography, either for the senior citizens of the Dancers of the Third Age or in other politically minded Dance Exchange works, attracted further attention, she gained much practice on the public speaking circuit, addressing audiences during post-performance discussions and talking to journalists for newspaper and television reports, mostly based on her work with seniors. She has rarely turned down an opportunity to speak because she has said she wants most for her work to be understood. In 1992 Lerman even testified before Congress to the House Select Committee on Aging's Subcommittee on Human Services about her experiences founding the Dancers of the Third Age.

Lerman has continued to write and to speak on the nature of her work as a dancer and how she believes that dance and the arts are essential to building community, educating audiences about political and social issues and making political statements. Lerman has a keynote address, "Hiking the Horizontal," an intriguing talk about art, life and their intersections, which elicits tremendous praise wherever she delivers it, and since about 1992 she has spoken to arts presenters and funders, scientists and business school alumni, managing editors and orchestra directors. No matter the venue, no matter the audience, Lerman holds her listeners rapt while she ignites within them ideas for instituting fundamental changes in their staid ways of thinking. Lerman, in effect, from her first choreographed work using narrative elements, began training herself for what would three decades later become her foray into the world of the public intellectual.

Chapter 6: Jewish Matters: ‘The Good Jew?’ (1991)

Return to Washington, D.C.

On Lerman’s return to Washington, she enrolled in George Washington University where she took a \$2,000-a-year graduate assistantship. She continued to make dances and worked with G.W. professor Maida Withers’ company. Soon though, Lerman took a hiatus from classes to return to Wisconsin, this time Madison where her parents had moved, because doctors discovered a cancer overtaking her mother Anne’s liver.

Lerman expected to stay only a few weeks, the prognosis was that bad, but weeks stretched into months and Liz spent hours in her mother’s bedroom, sitting, talking and not talking. Throughout the winter of 1975 she watched her mother, then 60, die. Today Lerman can’t recall specific conversations she had with her mother at that time, she remembers instead a feeling of closeness, intimacy that forged bonds even as Anne was slipping away. Before Anne Lerman died, Liz produced a concert in Madison, but by then her mother was too sick to attend. Lerman recalled that at that program she spoke from the stage about her mother’s illness and even led the audience in a seated dance, eliciting a few movement gestures from the onlookers. This was a rudimentary step for the young, untested choreographer; she was still seeking a way to put her ideas about the possibilities of dance into action. There, as her mother lay dying, she was beginning to articulate the humane and very human concepts that would later become her trademark.

Anne Lerman died in March 1975. And even though her death was expected, planned for through counseling and a social worker’s assistance, the family was bereft.

Lerman stayed on through the summer, spent time alone in the woods at the family cabin, sewed and thought, but danced little.

By the end of the summer, Lerman returned to Washington, to the dance program at G.W., and she began laying the foundation for the Dance Exchange. But first she was determined to make a dance about her mother and felt she needed older bodies, senior citizens, to perform in it. That fall she walked into the Roosevelt Hotel for Seniors on 16th and V Streets, NW, and offered to teach dance classes to any takers. Eventually, classes became so popular Lerman began hiring fellow G.W. students to teach and shuttle the seniors to classes as the program expanded to other sites. Some of these older students became part of Lerman's larger group work, "Woman of the Clear Vision," which honored her mother's life and shepherded her into death. A few others stayed on to found what would become the popular Dancers of the Third Age, a troupe of senior adults and young professional dancers that performed in schools, senior centers and theatrical venues in Washington and eventually throughout the East Coast.

Lerman also discovered Fabengen, an unaffiliated Jewish lay-led organization, part of the burgeoning Jewish renewal or *chavurah* movement, which by the late 1960s had made waves in major urban centers, including Boston, San Francisco and New York. Washington's community attracted young, college-educated, but not necessarily religiously educated, Jews of all backgrounds who found themselves in the nation's capital at jobs in government agencies or burgeoning non-profit organizations.

Fabengen was a lay-lead community and thrived on the talents of its participants. One, a young scholar named Arthur Waskow was working on his dissertation. He taught courses on philosophy that featured readings from Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the

leading Conservative Jewish thinkers, and Herbert Marcuse, a Marxist theorist, for example. In a rented three-story walk-up off Dupont Circle, Friday night services attracted hordes of young Jews, who sat on pillows and sang to welcome in the Sabbath bride and then sang some more about social justice as guitars accompanied them. Lerman felt comfortable in this environment and later taught some movement classes based on traditional Jewish texts there and at Fabrengen's countryside retreats. Under auspices of another group, the Jewish Study Center, she led a weekly improvisational movement class called the Dancing Dybbuks. Lerman found a world-view that aligned with her own at Fabrengen, and a community that reminded her in many ways of the Quaker activist community she experienced at Sandy Spring. She said, "That relationship to spirituality and action in the world, as opposed to spirituality and [contemplation], making a perfect life for oneself" is what she found most attractive at Fabrengen (1987).

The Dance Exchange

By 1976, Lerman saw a need in the Washington, D.C., dance community that she believed she could fill. She began the process of creating an organization. Like many of her efforts, this one, too, was collaborative and involved countless open-ended conversations with friends and colleagues. Former D.C. choreographer and Lerman dancer Sally Nash remembered speaking with her friend Lerman about foundational ideas of the Dance Exchange while Lerman was still in Madison the year her mother died. Dance Exchange was created to support a community of like-minded individuals. In Washington at that time Jan Van Dyke's Dance Project, on 18th Street, NW, offered a complement of technical and experimental modern dance classes and monthly

performances by D.C. area dancers and a few out-of-towners. But Van Dyke, who had hired Lerman as a teacher, saw the distinct differences in their approaches: “I wanted to teach dance; Liz wanted to teach people,” Van Dyke observed (Sept. 29, 2003). A few other studios, including Butler’s, and some university dance departments, namely Maryland and G.W., were also part of the young, modern dance scene.

That same year, 1976, Lerman founded the Dance Exchange, a name she settled on she said even though she felt it connoted commerce, like the similarly sounding Stock Exchange. But exchange was what Lerman desired, so there really wasn’t any other choice. Initially, her name wasn’t appended to the organization’s. It took a few years, and the urging of board members who saw Lerman’s developing reputation as a boon, to convince her that Liz Lerman and the Dance Exchange should become synonymous. “When I began to make the Dance Exchange, I felt there were a lot of similarities between Fabrengen and the Dance Exchange,” Lerman said (1987).

Some of my ideas about community at that time and what I was trying to do with the Dance Exchange have changed since those early days. But initially I was as interested in forming a community through dance as I was in making an arts organization. And that hasn’t changed (1987).

Lerman acquired the right contacts to set in motion the legal underpinnings of the organization. She found a space on the 1400 block of Rhode Island Avenue, NW, in a complex of arts organizations that gallery owner Margery Goldberg called Zenith Square. Aside from the Dance Exchange, there were studios and workshops, galleries and Joy Zinoman’s actors’ studio, later to become Studio Theater. A group of dedicated dancers, some fellow students from G.W., others students from her classes at Dance Project, joined together to prep the space, clean up, paint, lay down a wood dance floor

and whatever else needed to be done. It was a moment in community building, a barn-raising of sorts, in the middle of a decaying urban neighborhood, post white flight. Soon classes began to fill up with young, college-educated professionals living in Washington, who worked for expanding government agencies and non-profits. During the mid-1970s, the health and fitness boom was just beginning but the period was long before the propagation of exercise clubs on every city block and yoga and Pilates classes in every health club rendered modern dance classes obsolete. Back then, in the mid-1970s, to take an after-work or Saturday dance class was unusual, a rare treat for both body and spirit. Lerman and some of her teachers also taught lunch-hour classes in meeting rooms and basements at a handful of government agencies, which also attracted curious students. The Dance Exchange offered everything from Lerman's popular people-based modern technique classes, to Melvin Deal's African dance and drumming to improvisation and even disco, tapping into the demands of students eager to try something, anything new that moved and moved them.

As the Dance Exchange grew, those who Lerman thought initially would be partners or at least collaborators, wanted more – more pay for teaching, more studio time, more recognition, more opportunities to perform – than she felt they deserved. For a while everyone worked hard at building and maintaining the community, but no one worked harder or longer than Lerman, who at one point was teaching upwards of 20 classes a week, while still choreographing and rehearsing new works and overseeing some of the administrative tasks.

'Ms. Galaxy and Her Three Raps With God'

At this time, Lerman began choreographing a large group piece, "Ms. Galaxy and Her Three Raps With God." It was not her first large group work: She had done those massive dances for students at Sandy Spring, and a year and a half earlier, in December 1975, she premiered "Woman of the Clear Vision," the groundbreaking work crafted in memory of her mother. That was her first piece to incorporate older adults drawn from classes Lerman taught at the Roosevelt Hotel. A dance-theater work for a cast of nearly 50 dancers, singers, musicians and actors, "Ms. Galaxy" examined Lerman's Eastern European *shtetl* heritage – the life she imagined her grandfather Ben, Berel in Yiddish, lived in pre-revolutionary Russia. In three parts the work looked at Jewish folk customs and supernatural beliefs surrounding death, marriage and eventually emigration and assimilation. Accompanied by a klezmer trio and vocalist Myra Tate singing in Yiddish, Lerman drew from traditional Jewish dances and Jewish folk characters: spirits, rabbis, even Elijah the prophet were incorporated into the mix.

In the work Lerman wins a chance to talk directly to God, but wonders how to open the conversation. She relies on a personal narrative, as in earlier works, spoken and danced. One critic wrote, "While she quite clearly expresses all the pain this thing has caused her, she can't quite free herself from the hold it has on her ... she remains bound by a connection to the historical tradition" (Edelson 1977). The "thing" is the yoke of Jewish tradition, with all its ramifications for Lerman, a Reform Jew with little want or need of its constraints. "Ms. Galaxy," then, is a tug-of-war between tradition and change, between old country ways and new world innovations. It was the first time Lerman dealt openly, artistically, with her questions concerning religion and power,

culture and assimilation. It wouldn't be the last though, for Lerman has continued to return to her Jewish roots and to issues she relates to her vision of Reform Judaism with its belief in social justice – the vision she gleaned from her father Phil Lerman's own activist life creed.

Later, Lerman delved more deeply into Jewish texts and what she felt were anti-feminist ideals embedded in *halacha*, Jewish law, with “Songs and Poems of the Body” (1982), which used excerpts from a Jewish code of law, the *Shulchan Aruch*, and the sensuous biblical Song of Songs. She then traced her Russian Jewish family background in “Russia: Footnotes to History” (1986). She broadcast her concerns for the environment with a prophetic timbre in “Atomic Priests: Coming Attractions” (1987). She sought ways and means of expressing thankfulness in “Shehechianu” or “The Sustenance Project” (1995-1997). And, in *Hallelujah* (1999-2002), she journeyed the country seeking out praise-worthy moments and communities to incorporate into her ideal of a contemporary, biblically scaled song of praise.

“Ms. Galaxy” was her first quintessentially Jewish piece and it served Lerman well in attaching her dance ideals to her Jewish roots, and her Jewish quest for knowledge and acceptance. Growing up Jewish in post-World War II America has been an experience in the dual tropes of assimilation and grasping hold of tradition even as the tradition changes, reinvents itself in this melting pot or tossed salad of a nation. American Jewish culture is something that could not have been imagined before the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth (Whitfield, 12). Yet, by the mid-twentieth century, Jewish artists, writers, composers and choreographers found vibrant inspiration in their Jewish past. In dance,

choreographers like Anna Sokolow, Sophie Maslow and Jerome Robbins at various points turned to their Jewish roots to express and reflect on their cultural and religious heritage for broader mainstream American audiences.

At the turn of the twentieth century, when Liz's Russian-born grandfather Ben Lerman emigrated, waves of like-minded emigrants flocked from Europe to America in a search of freedom and opportunity. Ben Lerman was like many Jews, a model immigrant, who worked hard, sacrificed his needs for those of his young family and assimilated, not so he could succeed – but for the success of his children and grandchildren. In Hebrew the saying *dor l'dor* means from generation to generation and refers to inculcating Jewish values, practices and religious instruction for the young. But from generation to generation holds equally true for cultural and social scripts. And children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants have succeeded admirably in their ancestors' adopted home. In ensuing years these progeny have socially constructed an identity that encompasses a shared history based on the Old Testament; on religious customs observed and spurned; on a shared immigrant ancestral experience and on shared cultural practices. Jewish identity, while rooted in religion, is not solely religious. These are the Jewish ideals and Jewish cultural expressions that reappear regularly in Liz Lerman's choreography.

Though rabbis of the more traditional denominations require that a Jew is either one born of a Jewish mother or one converted according to *halacha*, Jewish law, other definitions of Jew are more malleable, more culturally and socially

constructed, more, perhaps, American. Take Lenny Bruce's brilliant comedy routine, which skewered the traditional distinctions of Jewish identity:

In the literate sense... "goyish" means "gentile." But that's not the way I mean to use it. To me, if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish.

Evaporated milk is goyish even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Spam is goyish and rye bread is Jewish.

Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Mouths are very Jewish. And bosoms. Baton-twirling is very goyish...(Siegel, 8)

Bruce goes on milking laughs at the expense of stereotyped images of Jew and non-Jew, and it's hilarious. But the larger point is that Jewish identity is very much constructed out of experience, shared history, location and cultural practices. Religion isn't beside the point, but it is, in Bruce's eyes, nearly so. This, as well, is an idea Lerman has taken hold of: that her Judaism and her dance are equally relevant to her so why shouldn't she construct an identity that incorporates, that honors, both her heritages. Americans have over the decades of the twentieth century become a people of hyphenated identities: why shouldn't Lerman's identity then, when she chooses, be Jewish and dancer, with apologies to neither camp.

'The Good Jew?'

Jewish identity for children and grandchildren of immigrants can be at once more comfortable and more tenuous than that of their forebears. In 1991, about two years after the birth of her daughter, Anna Clare, Lerman began seriously questioning her Jewish identity and what she would pass on to her daughter. Her question was simple but tough: Am I a good Jew? This became the starting point and, ultimately,

the title for her work, “The Good Jew?” which premiered in Boston produced by the Dance Umbrella for the Jewish-American Dance Festival in the fall of 1991. There Lerman shared a program with another American-Jewish choreographer, Victoria Marks.

“The Good Jew?” touched a raw nerve in the Jewish community. A year earlier a National Jewish Population Study came out with the disheartening news that the Jewish intermarriage rate topped 50 percent. The small, community-based, youth-oriented Jewish renewal movement that peaked in the 1970s wasn’t enough to keep unaffiliated, assimilated Jews in the fold. Lerman, who married storyteller Jon Spelman in 1980, was one among that trend. A decade later now a parent, Lerman heard the call of *dor l’dor*, of generation to generation, and she didn’t know how to answer it for herself or for her daughter. She wondered how to raise Anna Clare as a Jew and how she could do that in a mixed – Spelman was Christian-born, but terms himself a humanist – marriage.

Lerman, who attributes her Jewishness to the social and political activism she learned from her father, said her question was not to ask whether she was Jewish.

In my dad’s generation in Milwaukee, my father’s father having been religious, there was ... no really stimulating wonderfully spiritual rabbi. None to be found. And [because of] that an entire generation of very interested Jews turned their attention to social action. He felt that that was Jewish expression. I mean a whole generation, of which my father was a part. I never knew this so I checked it out with my dad the other night. I called him on the phone and said, ‘Listen, is this true?’ And he said, ‘Yeah, it’s true.’ (1987)

Dor l’dor. Generation to generation. Lerman placed herself firmly in the social activist tradition, a position inherent in the tenets of Reform Judaism, just like her father did.

Reform Judaism was born from the laity, not the rabbinate during the early 18th century in Germany. Since the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment in the latter part of the nineteenth century, this first progressive or liberal stream of Jewish practice has transformed the religion into a multi-denominational one, where today at the dawn of the 21st century every modern Jew in America, not merely the converted who have taken up the nomenclature, is a Jew by Choice. Jewish reformers in Germany reshaped the aesthetic and traditional worship services by altering and abbreviating the liturgy, introducing vernacular sermons and prayers, allowing choral singing and organ accompaniment and rejecting out of hand many of the laws of religious observance. When German immigrants began settling in America in the middle third of the nineteenth century, Reform Jewish practice was the dominant worship system. Reform congregations sprang up in major cities throughout the country and attracted a strong cohort of assimilationist Jews. By 1880, 90 percent or more of American synagogues called themselves Reform. As the next wave of Jewish immigrants, mainly from Eastern Europe, began arriving on America's shores, tensions developed between these more traditionally observant Jews and the high Reform German Jews, whose synagogues differed hardly at all from Protestant cathedrals (Judaica, 23-27). In 1885, at an important gathering of Reform Jewish leaders in Pittsburgh, the infamous Pittsburgh Platform articulated the progressive, nearly radical, view of Judaism as follows:

Today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as sustain and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship

under the Sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state (Siegel, 509).

Reform Jews were at the helm of revisioning Judaism for the modern world. Besides eschewing nearly all of the halachic – religious law – constraints, Reform Jews sought to emphasize moral law rather than traditional observance or even attachment to Israel. Thus Reform Jews were involved in the establishment of a number of important communal and educational institutions, including the YMHA or Young Men's Hebrew Association; the American Jewish Committee, a cross-communal organization, and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, an organization founded in the wake of the Atlanta lynching of Leo Frank, a Jew falsely accused of rape in 1913. The Reform Movement is no longer anti-Zionist and hasn't been since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. In the post-World War II era, prominent Reform Jews became involved in the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War protests and other major liberal, democratic and progressive political and social causes.

So Lerman defined her history, her social activism, her Jewish involvement in the context of the fundamental ideals of progressive, liberal Judaism as articulated by American twentieth century Reform Jews, most notably her father, Phil. With progressive, liberal Judaism, a Judaism that honors the social activist more than the ritual practitioner, comes greater freedom from ritual and law and more choices, as well as more demands on whether or even how one can strive for that “good Jew” status.

Like her acceptance 15 years earlier that dance was the right choice for her, Lerman had no question that she was Jewish. It was her heritage, her cultural background, her religious roots. Her experience growing up Jewish differed greatly

from her mother's California upbringing, partly Jewish but partly Christian Scientist for when Anne married Phil, she wholly took on the yoke of Reform Judaism, for her family and for Phil, even if she herself didn't find fulfillment in synagogue life and many Jewish activities. Liz Lerman said of the issues with which "The Good Jew?" grapples:

The work does not question if I am Jewish. It is about whether I am Jewish enough. It is about identity and assimilation, melting pot or gumbo. It seems to me now, that the questions are relevant not just to Jews, but to each of us in the way we define and claim our ethnicity, our traditions, our rituals and our place in contemporary community (1990).

"The Good Jew?" wore its question mark on its sleeve. As Lerman developed the piece, she brought work-in-progress showings to synagogues, community centers and other organizations, some Jewishly affiliated, others not. After, at panels and discussions, she solicited personal stories, comments, anecdotes and disagreements. At one panel sponsored by the District of Columbia Jewish Community Center, Lerman described her initial rehearsal process:

At the first rehearsal, some non-Jews said, 'I feel on the outside.' My job was to find out how to address that. We [Jews] have a lot to say to other communities. When I make a personal choice it becomes a communal issue of all Jews. It's a question for us all: Women don't feel feminist enough; blacks don't feel black enough. I don't know whether I, as an artist can state personal experiences to others and expect them to relate (panel, October 1990).

"The Good Jew?" was born in Lerman's imagination, with the image of Chassidic men in beards and black coats wagging their fingers at her, the unabashed secular, unaffiliated Jew. She wrote:

There is a huge jury box filled with little men in black garments and long side locks of hair. They are shaking their finger at me. It's because I am dancing on the Sabbath. Sometimes they appear just because I am dancing. Other times they remerge when my husband mentions Christmas, or I start talking about the Middle East. Always, I am not good enough. I have let my people down (press material, 1990).

The piece begins with Lerman, on stage, speaking confessionally, personally, to the audience about her dream, her nightmare, her cold sweat. She is about to go on trial.

The charge: is she a good enough Jew. The work is a fully realized dance-theater piece with a courtroom-styled set by Tom Meyer decorated by stained glass panel windows rising above jurors' chairs and rolling platforms. Music, composed by Andy Tierstein, filters klezmer and Middle Eastern influences, cantorial solos, *niggunim* – wordless Chassidic-style chants – and folk-like melodies, that buffet the dancers from the trial scene to ancient Old Testament scenes, from confessionals to folktales retold. Sung and spoken text includes personal narrative, dialogue between Lerman and her prosecutors, biblical storytelling and an intermittent spoken glossary of Hebrew or Yiddish terms. A repeated motif – two fingers pointing, dipping into an imaginary pot of honey, swiping at tears – binds together folk legends, biblical passages and personal experiences.

Senior dancer Judith Jourdin related the story of a relative, a young Jewish woman, who became involved in an ultra-Orthodox Chasidic sect, but eliminated the vivacious life force from her eyes.

Non-Jewish cast members shared their own experiences. Most viscerally was African-American dancer Boris Willis who stood before the audience and declared: “I’m not unemployed. I’m not on drugs. And I’m not dead.” Unspoken but obviously insinuated was the fact that he was a young black male. At another point he is the ram, about to be sacrificed at the hands of a biblical Abraham, in place of innocent boy-child

Isaac. Like in “Ms. Galaxy,” there’s a wedding scene. This time Amie Dowling flings herself against Lysa Nicholson, clad in a formal white, flouncy gown. Nicholson is the Sabbath Bride, the metaphorical queen Jews have traditionally welcomed in with song and psalm each Friday evening after sundown. Dowling sees a need for adjustments to the bride’s attire; an alteration here, a shorter hem there, for at the end of Dowling’s athletic sequence flinging herself around and atop Nycholson, she relates that her spouse would be a woman – a true break with tradition.

Grey-haired Seymour Rosen portrayed a Groucho Marx-like commentator, telling crusty, old Jewish jokes to break up the serious tone of the work. Tom Truss appeared as a prophet, his long arm grasping upward while a young boy, Daniel Eichner, was the innocent Isaac, slated for sacrifice. Wiry Tom Dwyer served as the dry, wry, disinterested judge in the case but, beginning and end, Lerman was at center stage. It was her life, her soul, on the line. The cast replicated her dreams, her literary explorations, but it was Lerman who must come to terms with Judaism, discover her Judaism, for herself. One Boston dance critic termed Lerman’s work “among the most significant arts ventures we’ve seen in a long time” (Fanger 1991). Debra Cash in *The Boston Globe* called it “a work of extraordinary courage, of unflinching autobiographical exposure” (1991). Critics less wholeheartedly lauded subsequent performances. While Alan M. Kriegsman, critic emeritus for *The Washington Post*, conceded that Lerman’s subjects “may be the crucial topic of our times – everywhere one looks today, the assertion of national, ethnic, religious and group identity seems of burning importance,” he felt the work didn’t fulfill its promise. He concluded:

My problem with the work is that it fails to project the urgency and emotional resonance of the issues it raised. The nonverbal elements,

including the choreography seem to have but glancing relation to the theme, and it's hard to see what light the work as a whole sheds that a panel discussion might not have outshined (Nov. 9, 1991).

The late summer of 1992, the Dance Exchange brought "The Good Jew?" to Jacob's Pillow, the venerable dance festival in Lee, Massachusetts, where the company had worked on its development the previous summer. In the *Village Voice*, Deborah Jowitt found some problems, but also some praiseworthy elements:

Given the scope of the theme, I'm not surprised that 'The Good Jew?' is flawed – often obscure in the structuring of its parallels, in the clarity of its thinking. It's as full of questions and as low in answers as Lerman's excellent brain. What surprises and gratifies me is how engrossing a piece of dance theater it is and how astutely theatrical many of its scenes and devices are (Sept. 15, 1992).

About the time Lerman premiered "The Good Jew?" in October 1991, which was co-commissioned by major presenters in five cities and later was presented at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in Kansas City and Pittsburgh, Jewish identity and continuity were top issues for national Jewish communal leaders.

The same year "The Good Jew?" premiered, civil libertarian and Harvard lawyer Alan Dershowitz came out with his book, *Chutzpah* (Little Brown, 1991), an examination of American Jewry from Dershowitz's very personal perch. He looked at anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, assimilation and a raft of other issues Jews typically see as problems that should be discussed only within the closed circles of the Jewish community. It's the dirty-laundry syndrome writ large. Dershowitz hung his laundry and his ideas out in public, igniting a round of discourse about the place of Jews in American society. *Chutzpah*, an analysis of Jewish assertiveness – at least Dershowitz's brand – became a bestseller. While Dershowitz and Lerman didn't cross paths as she

was creating “The Good Jew?” the broader issues she was dealing with were also Dershowitz’s. Lerman said:

I’m looking for all the threads. How people have associated and expressed their Jewishness, because, ultimately, I think there are two pieces of the question that I’m looking at. One is: What are our private choices? How do we decide what to keep and what we give up in order to join a larger world or not. That feels like a private choice. The second question is: How do we, in our own community, look at each other after we make that choice? That’s the part that I feel that the [Chassidic] finger shaking goes on. The part that says, how could you have made that decision when this is the truer way.... Then the third question is: Do we even discuss that in public? Isn’t that really something that should be discussed behind closed doors? I feel like that ... The Jews have been struggling with this forever and ever, and that other groups in our country are coming to have to struggle with it, too. And that’s why I think that the piece will have an interesting taste and flavor towards the larger questions that American society is facing, not just Jewish culture, but American society as a whole (October 1990).

Lerman was aware from the outset of her work on “The Good Jew?” that this piece wouldn’t sit well with some establishment members of the Jewish community. In fact, none of her earlier Jewish-themed works received much interest or support from Jewish establishment organizations either. Lerman’s Jewish work had always been created and taught on the fringes of that community, at collectives like Fabengen or the Jewish Study Center, in a few selected synagogue social halls, but more likely in church basements and black box theaters outside of the usual Jewish circles. But with “The Good Jew?” in conjunction with the local presenter, Washington Performing Arts Society, the Dance Exchange set up a number of in-progress showings, workshops and discussions at synagogues and Jewish community centers in Lerman’s home base. The initial inkling that the Jewish community was becoming aware of Lerman’s Jewishly inspired art came in the form of a grant from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture for the work. The first time Lerman received a grant from a well-established

Jewish organization, it came almost 15 years after her first overtly Jewish work: “Ms. Galaxy.” Lerman wrote:

In talking with the presenters who are commissioning the projects, I have discussed with them my concern about appearing in their communities with what I think will be a controversial piece, and [I] find the Jewish community just plain upset. I have suggested that the collaborators on the projects, and local Jewish leaders hold a forum in each community to discuss the question “What is a good Jew?” I think this would lead me to some very interesting ideas, and go a long way toward helping each community feel a part of the process and broaden the entire creative endeavor (press material, 1991).

Lerman expected the piece to be inflammatory for the well-established, well-endowed Jewish community. Jewish community federations, mainline synagogues, rabbis and academics who tow the line on Jewish communal issues, she believed, would be disturbed at seeing ‘Jewish dirty laundry’ aired so openly – the “Chutzpah” syndrome of Dershowitz revisited in choreography. She wasn’t concerned about the Orthodox community, as a dancer, a woman and a liberal Jew, she realized early on that there her voice, her ideas would never carry weight there. It was the more assimilated Diaspora of American Jews – Reform and Conservative, Reconstructionist and secular – where Lerman felt that controversy would arise in those mainline denominations.

But one thing Lerman learned from her father, Phil, was never to confuse the establishment with the issue at hand. Sometimes the organization is wrong but the issue is right. She relied on those words when she was a college student struggling with her career choices. She returned to those words in the midst of her work on “The Good Jew?” Lerman was used to being a choreographer working on the fringes of the Jewish community. But she knew she had a message that was relevant and important for that community to hear. Before the work premiered, Lerman expressed a desire for it to be performed at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York, for she saw that setting as a perfect

expression of her acceptance into the Jewish fold from the fringe. Any negotiations for a showing at the 92nd Street Y never came to fruition. Lerman recognized that: “I’ve never been in the majority. I’ve always been in the margins and I’ve been able to forge a strong identity within the margins as a dancer and as a Jew.” But Lerman saw the validity of her Jewish questions and how those could translate for others as well: “I can use my personal experiences for others to relate their own experiences in seeking out their identity” (Oct. 1990). The work received some negative comments from some audience members wherever it was presented, but there was no evidence of a wholesale rejection of Lerman, her ideas or the issues she propagated in “The Good Jew?” If anything, Lerman became better known to the broader Jewish community in Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, Kansas City and beyond because her work was presented in mainstream theatrical venues.

For some in the Jewish community, “The Good Jew?” felt too radical, too pushy, too *chutzpadik*, like Dershowitz’s own assertions. For others, for Jews on the fringe, Lerman didn’t go far enough. While Rabbi Max Ticktin, a professor of Jewish Studies at George Washington University, saw in the piece a quest for the future of Judaism, unlike Lerman’s earlier Jewish works, which evoked the past, another rabbi and former Fabrengener, Arthur Waskow, founder of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, was disappointed in “The Good Jew?”

It felt to me like she came right tiptoe up to the edge of what a transformed Judaism might be and then she tiptoed away. I remember there was one really specific passage, where she tells the story that old Chassidic story, maybe Elie Weisel retells it in one of his books ... Once upon a time there was a rebbe who knows where to go into the forest to light a fire, ... in the end it turns out that all they know is how to tell the story. In my view, we have gone beyond that last line. What we have learned to do is light a new fire. I think I said that to Liz. It felt to me ... like the dance only went to the

point of telling the story of the old fire. Liz had come closer earlier [to lighting a new fire], she had actually come a little closer. At that point in her life if felt like she, she wasn't ready to say, there is a new fire (Nov. 17, 2003).

Waskow believed that Lerman could have pushed herself further, could have engaged herself prophetically by impelling through her artistic endeavor American Judaism toward a re-envisioning of itself. Lerman said at the time that her typical experiences as an American, post-War, intermarried Jew allowed her to speak frankly through her work to other young Jews in similar situations.

I don't feel I have a particularly unique voice and that's what makes me feel like I can take on this subject, because I feel like the dilemma experience is one of many, many American Jews and one of many, many American-slash-just-anything have: African, lesbian, however we define our community. Some of those issues are similar. That's what's exciting the company ... Despite the fact that only a portion of the company is Jewish – I have black people in the company, gay people in the company, – everybody's looking at the piece as an opportunity to explore the larger pieces of history and personal questions

I guess what I feel is that a part of my generation – our generation – there's a chunk of it that's trying to throw off the burden of being Jewish, a piece of that burden is the victimization. And I think that our parents worry that by throwing off that piece we will lose touch. And since I've gone through, relatively unscathed by I'm proud to speak up that I am a Jew whenever I feel like it (October 1990).

Reaching the Jewish Mainstream

“The Good Jew?” put Lerman on the map as an American Jewish artist. It also introduced her to Rabbi Daniel Zemel, of Temple Micah, now in northwest Washington, D.C. Zemel called himself typical in his lack of knowledge and experience in dance, especially modern dance. But he attended a showing of “The Good Jew?” and was struck, “blown away” in his words, by the depth and breadth with which Lerman was able to address essential, if difficult issues facing the Jewish community. Zemel

allowed Lerman's company to perform at Temple Micah at the suggestion of his cantor, Teddy Klaus, who also worked as a composer and accompanist for Dance Exchange. Zemel almost didn't attend that Sunday afternoon in 1989. But he made it, and was surprised to see the room filled and even more surprised that he only knew half of the attendees, his congregants— the rest were outsiders. He recalled:

They do this work, which I found stunning. So different than anything I've ever seen. Just stunning and amazing. And she's then leading a discussion for feedback on different parts of it. One dance number in this performance ... was the Shabbat bride. And it was stunning and I was very taken with the dancer who performed the Shabbat bride. It was a stunning piece and I felt I was totally locked in to what this was. But during the discussion someone said, 'If you really want to create the sense of the Shabbat as Bride, what you should do is put the dancer on a chair and lift the dancer up because that's what you do at a Jewish wedding. That's the dance form.' (2003)

At that Zemel recalled that he stood up and said, "That would be the worst thing in the whole world that you could do. *Don't* do that." Zemel explained that he insisted on moving away from old-fashioned *shtetl* imagery because in America it had become a cliché. Zemel continued: "I told Liz, that's a European metaphor, but what you're really trying to do is create new metaphors in Jewish expression. Don't drag us backward. Drag us forward!" He was intrigued enough to offer his help to this choreographer, right there on the spot. The two clicked and have become good friends. Eventually Lerman joined Temple Micah and she continues to offer movement and dance programs there on an occasional basis.

That connection with Zemel became Lerman's entree into the organized official Jewish community. Within a few years she was asked to teach workshops at rabbinical retreats and conventions, at national gatherings of lay leaders, at synagogues and Jewish art museums, and through Zemel she made the connection to Synagogue 2000, a

national non-profit institute dedicated to revitalizing synagogue life in North America through colloquiums with rabbis, educators, teachers and lay leaders. It took two decades, but Lerman had found more than a measure of acceptance in the Jewish community.

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, the Barbara and Stephen Friedman professor of liturgy, worship and ritual at Hebrew Union College, one of the Reform movement's rabbinical seminaries, co-founded Synagogue 2000 and fully supports Lerman's work in the mainstream Jewish community. Zemel introduced Lerman to Hoffman and he too was hooked:

We believed in Liz. We believed in all the things she believes in, so we brought her to one of our [programs] and we saw she was terrific.... I remember one major event in Philadelphia for the largest Conservative [Jewish] conference, the Sisterhood. There were a thousand people moving with her. They loved it (March 18, 2004).

Hoffman describes the reticence that the organized Jewish community has to movement and dance in its religious services by relating his own training as a young rabbi: "I was raised not to move at all. When I first took my first class in speech ... in rabbinic school, I stood stock still at attention as I gave my talk." His professors considered him a good speaker. Hoffman has learned to appreciate innovations in synagogue ritual and liturgy, which is what sparked his interest in Lerman's work in the congregational setting.

There's always some movement [in the synagogue]: Holding the Torah, the rabbi gestures with his or her hand, walking ... And Liz uses that.... She never says, 'We're going to do a dance.' Instead she says, 'What are some of the natural gestures you use in prayer?' And people say, 'Oh, we all do that anyway.' So the next thing you know, they're just doing it a little more and just a little more stylized. It comes out a dance. But there's no sudden determination to say, 'We're going to do something altogether different.' People can see that 'dance' is really just part of the choreographic environment [of the synagogue].

The issue for worship is not ‘do you or don’t you dance’ and ‘can you dance in the aisles’ ... but how do you use your body in what is anyway a choreographic environment to express the mood, ideas and message of prayer. Liz has managed to do that (March 18, 2004).

Alongside convincing leading contemporary experts in Jewish liturgy like Hoffman that dance works in ritual and communal settings, Lerman has become a sought-after speaker, performer, panelist and workshop leader at Jewish retreats, conventions and national Jewish gatherings. But she remains a dancer, a choreographer, an activist, not a Jewish establishment leader. Lerman, even as she gained a large measure of acceptance from Jewish communal organizations, is still and forever an outsider in some ways, on the margins, seeking new ideas and means to blend dance and community into an idealized utopia. And that remains fine for her.

In Judaism we need people who are holding on to something narrow. I don’t like that they put themselves above [others]. I don’t think they’re the only ones, but I’m glad that they’re sustaining it, because, in part, it gives me a pole to move from. Build the pole up, build the dialogue. I think there’s more potential for life. (Jan. 14, 2004)

Through Lerman’s work on Jewish themes and through her growing acceptance into the mainstream Jewish community, Lerman has gained recognition and a level of acceptance that previously she felt was impossible to achieve. But then the accolades came. First the aging and geriatric communities took notice. Then the established Jewish community took notice, even before she received the MacArthur in 2002. In 1995, Lerman’s father and stepmother came to Washington to watch her receive a “Golda Award” from the National Capital Region of the American Jewish Congress, an advocacy and Civil Rights organization. She was named one of 50 to watch by the national Jewish newspaper, the *Forward*; she received recognition and awards from

national federations and Jewish organizations. She's even spoken to groups of Hadassah ladies and synagogue Sisterhoods, organizations that her own mother eschewed in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1998, Lerman and the Dance Exchange developed "Moving Jewish Communities: A Training Initiative for Jewish Artists," a weeklong workshop held at the Dance Exchange's Takoma Park studio to instruct Jewish artists in methods of bringing creative work to Jewish communal organizations, synagogues, Hebrew schools, Sisterhoods, to name a few. The faculty, aside from Lerman, included Zemel, Rabbi Elaine Zecher of Temple Sinai, Boston; Rabbi Rachel Cowan of the Nathan Cummings Foundation; Ori Soltes, art historian and former museum director; and members of the Dance Exchange performing company. The 26 participants came from New York, Tucson, Seattle and Washington, D.C., among other cities. Funding from the Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation provided the imprimatur that Lerman's work and her methods were in important ways reinvigorating Jewish communities. The workshop provided others – rabbinical students, teachers, artists – the tools to do the same. At the workshop, Lerman exhorted the group: "We must change synagogues from corporate centers to spiritual centers" and during the week participants visited the largest, most established congregation in the city, Adas Israel, for a day-long venture in site-specific choreography, in the sanctuary, on the pulpit, in the hallways and galleries of the building.

For some, "Moving Jewish Communities" introduced them to methods of bringing movement and dance into prayerful spaces, into spiritual realms, something Lerman evolved during her earlier work with Fabrengen and the Dancing Dybbuks.

Other sessions advised students on nuts-and-bolts issues: how to deal with synagogue boards, funders and the press. Everyone walked away with a thick binder of instructions to assist artists and teachers in creating programs and workshops in their own communities. Lerman gave to her students this charge: “Here are the tools. Take these tools, which have been effective for us at the Dance Exchange, and bring them back to your communities.” The program offered a way that Lerman’s community-based synagogue work, teaching and movement workshops can be replicated around the country. “To bring movement to the life of prayer is extraordinary,” said Dr. Ron Wolfson, co-founder of Synagogue 2000 and vice president of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, at the workshop. He added:

Liz is able to make people comfortable with the idea that movement is a possibility and she expresses it in a non-threatening way to people who have never believed they could move ... What better way to be moved than through dance? Personally my prayer experience has been changed forever [by Liz’s work]. What we need to do through Jewish education is to explain this, to translate it and to find new ways for Jews to express their connections (November 1999).

Zemel, too, is one of the converted – to Lerman, to incorporating the arts into Jewish spaces and Jewish events, even to dance. He has called her the only true genius he knows. Zemel appreciates the Jewish themes and universality inherent in Lerman’s work and terms it critical in an era where he sees alienation and disconnection and urban discontent. Zemel sums up Lerman’s work with Jewish themes:

The Torah’s for everybody. She literally embodies that. She takes this sense and she reminds us [that] the Torah is for everybody. And Judaism has a message for the world. Everybody’s a dancer, not just dancers are dancers, everybody’s a dancer. It’s so critical, so affirming of life, it’s so affirming of creation (Dec. 1, 2003).

Chapter 7: Community Matters: ‘Still Crossing’ (1986)

Community Idealism

Lerman formed the Dance Exchange in order to fulfill her vision of a utopian community, a group of people cemented by like-minded goals, able to work together, create together and live together in peaceful coexistence. Community ideals were enfolded into Lerman’s character growing up under the assertive influence of her father, Phil Lerman, who placed great emphasis on the importance of not separating oneself from one’s community, even at times of dissent. The first tight-knit community Liz experienced as a youngster was the extended Lerman family: her father’s brother and sister, her cousins, grandparents and various other relatives. Holiday celebrations once the family settled in Milwaukee were well-attended and rotated from house to house in Milwaukee and its suburbs. A cousins’ club also met periodically where the extended Lerman-Holtzman family would get together, the grownups upstairs talking, the kids playing in the rec room downstairs.

Growing up, she recalls little of her social life outside the family and remarked, “I remember it was more interesting to actually be around my folks at home” (Dec. 1, 2003). And they were interesting, with her father and uncle discussing the family business, democratic politics, workforce training or Civil Rights, and talk of meetings, newspaper editorials and protest marches a prominent part of weeknight dinner conversation and weekend gatherings.

Among the earliest communities of dancers Lerman created was the one that grew out of her work at the Roosevelt Hotel in Northwest Washington. It was not the

first, though. Earlier her experiences at Sandy Spring Friends School had steered her toward the idea of a vibrant, collaborative community, where teachers learned alongside their students, where learning was fun rather than a chore and where experimentation in teaching methods was honored not suspect. Later, on her return to Washington, D.C., in the late summer of 1975, following her mother's death, Lerman had in mind a piece she wanted to make in honor and in memory of her mother. But Lerman couldn't see using just any dancers for this piece. In her mind's eye she envisioned a group of her mother's relatives welcoming Anne Lerman into heaven. It didn't make sense for Lerman to seek out young, vital dancers for this project. She needed older bodies, older dancers, people changed by life experience rather than technique, to represent the cadre of her mother's relatives – floating Chagall-like in the recesses of Lerman's imagination. Lerman knew her mother wouldn't go to heaven alone, unaccompanied; her past would follow her and welcome her. In Lerman's vision, her mother Anne would enter an imagined heaven with a community of supporters, a group of people her mother had known – her own ancestors, mostly strong women, unshaken by constraints of a society that favored the young, the male, the assertively powerful. Lerman sought out senior citizens, and she realized that the only way to get them to dance and perform was to teach them. So she did.

Roosevelt Hotel for Seniors

Lerman had assimilated a number of techniques for teaching non-dancers how to feel comfortable and uninhibited while working with the Sandy Spring students, staff and faculty. She took that information and applied it with a liberal dose of common sense as she began instructing seniors at the Roosevelt. Classes took place in a large social hall

where chairs could be pushed to the perimeter of the room. Warm ups, she decided, could be performed seated or standing next to a chair, its back serving as a support or *barre*. The exercises were simple: head, shoulder and arm rolls, knee and foot flexions, slow rolls forward, chins dropping into chests to loosen the spine. It was enough to oil and warm up creaky joints and muscles, then Lerman or later her co-teachers would lead the seniors in short combinations of movement, which could be practiced sitting or standing. When moving cross the floor the senior students frequently clumped in large groups to aid in balance, memory and comfort, or they even held hands on occasion. Finally, the teachers invited their older students to create by improvising movement based on stories from their own lives. Lerman's classes at the Roosevelt were a hit and helped her in the work she crafted on a select group of these older adults, non-dancers all, "Woman of the Clear Vision," which used six senior women from that very first class at the Roosevelt.

"Woman of the Clear Vision – A Piece for My Mother," created while Lerman was still in graduate school at G.W., premiered in December 1975 at Mt. Vernon College's architecturally intriguing Hand Chapel, a contemporary space with multiple levels and rich acoustics enhanced by the resonantly rich woods throughout. The piece shared Washington Area Feminist Theater program with Lerman's "New York City Winter" and dance works by Meade Andrews and Karen Bowie. "Woman of the Clear Vision" closed the evening with dancers portraying 'family' and 'visitors' (a recollection of Anne Lerman's sickbed experience), representing an oddball assortment of stereotypes: Aunt Chicken Soup, Ms. Religion and Ms. Thorazine Demerol. The piece, like "New York City Winter," relied on the very personal experience Lerman had

just gone through watching her mother die. The piece became a means of personal healing for the choreographer, who even used one of her mother's nightgowns and a pair of her eyeglasses as costumes during the performance. The five older women from the Roosevelt were gray-haired and lumpy, their bodies nothing like the lithe, lean, trained dancers audiences were accustomed to seeing at a dance concert. But they had something more important than technique for Lerman; they had life experiences, they had honesty. "Lerman orchestrates a whole series of dance charades – depicting dippy relatives, a fatuous reverend, a pill-happy medic – into a kind of impressionistic memoir," wrote Alan M. Kriegsman in *The Washington Post* (Dec. 5, 1975). While the work served as a catharsis for Lerman – she even told a reviewer from the women's magazine *Off Our Backs* that the work "clarified a lot of what she had gone through during the month's of her mother's illness" (Kelly 1975) – it was most notable for its use of senior dancers alongside younger dancers. This was the community Lerman was striving for, the one to welcome and embrace her mother. With its multigenerational roots in place, she would continue to build and refine her community of collaborators over the course of her career. "Woman of the Clear Vision" was merely her first attempt.

A number of her early works featured large casts and drew together an expansive community of dancers, skilled or not. "Memory Gardens" (1976) featured a cast of 59. "Miss Galaxy" (1977) and "Elevator Operators and Other Strangers" (1978) were also works that filled the stage with dancers, whom Lerman shepherded with aplomb. Lerman collected dancers wherever she worked. Fellow students at G.W. joined her casts; she welcomed her students from Dance Exchange, as well as her

colleagues and students at Dance Project and even some high schoolers from Sandy Spring appeared in these pieces. “She had *so* many people and so many sets and so many levels of achievement and so many age groups,” said Carla Perlo, a fellow dancer, choreographer and founder of Washington’s foremost dance presenter, Dance Place. Perlo recalled performing just once in a Lerman work, as Elijah the Prophet in “Miss Galaxy.” She remembered the crowds, on stage and back: “It just ... drove me crazy. It was too much backstage. I didn’t understand how anyone could cope with that, trying to pull all that together” (Sept. 30, 2003). But Lerman did it, without too much discontent from the masses. She seemed to have a knack for community organizing, perhaps gleaned from her father Phil’s examples, organizing campaigns, unions, groups to sign up for protest marches and the rest of his activist interests.

Lerman had learned how to work out large pieces in small, incremental rehearsals first at Sandy Spring and later at the Roosevelt. It was a matter of practicality. Dancers had precious little time to give over to rehearsals, and non-dancers as well were often limited to only one evening or weekend rehearsal per week. That technique, pulling in a few dancers and working through small sections at a time, served her well as she choreographed and directed the three-act “Miss Galaxy” and “Memory Garden,” with its multigenerational cast. The chaos, when everyone came together shortly before a performance didn’t seem to faze Lerman. Perlo said,

She was okay with that. I mean Liz gets very low key ... You can tell when she’s really annoyed ... [but] she never yells. She gets angry and she internalizes it all. She doesn’t know how to blow up and just say, ‘Will you all shut up?’ She just can’t do it. Somehow she gets quiet and tries to keep people doing what their supposed to be doing professionally. She keeps her cool. It was interesting for me... I admire her for her patience and [ability] to work in those huge arenas with people (Sept. 30, 2003).

It was democratic dance, welcoming dancers of all ages and levels of abilities and these large group works were an early articulation of Lerman's vision that any body and anybody could indeed dance.

May Dance

In 1980, the Washington Performing Arts Society hired Lerman to curate City Dance '80, a weeklong festival of dance that showcased the diversity of dance in the Washington, D.C., area. It was the fourth annual festival, and the largest by far, with participation from some 50 Washington area dance troupes, 800 dancers in all. While the fest culminated in three programs of local professional dance at the Warner Theatre on 13th Street later in the week, the most memorable part was the opening, performed to the soul-stirring American strains of Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man." It was Lerman's idea to celebrate all dance, not just the dozen or so companies selected via audition to perform on the main stage at the Warner. The event titled "May Dance Celebration" took place on a Saturday and was a perfect embodiment of what a community of dancers could look like when joined together for a common purpose. Over the winter Lerman taught the simple semphoric arm movements and a few plain steps to dance teachers of all stripes: African and Spanish, ballet and jazz, tap and Japanese, they all learned the same brilliantly but essentially simplistic choreography. But the instruction was to perform it within the demands of the dance genre, for example if the Japanese dancers were hindered by their kimonos from opening their arms and legs wide, so be it. They would adjust the choreography to suit their style's demands.

Washington, like much of the nation, was still reaping the benefits of the dance boom, among them relatively strong levels of government support, interested presenters and audiences and a growth in companies and classes of all genres, from ballet to modern to folk and ethnic. The City Dance festival was one result of the dance boom and it attracted eager audiences and a vast array of participant dance companies based throughout the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., area.

That brilliant Saturday in May drew a reported 10,000 onlookers to watch the dancers on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and to listen to the deep reverberations of the tympanis played by the D.C. Youth Orchestra. When WPAS founder and director Patrick Hayes proclaimed, “I have a dream that nations would fight with teams of dancers. Soviet and Afghan State dancers crossing each others’ borders to no conclusion,” the event became more than a dance, it melded into a political rally, albeit one in which the participants wore ballet slippers or kilts, dashikis or mantillas, tap shoes or no shoes (Welsh D-1). But together beneath the gaze of the brilliant white marble rendering of the sixteenth president, these dancers representing different forms and nations, different cultures and techniques, were united into a common purpose via Lerman’s choreography and artistic and community leadership. In *The Washington Post* Kriegsman declared it “democracy in action” and praised the “unbuttoned imagination” of Lerman for thinking up the whole thing. He was as inspired by the evocative meaning it engendered, as he was of the dance set forth in that monumental setting:

It was a spectacle that gave the concept an animation and significance the framers of the Declaration of Independence might never have dreamed of. But it was also one of which they would have heartily approved (May 5, 1980).

The event's centerpiece, Lerman's choreography for the "Fanfare," relied on a simple but unavoidably expressive motif of arms raised and reaching sunward. Kriegsman described it as "a jubilant stretch [that] turned the piece into a grand paean to freedom" (May 5, 1980). Anne Marie Welsh in the now-defunct *Washington Star* wrote, "The gestures and postures evoked freedom and prayer" (May 5, 1980). Lerman's choreography was spare and unadorned. She relied on the dancers, from five-year-old girls in pink tights to middle-aged folk dancers to her own Dancers of the Third Age, to put themselves into the movement. After the "Fanfare" the festival featured a parade of sorts, led by champion baton twirler Bill Bruce. Each participating group marched before a viewing stand composed of area arts writers and, as companies lined either side of the Reflecting Pool, they had a chance to perform their own small, individual dances. It was impossible to see it all. What one did see was the vastness in number and scope of dancers, everywhere, of every type, lining the steps, spilling onto the lawn, bringing dance of the people, to the people. Finally the whole thing came to a close in one great, big, snaking conga line, led by Melvin Deal, one of Washington's stalwarts in African dance. He taught a few steps from a Ghanaian dance, and off went the dancers, the audience, anybody who chose to be swept up in the rhythm and movement of the moment. It was a grand spectacle. "Undoubtedly the largest dance in history to be held between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument," crowed Robert Stanton, spokesperson for the National Park Service, one of the event's sponsors.

Lerman was impressive and inspiring in the way she brought together a sometimes contentious community of dancers, wary of their turf and the boundaries in

which their dance styles resided. But Lerman chose to look beyond boundaries and styles into the larger diversity of dance as it represents an ideal vision of the American experience, not as melting pot but as tossed salad, a mix of ingredients that complement one another without masking or changing the flavors of the recipe. Here Lerman's communal longings, the ones she expressed comically in "New York City Winter" of creating a community of go-go dancers from Passaic to Union City, were momentarily fulfilled. Five years later, Lerman for a day created a community of dancers, who together danced a shared message of democracy in action. "Fanfare," as the piece became known, was an inspired communal epiphany that allowed Lerman to capture the life and hope of America in the mass movement of a diverse collection of dancers.

Siting Dance

Lerman would learn much from this experience in community organizing. She learned a great deal from that effective use of community-based choreography, which she would begin to incorporate into her work with communities of dancers and non-dancers around the country.

Another hallmark of "Fanfare" and the May Day Celebration was Lerman's use of a specific non-theatrical site to shape and inspire the choreography and the event. Site-specific choreography grew out of the Happenings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when artists, not necessarily choreographers, aimed to take art out of its expected setting, a gallery or theater, and put it into the context of everyday life, in parks, on street corners, to be encountered as much as to be specifically visited. Even earlier, in the 1920s and 1930s, movement choirs conducted by Rudolf Laban, carried the hallmarks of Lerman's own large-scale group works performed in monumental

settings. Laban, a theater director and movement teacher, was born in 1879 in Bratislava. His dance schools around Europe, each helmed by one of his star pupils, sponsored a movement choir, something he and his colleagues also called a 'layman's dance group,' which allowed non-dancers enchanted by the performances they saw, to participate in large-scale group works, performing simple unison and canonic movements. Antecedents to Lerman's grand gestural pageantry, too, can be found in the American pageantry movement of the late-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, when massive groups of volunteers were directed in elaborate spectacles in stadiums and amphitheaters. Lerman's May Dance "Fanfare" reflected characteristics of both the grand pageants and of the Laban movement choirs; her site-specific works, including those at the Lincoln Memorial and later at Battery Park in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, in the red-carpeted concourse of the Kennedy Center, on the Portsmouth, N.H., bridge connecting a physically divided shipbuilding town, were as inextricably bound to grandiose group movement as they were to the settings Lerman selected. She, as well, may have been thinking of the political demonstrations she accompanied her father on as a child and teen in Milwaukee, for the political and the artistic have never been separate entities in Lerman's mind.

Six years later Lerman would take on another monumental icon of American democracy: the Statue of Liberty during the celebration of its centennial. The Dance Exchange was among three American and three French modern dance troupes brought together by Elise Bernhardt and her forward-thinking organization, Dancing in the Streets, for a festival of French and American dance in 1986. Dancing in the Streets programmed site-specific works primarily in New York, but also in sites around the

nation. The program, “Liberty Dances,” performed on a stage set up in Battery Park, the Statue of Liberty visible in the harbor in the distance, was set for a little more than a week after the grand Fourth of July festivities, with fireworks silhouetting the spectacular statue. For the program Lerman choreographed “Still Crossing,” a meditation and reflection on the immigrant experience that was both deeply moving and emblematic of Lerman’s brand of multigenerational, multi-ability choreography. It shared the bill with Bebe Miller’s “A Haven for Restless Angels of Mercy,” Pat Graney’s “Colleen Ann,” Josette Balz’s “Water, the Matter,” Odile Dubuc’s “*Quoi de Neuf?*” and Jean-Michel Agius’s “*Quelque Chose Comme un Oiseau.*”

“Still Crossing” was the most talked about and most critically acclaimed work on that program, and it became among the Dance Exchange’s most performed works, remaining in repertory for subsequent seasons following its 1986 premiere.

‘Still Crossing’

The work begins in darkness, with nearly formless bodies rolling across the floor, a pair of standing shapes rising up like distant masts of ships, or landmarks in a vast open sea. Mark Isham’s music, from the score of *The Times of Harvey Milk*, begins as a hum and ebbs and flows like the water lapping at the shoreline. As the lights intensify, the rolling bodies continue, some dancers lifting their knees, some rising to sitting before they sink back into the rolling pulse that carries them across the stage. The sparseness of the simple human gesture becomes strikingly prescient. A woman reaches forward with one arm, palm flat as if trying to sense a wall in pitch darkness. She’s a lookout, but with her other hand she masks her eyes, stepping forward, walking blindly, inching into the unknown. And ultimately that’s what “Still Crossing” was meant to evoke: the risks

and the joys, the tribulations and the hopes of the unknown. It's the immigrant experience, as hordes of refugees, crossed oceans to begin their lives anew on America's shores.

The same year Lerman created "Still Crossing" she was working on a history piece based on her grandfather Ben Lerman's experiences in Russia during the revolutionary period. The work began as a parable, "The Transparent Apple and the Silver Saucer," presented in 1985 in Washington. As Lerman continued her research into Russia, its history and culture, she discovered that everything that she found to be Russian was also culturally Jewish, at least in her experience, and vice versa. Thus, cultural practices that she thought of as Jewish were similarly Russian (April 26, 1987). Ultimately, Lerman developed the work into an wide-ranging examination of Russia, its history, its culture and its political and social significance and she gave it the unwieldy title "Russia: Footnotes to a History." While this work began by tracing her own Russian-Jewish grandfather Ben Lerman's immigrant roots, it grew into something much larger and more disparate. This was a big picture story, meant to encompass 1,000 years of Russian history and culture in two hours at the theater. Lerman, the one-time history student and teacher, even included a two-page bibliography in the program and offered footnotes to events, read off of three-by-five cards from the side of the stage. It was a vast, difficult work. Yet during the same period, "Still Crossing" told a parallel narrative, without words, without slides, program notes or footnotes, about the immigrant experience in coming to America. Somehow what Lerman could not completely attain amid the immensity and complexity of "Russia," with its multiple characters, dancers, sets, costumes, stories within stories, and didactic narrative, she

chiseled down to a few significant moments and movement gestures in “Still Crossing.” A short piece, “Still Crossing” times in at about 13 minutes, but says a great deal more, wordlessly, about immigration and hope, about holding on and letting go, than many other similar works that try to do much more.

In “Still Crossing” three central couples are joined by some of the Third Age dancers and for “Liberty Dances” seniors from New York’s 92nd Street Y and the Shore Front YWCA in Brooklyn. These dancers, clad in blues – sea blue, sky blue, deep navy – form a chain across the back of the stage holding hands as they walk across the space. The iconic image of one hand held above the head, the other stretching to the side, is a searchlight of sorts and it mimics the Statue of Liberty, bearing that great light of freedom, the torch she holds high as a beacon to all who enter the harbor. When each dancer lifts an arm straining upward or forward, it’s an unadorned moment, but one rich with resonant power, of reaching higher, of moving forward and out, of striving toward the unknown. On a diagonal, four company dancers stoop, clutch themselves, cover their ears in agitation as a high pitched whistle pierces the hypnotic pulse of Isham’s synthetic score. There is no question that these crossings were difficult, and Lerman has no qualms about stating this in blunt movement gestures: for the times were arduous for those shipboard immigrants, mostly packed in horrifying conditions in steerage class. Even amid the hopefulness of the new world, there was illness, fear, discord suggested by the way the dancers grasp themselves, twitch or stir an arm. One dancer appears to have given up and given herself over as she’s lifted in a cross position, carried away, while a continuing tide of bodies moves along, like waves on the stage floor.

Throughout, though, Lerman maintains a sense of forward-going, with performers continuously rolling or walking across the stage, ever in transit. There's a simple, back-to-basic moment of side-to-side swaying, the way one may catch balance when standing on a rocking boat, before stepping forward and melting into a lunge to the floor. Couples meet, hug and part, their actions conveying worlds, lifetimes of experiences in these unadorned gestures of greeting and departure. Ultimately the entire cast, company members and community dancers, gathers on stage, some standing, others kneeling or lying prone. They repeat and sum up the semaphoric choreography – that raised arm, the shielded eyes, the sway-sway – which with a filled stage grows in strength as it has in number. Isham's music grows to anthemic proportions, powerfully pulling the dancers along. Then the dancers cup their right hands at their lips, scooping up and drinking in sustenance, dropping back their heads, like thirst-starved travelers. It's a definitive unspoken moment, followed by a wipe of the lips with the back of their hand. How simple, how spare, how utterly evocative of what Lerman was trying to tease out about the challenges and hopes embedded in the immigrant experience. Viewers know instinctively from that movement that the crossing was hard, bitter, demoralizing even, but the reward at the end is sweet, as it quenches parched throats, moistens dried lips. Then at the premiere performance, 28 dancers join in unison, their backs facing the audience, their faces turned toward the harbor, the Statue of Liberty⁶. They reach once more, they push forward toward her, they cover their eyes scanning the horizon their other arms outstretched. Finally, they begin to lift one arm, like Liberty herself. Some allow their one arm to rise up slowly, steadily, others shoot an

⁶ Subsequent performances of "Still Crossing" had variable numbers of dancers, depending on how many community participants joined pre-performance workshops.

arm up with percussive fervor. Ultimately, all dancers rise as a unit, one arm reaching, higher, higher for the same freedoms that Liberty herself proclaims. We are all one, a community, just as we are all immigrants, all in some manner, Lerman suggests, “Still Crossing.”

At the premiere of “Still Crossing” in Battery Park, the work took on even greater resonance because of its placement in view of the Statue of Liberty. Yet, when the work was performed later in Dance Exchange repertory programs, it seemed to maintain that deeply felt meaning in its very structure and bones. Over the years the work has been performed in cities around the country, in each location, members of the local community supplemented the Dance Exchange cast. The piece didn’t always use only seniors as supplemental dancers. At the Barns at Wolf Trap, in Vienna, Va., in 1988, “Still Crossing” featured both seniors from the Dancers of the Third Age and community members from around the Washington, D.C. area. But joining that cast was a group of elementary school-aged children, including Lerman’s own daughter, Anna Spelman. With multiple generations sharing and filling the stage “Still Crossing” was truly a paean to Lerman’s democratically inspired ideal of community-based dance.

In the *New York Times*, Jennifer Dunning wrote of the premiere in Battery Park,

Each of the groups had a complementary dignity and eloquence Living together is possible, Miss Lerman seemed to be saying, and brave, clear-eyed vision is necessary if we are not to disappear from each other’s lives (July 13, 1986).

Burt Supree called “Still Crossing” the one solid piece of the “Liberty Dances” program in *The Village Voice*. He was taken by its tenderness:

It had a quality of stretching tentatively, but without fear, into the unknown. And it had a kind of melancholy, too. But I didn’t need to know

exactly...these older dancers are incredibly moving in their very spare execution of the choreography's broad gestures and simple moves. They're eloquent, full of unsentimental feeling (July 29, 1980).

With "Still Crossing" Lerman made excellent use of both her company and her older dancers, while still ably and efficiently incorporating in members of the community. It wasn't as much a breakthrough, as an ongoing development in the way she worked within the Dance Exchange and with the community at large. And community work, mainly through presenter-sponsored residencies, has become a mainstay of the company and of Lerman's ability to reach a broad base of audiences, many not necessarily affiliated with or even interested in contemporary dance.

An example of drawing in a diverse and decidedly non-dance audience for a project that captured the interest and imagination of a community was Lerman's 1994-95 *Shipyards Project*. Two years earlier Lerman had conducted a series of workshops in Portsmouth, N.H., a shipbuilding center that during World War II produced a barrage of submarines. In more recent years, with the end of the Cold War, fewer nuclear subs were needed and the tradition of shipbuilding in Portsmouth nearly ceased. As a result, Portsmouth residents no longer had a connection to the long and proud history of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. Lerman proposed a project that would bring together the shipbuilding and naval communities with the town, which by the 1990s was rapidly gentrifying. The *Shipyards Project*, funded by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Arts Partners Program among others, was conceived to bring together these two disparate groups who over time in collaboration with Liz Lerman and her Dance Exchange Dancers, would learn to work and live together in harmony. The project began with

conversations and community engagement activities. At one of the early meetings, 25 current and former shipyard workers listened to and spoke with Lerman to unearth the defining images – expressed in the body – that would take hold as the project unfolded.

Ultimately Lerman, with assistance from Dance Exchange company members and the Portsmouth community, planned a series of events, dances, which would occur during the course of one week and weekend throughout the city. Each day a different aspect of the community and the shipyard would be the focus and finally on a warm Sunday in mid-September 1996, the whole project came together. Lerman's goal with the *Shipyard Project* was to repair and build up a community ravaged by economic, social and political changes. She tried not to leave anyone out. She included high school color guards, dancers, shipyard workers, community leaders, and residents, of the city. She even arranged for the Memorial Bridge, which connects Portsmouth and the shipyard, to be closed, briefly, in order for dancers to bridge the gap between the two places – the town and the shipyard – so closely interconnected, yet so ideologically and socially separate. While participation in the Dance Exchange residency throughout the week in Portsmouth was at times spotty, it grew. And many, in particular the direct participants, reported a “spiritual high” as a result of joining and performing in the project (Putnam 71). The *Shipyard Project* became significant not because of what it did to and for Portsmouth. While some residual elements of Lerman's work there remain: for example, a new group was created to pursue arts-related interests and a community arts group created “Neighborhoods,” an educational performance with song, story and poetry that depicts the history and

culture of Portsmouth. A renewed interest in the literary arts was sparked, and resulted in a poetry series and the naming of three city poet laureates.

Although Portsmouth's *Shipyard Project* did leave some lasting effects on the community the Dance Exchange served over two years in 1995-1996, the larger result was that the project even occurred at all. Most astonishing about it were the lengths that Lerman and the Dance Exchange went to for access and collaboration, on a once closed-to-the-public naval shipyard, in a community riven by military-civilian distrust. Lerman was able to show that community work was more than just one-shot, everybody jump in and join a conga line and dance. Lerman and company members maintained a presence in Portsmouth during the duration of the project by returning periodically throughout the two years to work and discuss, to listen and experience, to consult and to teach all in relation to what was going on in the city. The *Shipyard Project* brought Lerman's foundational ideals of community-based work to a broader general public and to an even more distant and wary subset of military leaders at the Portsmouth Shipyard. It was neither at all simple nor easy. But by degrees, Lerman's work at gleaning personal stories and movements, relying on history and narrative, allowing collaboration and participation served both the Dance Exchange and the city of Portsmouth.

The *Shipyard Project* also introduced Lerman to Lewis Feldstein, who joined the audience of the Portsmouth Music Hall for one of the week's events. As director of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, he had a vested interest in the project so he drove out to Portsmouth and sat in the audience, stunned by what was unfolding before him.

I didn't have much idea at all what I was going to see. But I remember that Liz had ... managed to have men dancing and telling the story about the shipyard, including several guys who, it was obvious by their build and their makeup and the stories she told us about them, were not dancers ... What I remember most about it was [Liz] getting us all up on our feet. There must have been 1,200 people there. It was an odd group that included people who don't usually go to the Portsmouth Music Hall. She had us up on our feet and had us all moving, acting out the crane, as if we were moving parts of ships and heavy equipment around, as if we were working on the shipyard. And as we did that she had us all sing 'America the Beautiful.' I cried and I think a lot of people in the audience had tears in their eyes. The impact it had on us was totally unexpected (Feb. 2, 2004).

Feldstein eventually met Harvard University public policy professor Robert Putnam.

Putnam, author of the acclaimed *Bowling Alone*, was interested in initiating a seminar to foster civic engagement in America. Their ideas grew into the Saguaro Seminar, and Feldstein ultimately – with some persuading – convinced Putnam that Lerman, an arts practitioner, a dancer, should be included. She found her place at the table of public intellectual discourse, her means of bridging dance with community activism when she stood up and convinced more than a few of the academics, social and public policy representatives to get up and move, dance.

Lerman's community-connected works, from "Woman of the Clear Vision" to "Still Crossing" and the *Shipyard Project* each drew expressly upon community members while simultaneously bringing contemporary dance to a broader cross section of the general public by taking it from concert venues and into public places. These community-inclusive works presented away from the modern dance stage became a way for Lerman to "speak to a larger audience than their own professional colleagues," a reflection of Alan Lightman's definition of public intellectual. Lerman from the outset of her dance career – in the classroom and on the stage – was seeking to break down the

traditional boundaries that the dance world and general public relied on to keep dance a separate and unequal art form in the greater realm of performing arts. With this work, and the addition of Lerman's public speaking, she bridges the dance world and the social, cultural and political worlds surrounding it.

In 1992 Lerman addressed the Northeast Performing Arts Conference at a meeting in Arlington, Va. Her keynote address there, titled "Are Miracles Enough? Thoughts on Time, Transformation and the Meaning of Community," synthesized her burgeoning ideas of how dance in community settings, dance using community members and dance for the community could teach and influence artists as much as it could the community. In this speech Lerman began with an ancient history lesson, something she has since returned to frequently:

I think there was a time when people danced and the crops grew. I think they danced and that is how they healed their children. They danced; that is how they prepared for war. Maybe they mainly danced because they could not understand the incomprehensible, and perhaps in a moment of becoming (not interpreting) the sun in a sun dance they could understand the forces of nature.

When I think about that time, I like to imagine several things. I think everyone knew the dance, so that when people came to festival days, they were not humiliated because they didn't get it. I don't think they needed to be initiated into anything or if they did, it had become so integral to their lives that they knew it when they saw it (Lerman, *Are Miracles Enough?* 1996, 5).

Lerman views her work as a teacher, as a dancer, as a choreographer, as a speaker and advocate as community-based.

The Dance Exchange has a history of trying to make that bridge in lots of different ways. One of the ways that we do this is to be in all parts of the community, whether it is where presenters would like to put us or some place we are interested in exploring. Meanwhile, we are typically performing on concert stages (Lerman, 1996, 6).

But Lerman knows that community work has its limits, for presenters, for artists for dancers, and even for the community. The art world hungers, too, for the primacy of high art. Lerman articulates that understanding as well:

I guess I'm asking myself: "Why am I depressed? Why do I come away from this work feeling: 'My God, it's so simple. Why can't we all be doing it? Why can't everyone be connecting?'" Then I realize that this is perhaps the issue. We are so hungry for connection that we accept moments ... and we think we've made a community. We say, "Ah-hah, I'm in a community now." It's like a sound bite. I don't want to denigrate it. My question has become: this world is falling apart, is it enough to go in and get somebody talking again? Or is there yet something else I might be doing, given what I know as an artist, given what we all know art can do? I go back to saying: Art is one of the few things we have left in this universe that can integrate various phenomena: mind, body, spirit (Lerman, 1996, 7).

That is where Lerman early on discovered community, by bridging mind, body and spirit, to craft dances for teachers and students at Sandy Spring, as a memorial to her mother, as an evocation of the history of immigration and as a means to repair rifts in a city, as a few examples. Community work remains an elemental area within the Dance Exchange and, as far as Lerman is concerned, she needs the community work, that connection with the outer world and its collaborative atmosphere in order to create. Likewise, she contends communities around the country need dance and art to make them better. And community is one area where Lerman began to evolve into a public intellectual.

Chapter 8: Stamp of Genius: The MacArthur Award

September 18, 2002 – “Could you wait just a minute?” Liz Lerman asked Jonathan Fanton.

Sitting in her warm office on a Wednesday mid-morning, she stood up at her desk, put down the telephone receiver and walked to the center of the room. There, next to a small round conference table, standing atop a threadbare oriental rug, she bent both knees and jumped. Just once, arms flinging upward, adrenalin coursing through her veins like water gushing from a fountain. The butterfly tickle of excitement was just too much when she heard what Fanton told her. Lerman had to let it out. But she is a dancer, first and always. The only way she knew how to let that feeling out was through her body, with a jump. Two-footed, propelling away from the floor, hanging ten momentarily in the air, it must have been a spectacular jump, not for its virtuosity, but for its sheer, breathless abandon.

A moment earlier Lerman was in her office, meeting with John Borstel, her longtime colleague, humanities director of the Dance Exchange. They were discussing upcoming projects when the phone rang. Outside waiting in the lobby – a bare, unattractive room filled with mis-matched sofas and coffee tables contributed from sundry living room remodeling projects – Carla Perlo sat. Perlo, a long-time colleague of Lerman’s, founded and directs Dance Place, Washington’s most-prolific presenter of modern and ethnic dance. The two were scheduled to meet and discuss the Dance Exchange’s upcoming home season of company choreography at Dance Place. Carla

waited for Liz, who was uncharacteristically late. She saw John Borstel leave the office, and close the door behind him. Lerman still didn't come out.

Inside, Lerman had just heard Fanton say, "Hello, this is the MacArthur Foundation." Six words, but in those fleeting seconds, Lerman said later, "I think I knew." His next words were: "Are you alone?" to which Lerman replied, "No." "Can you be alone?" he asked.

Lerman looked at Borstel saying, "John, I need to be alone" as she signaled him toward the door with her hand.

Later Lerman said, "In the period that John is walking out the door, that's the period that feels well..." Even two years later in recollection Lerman is momentarily speechless, struck dumb in an effort to describe those few seconds of dawning realization. Fanton was president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, a private Chicago-based foundation that grants more than \$170 million a year to human and community development efforts throughout the United States.⁷ The MacArthur Foundation is, perhaps, best known for its MacArthur Fellows, a highly selective cadre of individuals from fields of science, literature, social sciences, the performing and visual arts, medicine and journalism, anointed for five-year grants with no strings attached.

These fellows are an exclusive club, one joined only by invitation.

⁷ John MacArthur had been a savvy and generous businessman, sole owner of Bankers Life & Casualty Company, which he had purchased in the 1930s and nurtured and built over his lifetime into a successful insurance business. MacArthur controlled other assets including numerous real-estate holdings throughout New York and Florida as well as diverse businesses around the country. The foundation was created in 1970 but not until 1978, upon his death, did it begin operations, disbursing grants in a wide array of areas from global security and sustainability, to ecology and conservation, to diversity and population trends as well as to creative excellence.

“Then he said something like this,” Lerman said, remembering that conversation, “‘Do you know’ – I wished I had written it down – ‘Liz, do you know what a MacArthur Fellowship is? Do you know anybody who’s ever had one?’”

“They’re very coy,” she added, reflecting back on that September day, the sky a robin’s egg blue, the temperature still reaching a summery mid-80s. “‘Well, yes,’” Lerman replied, playing along with Fanton, “‘but I can’t think of anybody right now.’” Next Fanton said, “You should know one of them very well, because it’s you.”

And then Lerman asked Fanton, her latest and by far most generous benefactor, to hold on for a moment while she put down the phone and let loose with that jump.

But after that initial rush, Lerman said her next feeling wasn’t of elation but of exhaustion. “It wasn’t liberating. It was ... heavy. Like I felt all the years of labor.... You know how people say it all passes in front of you ... I just felt all the effort and the tears from all that work.” She describes the jump plainly:

I just jumped. I didn’t dance around the room or anything like that. I just leapt and sat back down again. And then I said, ‘This is incredible, this means so much to me, but it really means a lot to all the people who have been with me for so long and have gotten nothing back. This is incredible.’

The next thing Fanton said was, “Well you can’t talk to them.”

Genius Award

The MacArthur Fellowship is most commonly known as the ‘genius’ grant and its selection and notification process is as notable for its secrecy as it is for its generosity. Each year a panel of nominators culled from a variety of fields throughout the country selects individuals of all ages and areas of expertise. These names are forwarded to another top-secret panel of judges to consider for the coveted MacArthur Fellowship.

There are no applications. There is no specified number of awards. And there are no particular areas of expertise from which the nominators select. The nominators and later the judges are simply charged with uncovering the best and brightest among Americans. Most typically between 20 and 40 recipients are selected. They may be young or experienced and they represent a diversity of fields and ideas.

Those tapped as fellows earn, in addition to the honor of being called a genius by friends, family and the public, a stipend, currently \$500,000 paid out in quarterly installments over five years. The money has no strings attached and is not based on past achievements; it is meant to serve as seed money for future creativity. The foundation terms it “venture capital for intellectual, social and artistic endeavors.” This money enables activists and artists, scientists and writers, thinkers and doers, a measure of freedom from material constraints in order to pursue significant work and ideas in their present field or, if the interest is there, venture into a new field. MacArthur money awarded to fellows can be used to support current or future work, fund research or travel, pay for time away from a job or institution, allow time to rest or time to be creative. The money can also be used to pay off debts or plan for future expenses like college tuition for children or retirement. Some fellows have used the money to fund new programs or institutions; others have kept it to finance and support personal expenses. The MacArthur Foundation clearly states that the money is unrestricted and requires no reporting. Additionally, during the five years of the fellowship, health insurance is available.

Lerman may not have been aware of the details of the MacArthur, but she knew, as well as anyone working in the arts for a substantial period of time must, that a call from the MacArthur Foundation is a blessing, like manna – or pennies – from heaven.

But it's a blessing that can't be shared or announced, at least not for seven days. "You cannot talk to anyone about it for a week," Fanton warned Lerman. She said he told her that she could tell just one person. "I wasn't prepared for it at all. I was all over the place," she said. As Fanton began detailing logistics about when the official announcement would come and what Lerman should expect, a sudden connection dawned on her. "Oh," Lerman blurted out, "that's why 'Nightline' called."

A few days before Lerman took Fanton's call, an ABC News "Nightline" producer contacted Jane Hirshberg, the Dance Exchange producing director, about running a feature on Lerman and the Dance Exchange. Timing, though, just seemed off to Hirshberg, to company publicity director Gail Stamler, to humanities director Borstel and even to Lerman. Collectively the company was still recovering from its grandest project yet, *Hallelujah*. Monumental in scope, this three-year, 14-city community-based production culminated in a two-week long residency at the recently opened Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland in College Park. Following nearly a fortnight of workshops, rehearsals and public community events, more than 100 performers – professional dancers and singers, and non-professionals, students and elderly, clergy and just plain folks from Tucson and Burlington, Vermont, from Minneapolis and Raleigh, N.C. – came together at Lerman's behest. On August 9 through 11, 2002, over the course of three days, seven sections of the work were

reconstituted into a final joyful blast of praise – “a mass rejoicing of the human spirit” – emitted one last time before the project was laid to rest.

Dance Exchange staff members wondered why, after three years on the *Hallelujah* trail, ABC News had not been around a month earlier? Hirshberg said, “We thought of it as a pain in the butt.” Though Stamler wasn’t clued in about the MacArthur until the night before the public announcement on September 24, she knew that any press interest, especially from a network news crew, was important. “At that point I didn’t really have any idea [about the MacArthur],” Stamler recalled. “My job was to help facilitate that interview, to get things set up, and to make sure the people there got the information they needed to pull together. [There was] nothing specific that had to do obviously with the MacArthur, because we didn’t know about it.” The crew followed Lerman around for three days, interviewing her, shooting her in classes, rehearsals and during her daily round of meetings and collaborative consultations.

Lerman was also mystified about “Nightline’s” interest. *Hallelujah* was over. The company was recuperating and regrouping. Exhausted staff members were taking long-needed vacations, some company members were moving on and Lerman herself was beginning to mull over her next big project and new directions the Dance Exchange would take.

During that telephone conversation, when Fanton heard Lerman make the connection between the MacArthur and “Nightline,” Lerman recalled, his tone change. “We were being fairly chatty and then he said, ‘What do you mean ABC?’” Both Fanton and Lerman tensed up and she said quickly, “I didn’t tell them anything.” As if she had anything secret to tell them before Fanton had called. He asked her to hold for a

moment and when he returned, the conversation was all business. “That’s where I feel like I lost him,” Lerman said, “and to the extent that I might have had a slightly more engaged conversation, I didn’t.”

The MacArthur Foundation tightly controls the announcement of the winners, embargoing the information until the day they denote for the public announcement, which should come out with a bang. When a new crop of fellows is announced, articles appear in all the major papers and on all the news shows simultaneously. If any major paper has a local connection to a newly tapped fellow, usually additional feature coverage and a full-length interview accompany the news. “It’s funny,” Lerman said, “when they tell you not to tell, you don’t want to lose this on a technicality, so you don’t tell anybody.” And she didn’t, save for her husband, Jon Spelman, and her then-teen daughter, Anna (Jan. 16, 2004).

Sharing the News

After that phone conversation with Fanton, and that one blast of a jump, Lerman went back to work. What else could she do? She met with Perlo, who had waited patiently for nearly 30 minutes. She finished up with Borstel and said nothing to either of them about why she had uncharacteristically kept them waiting. It was nearly an hour before Lerman could take a moment to make her own telephone call. She dialed her home number and told her husband, professional storyteller Jon Spelman. His response: simply he cried. That night the two of them discussed the news with their daughter and emphasized the importance of keeping it absolutely secret until the official press announcement a week later. Anna threw her arms around her mother and cried, “I’m so proud of you!”

For Lerman the week of imposed secrecy was the MacArthur's toughest requirement. She kept quiet for six days.

The thing that's really hard for a person like me – I'm sure this isn't true across the board – is that I just work so much out by talking to people. And I had no way to work this out ... Once it was announced, I had had enough time for it to settle (Jan. 16, 2004).

On the following Tuesday, the day before the announcement, she spent the day in interviews with Style reporter Linton Weeks of the *Washington Post*, with a producer from National Public Radio and with writers from other selected news outlets. Along with the string of interviews, that day Lerman sat in her office making phone calls and meeting with her staff to plan for the ensuing onslaught. She first told her executive director, Joy Gill, and Gail Stamler, her press representative, who needed to be prepared for the rush of phone calls and interview requests following the official announcement. She felt obliged to let her staff and dancers know before they read it Wednesday morning on the front page of *The Washington Post* Style section. She called her stepmother Sara Dean in Madison, and her brothers, David in Milwaukee and Richard in Phoenix. She let her board members know and a few very close friends. It was big news, the biggest Lerman had ever had to share. Usually when she approached her board members with big news, it was of the negative variety like when the company got mired in financial straits and in was need of a cash-flow boost to make it through to the next grant disbursement or paid residency. But this time, Lerman had wonderful news to share. She brought champagne to friends Peter Franchot and Anne Mars, the Maryland state delegate and his wife, a Dance Exchange board member. When Lerman dropped by they expected the worst – another May Day call for help – and were pleasantly surprised to see her with a chilled bottle in hand.

Then it was time to tell her company members, staff associates and interns; they gathered together in the shabby lobby for an announcement. After revealing that Lerman would receive a MacArthur, there was a round of good wishes then someone asked, “Well, how much money is it?” Lerman paused momentarily, knowing that money talk, especially involving such a large amount, can lead to contentiousness, jealousy. Lerman said that she quickly discovered she should say, “\$500,000 over five years or \$100,000 a year for five years. It doesn’t sound like nearly as much as a half a million dollars.” But her plan to euphemize, at least initially, to dispel any lingering jealousies quickly went belly up. One dancer chirped up, “You mean half a million dollars?” And, Lerman said later, that sounds like a fortune to struggling dancers and arts administrators trying to make ends meet teaching, temping, performing and logging in hours working in offices and retail businesses (Jan. 16, 2004). Since receiving the award as she had before, Lerman has contributed to the Dance Exchange, but the money is not the Dance Exchange’s money, it’s Lerman’s. Jane Hirshberg noted that the MacArthur has not made an appreciative difference in the financial position of the organization, and she doesn’t expect it to, at least not in the short run (Dec. 16, 2003).

The next morning, Lerman was interviewed on National Public Radio and featured in a Style section article in *The Washington Post*. While it was above the fold on the front of the section, the headline touted the *Post*’s own journalist, Katherine Boo, a reporter who two years previous received the Pulitzer Prize for public service reporting. “Journalist Who Profiles Poor Receives Grant of \$500,000” boasted the headline. The subhead added: “MacArthur Foundation Also Awards Choreographer Liz Lerman, 22 Others.” While Lerman was not exactly an afterthought in the story, the

bulk of the copy was dedicated to the *Post*'s own accomplished writer, Boo. The story, straight news, doesn't reveal much about Lerman's work, the trajectory of her career or the ways she became notable for bringing dance to the general public and bridging cultural and artistic divides. Lerman herself said about the interview that the reporter didn't know enough about her to ask her anything interesting. In a sense, Lerman's hometown paper let her down, not out of malice, not even out of ignorance, merely out of coincidence. How could the paper not laud Boo, one of its own? If Lerman had received a MacArthur any other year, she would have been the main story.

When Lerman began notifying her family, friends and associates, her language choice was consistent. She said again and again, "I finally got a MacArthur," her face aglow, her eyes sparkling. Finally. For Lerman had known about ten years prior that she had once been nominated. "Probably it's not useful, this knowing I was nominated earlier. Because you wish, you hope ...," she admitted. But once it slipped, from a nominator who had called asking for some background material, it's information that can do a person no good, unless it comes to pass and the nomination becomes the award (Jan. 16, 2004).

Many times Lerman felt that an ensuing year would be her year. First it was her work with senior citizens that gained her public attention. But no MacArthur. Then it was her artistic and political work, using text and ripped-from-the-headlines themes in her choreography. But no MacArthur. Then it was the community work, involving under served and minority communities, in particular. But no MacArthur. Then Lerman mapped out her Critical Response Process, a codified means for looking at and responding to artistic work that involves the artist in productive feedback sessions. But

no MacArthur. Reflecting on the fact that she knew she had been nominated but had not received the recognition earlier, Lerman said,

If the MacArthur is about opening the field, or about unconventional thinking, there was a period in my life when I felt like I should have been recognized more than I was. I think I got over that about 10 years ago. But there was a period when I was extremely [fixated] about it. And I always thought [not getting the award before] had to do with the fact that I was nice, that I was female, possibly that I was Jewish, definitely that I was white and definitely that I was outside of New York (Jan. 16, 2004).

Lerman said she began to observe that dancers and choreographers a generation younger than her were receiving MacArthurs and she wrote the whole thing off as a lesson learned about not raising expectations. “All of those things added up so that it wasn’t going to happen” (Jan. 16, 2004).

Though no one from the MacArthur Foundation will speak about who is nominated, who is selected when and why, other than through the foundation’s published materials and reports, Lerman thinks what ultimately tipped the balance in her favor was her participation in the Saguaro Seminar.

I think that it may be hearing from people outside the field. Because if you look at the grantees inside the field ... that’s when I felt like I wasn’t going to get one anymore. [Recent MacArthur dance fellows are] younger than me, the nature of their work was such that it looked like they were heading in a different direction (Jan. 16, 2004).

As Lerman began to make a name and a place for herself speaking and joining panels outside of the insular modern dance world, doors continued to open to other venues. At Saguaro, a whole new cohort of thinkers, activists, community leaders, academics and public-policy experts learned about her work and its value both as artistic expression and as a workable example of political and social capital in action. In fact, Lerman was

so quietly influential with the Harvard panel that an additional session devoted entirely to the arts was added to the Saguaro Seminars. Both Putnam and Feldstein stated that initially as they planned the series of seminars, they had not anticipated a distinct session devoted to the arts. But over the course of the first few seminars, participants found Lerman's presence and her manner of relating the arts to social and public-policy issues convincing enough to request an additional seminar. Putnam recalled Lerman's participation in Saguaro, along with other high-powered journalists, academics and public-policy experts, among them journalists E.J. Dionne and George Stephanopoulos:

I'm sure if you took a poll of the people within the group that they would, many of them, maybe even all of them, would say she was the person, certainly one of the most influential people in the group, and many would say she was the most influential person in the group (March 15, 2004).

The MacArthur, for Lerman, has been both a personal and a professional triumph. It has freed her up from personal financial worries for the near future. Her most important desire, to send her daughter to the college of her choice, will be taken care of with the grant money. Additionally, Lerman noted that while she has no intention of retiring – and why should she after breaking down age barriers in the dance world– she plans to eventually slow down. So, while retirement is not on her agenda, she foresees a time when she and her husband Jon will work less and take more personal time for themselves.

The MacArthur, too, serves as an artistic validation. Over the years Lerman has built up a sense of immunity to the more difficult side of being an artist – the negative comments and the bad reviews. In addition to her codified system of Critical Response, which is now being used in college-level classes and by a burgeoning number of

theater, dance and music organizations around the country, Lerman built up internal muscles to protect herself from the blows she felt reviewers, both hometown critics and others, dealt to her work over the years. “When you get bad reviews what you have to do is to right yourself,” Lerman said. “I describe it as asking myself, ‘Why am I doing this?’ To me it felt like you needed the same muscle...Because it can be really awful.” Lerman knows that even as she’s riding the MacArthur cloud, she’s not done with the valleys. She said rhetorically,

If you thought life was going to be like this the rest of your life, it won’t be. It won’t be. It’s not going to be like this. I’ve been through enough to know, there are going to be a lot more valleys coming up. I just don’t know how [younger] people handle it (Jan. 16, 2004).

Lerman understands the MacArthur patina, and the MacArthur money, too, will pass. In the end, for Lerman, it’s the work and the effects that work has had in communities across the country and she hopes will continue to have, that will matter most.

Opening Doors

While the money has been personally liberating, just as liberating and surprising are the doors that have swung open for Lerman and for the Dance Exchange. While bookings have not shot through the roof, other evidence demonstrates that the company and Lerman are more visible than they were before. “The Dance Exchange,” Lerman noted, “gets all the status that comes with it.” While she doesn’t like the MacArthur moniker to take top billing in publicity and promotional materials -- the company and the work should come first -- Lerman said the award’s cachet definitely helps (Jan. 16, 2004).

Doors that once needed a hearty push now swing open to Lerman freely. Especially, she said, in relation to her latest work in development, “Ferocious Beauty, Tiny Monstrosities: The Human Genome.” “Doors fly open, fly open,” she said. With this, her newest project, she is seeking the participation of scientists, geneticists, ethicists and others involved in human genome research. Lerman admitted:

I would have gotten in the door anyway, because I would have. But now, it’s not just that the door opens. People are different. Instead of sitting with their arms crossed looking at you, looking at their watches, giving me two minutes, [now] their arms are opened, they’re relaxed, they want to get as much time as they can get with you. It’s a little bit like: ‘Well, you’re supposed to be a creative person, so take me for a creative ride. When are we going to start having the creative part?’ instead of, ‘You’re kidding me? I’m going to have to be creative?’ (Jan. 16, 2004).

Lerman admitted that it took a bit of time to get her bearings, to realize that she didn’t need to go through her introductory metaphorical tap dance. She didn’t need to prove herself; the MacArthur had already paved the way. “I didn’t have to fight so hard. I didn’t have to articulate so hard to get through to people. So I actually stumbled around a little bit because I didn’t have my warm up – my warm-up act was taken away from me.”

And then the MacArthur began more awards: the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, Maryland; the Tzedek Leadership Award from the United Jewish Communities, a national council of more than 150 local Jewish federations representing Jewish communities around the country; an award from the “the social headquarters for Washington’s intellectual elite” at the Cosmos Club. The Dance Exchange in November 2003 announced a \$600,000 Leadership and Excellence in the Arts Participation (LEAP) grant from the Wallace Foundation, a major coup for an organization the size of the Dance Exchange. More

typically grants of this nature are directed to major museums, regional performing arts centers and well-established theater companies. But the grant seems a perfect fit, for the LEAP program wishes to fund projects that “develop, experiment and refine innovative and effective participation-building strategies” (<http://danceexchange.org/wallace.html>) and, ultimately, to promote sharing of results with other arts organizations who may, too, adopt those strategies. Other grants and recognition, surely, will come as they have in the past.

Chapter 9: Liz Lerman: Public Intellectual

Can Liz Lerman, now stamped with the imprimatur of the MacArthur accompanying her 30-year body of work, be called a public intellectual? As she choreographs and dances less and speaks and consults more, her shift from studio to podium will garner her greater visibility in the public eye outside of the performing arts. She may not soon be found touting her ideas on the pages of *Commentary*, as public intellectuals of an earlier ilk were likely to do. Nor will she give up dance making, art making, to devote her time fully to activism and public discourse. Lerman, then, is a new breed of public intellectual, a practicing artist who maintains a foot in two worlds simultaneously.

For when Liz Lerman dances, people listen. And they listen not just because she frequently uses words – personal narrative, political text or historical passages – in her choreography. They listen because Lerman’s work wrestles with ideas. She has something to say about issues relevant to a broad cross-section of contemporary society, which are disseminated via her choreography, through her movement material, in the themes she chooses to explore, by the way she uses non-traditional spaces and atypical dancers, by the way she incorporates personal narrative, and by the way she allows the artistic and the everyday to meet and mix. By the late 1970s, when modern dance was particularly mired in formalist traits and structures, Lerman unabashedly eschewed formalism and reintroduced ideas of narrative and storytelling into her choreography. She didn’t aim to make dances that just danced; she set out to make dances that were about something, dances that said something, dances made a statement

that for her was personal as well as political. The ideas and themes she sought out nearly always exhibited her ideal of essential universal humanism in the great modern dance tradition of her dance forebears of the 1930s and 1940s and 1950s: Doris Humphrey, Anna Sokolow, José Limón and Anna Halprin. This generation of modern dance choreographers believed dance must make statements about society, about community and about history and politics. Dance must communicate a larger purpose. Their choreography bore messages of universalism and communitarian ideals.

Lerman's dances, like her forbears, carry the message of those ideals to a new generation in the 21st century. Her accomplishments within her field as a dancer and choreographer, and beyond the field as a speaker and writer, have been exemplary for the influence she has had on others involved in dance and arts and beyond. Her early utopian vision for a collaborative community of dancers and artists – her Dance Exchange – open and available to all has not changed dramatically over time. What has changed is the way the public now views dance and art, and that change has had at least something to do with what Lerman has accomplished over the course of her career. That her achievements have continually crossed fields suggests her viability as a public intellectual. But equally convincing is her continuing desire to advocate and disseminate her ideas and her dance values to the general public. That is what defines her as a public intellectual.

But not everyone sees Lerman as a public intellectual. The term public intellectual initially troubled Lewis Feldstein, president of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and co-chair of the Saguaro Seminar. He finds that her work as a choreographer and dancer does not allow for the scope that a published author can

attain with a popular book-length treatise on a similar topic. “Well ... the difference is Liz’s work is more retail than wholesale, right?” he wondered aloud (Feb. 2, 2004).

Feldstein defined public intellectual in terms of scale of impact and noted someone like his Saguaro co-chair Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor and public intellectual, has the ability to reach a broader spectrum of people through various media. Putnam’s work is published and discussed widely, in particular his recent books *Making Democracy Work* and *Bowling Alone*. Feldstein sees a problem of scale in comparing Lerman’s work to, for example, Putnam’s:

Liz’s impact is very much tied to the direct impact with Liz or her troupe. It’s hard to imagine as easily being influenced by her work at a distance, that is hearing something about it or seeing it on a tape, even, compared to actually being in the presence. It’s a different way of moving people. People who write books or make movies have the great benefit of being able to make a volume sale because the distribution, the megaphone, is so wide at the outside end. Liz’s megaphone is probably much narrower at the outside end. It’s not simply a tube that goes straight from my lips to someone else’s ear, Liz is a little bit larger than that. But it’s not likely to have quite the reach ... It’s just a different way of reaching people (Feb. 2, 2004).

Feldstein doesn’t take into account the tremendous influence Lerman’s work has had over the past 30 years within numerous areas among them the dance community, the senior adult community and the Jewish community, to name just three where Lerman’s work has been influential and change-inducing. He believes that Lerman may not reach as broad an audience as academic, public-policy and journalistic brand names like Putnam and Posner, who publish their ideas rather than choreograph and perform them. Lerman doesn’t broadcast her message on “Meet the Press” nor in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. Rather her ideals are interwoven in and disseminated through her choreography, her writing, her participation on panels and selected forums. She also demonstrates those ideas by example, in the way she runs her company as a

collaborative venture and the way she readily teaches, often subtly, in workshops and during her public addresses. Her immediate audience may be small in relation to academically or journalistically based public intellectuals, but it is not insignificant.

Professor and scholar Robert Putnam, a public intellectual of some repute, although also wary of the term and the constricting label it places on any public figure, finds a way to delineate Lerman as a public intellectual:

There is no question, if you talk to people around the country, lots of people know of Liz Lerman who never met Liz. And in that sense I think she's a public intellectual and she's certainly a public figure and a model, a role model (March 15, 2004).

Putnam echoes Feldstein in noting that one of the ways that Lerman can solidify her stature as a public intellectual is to find a way to more broadly disseminate her work via publication. He said:

I hope that at some point Liz ... will reduce to paper so that other people can learn about the techniques and lessons that she knows instinctively in her being. Because that's another way in which ideas get diffused beyond the handful of people any one of us can talk to face to face (March 15, 2004).

While Lerman has self-published a number of teaching modules and manuals through the Dance Exchange, among them a booklet of her speeches and essays, *Are Miracles Enough?* and her *Critical Response Process*, the acceptance of a larger legitimate publisher would assuredly lend more authority and more visibility to her work. Her groundbreaking handbook, *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults*, remains a model manual in the field of arts, teaching and geriatrics, but it is not something that readers without a special interest will pick up and study.

Lerman's most effective means of propagating her ideas so far have been through her choreography, her classes and workshops, and her public addresses. In all

of these guises she demands of audiences, students and listeners to consider contemporary dance and art in relationship to its role in society. She makes powerful assertions about how art can improve and change lives for the better and she gives compelling, often personal examples, whether in movements or in words. Lerman has campaigned tirelessly for a new conception of how artistic practices can inform and enhance everyday lives and that is typically what most intrigues audiences of non-arts practitioners. (Although many arts practitioners have known this for years, they haven't had the facility to articulate it as proficiently as Lerman has.)

Within the field she has contributed to the wider age and ability ranges dancers can bring to the stage and studio. When Lerman began her journey 30 years ago, at the Roosevelt Hotel for Seniors, dancers not much over 40 were ending their performing careers (aside from a few modern masters like Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham, who performed well beyond the typical age of dancer's retirement). Today, the age range of dancers has broadened, not solely because of Lerman's venture into multi-generational choreography, but her contributions as early as her 1975 work at the Roosevelt, coupled with a sweeping shift in popular culture views of aging, helped change perspectives. It's no longer a shock to see older dancers, older bodies, on stage – a public contribution Lerman has made to the field of dance and beyond. This contribution is explored fully in her *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults*, and in her workshops and teacher training sessions, which have brought her ideas to senior center sites across the country and beyond. Her work in the senior community has been examined in academic journals and discussed in the halls of Congress. It attracts interest from fields ranging from geriatrics to social work to early child education,

where Lerman's Dancers of the Third Age began performing for youngsters in elementary schools.

Outside of the dance field, Lerman's work in the Jewish community early in her career was initially not accepted, warmly or otherwise. In fact, it was rarely even noticed by mainstream Jews, Jewish presenters and Jewish funders. During the Dance Exchange's first decade, while Lerman received no financial support from community-based Jewish organizations for her work, she persisted in making Jewishly relevant and themed works. These works and her ideals firmly grounded in the tenets of Reform Judaism soon began to gather momentum and notice from small, unaffiliated Jewish communal groups, then synagogues, and finally, most recently, broad national-level organizations. Eventually Lerman's personal connection with members in her own local Jewish community, in particular Rabbi Daniel Zemel of Washington, D.C.'s Temple Micah, brought her to the attention of national leaders and garnered her an invitation to join a think tank of Jewish scholars, educators and clergy, Synagogue 2000, a Saguaro-like panel of socially, politically and communally committed Jews charged with rethinking the role of the American synagogue in the 21st century. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, Synagogue 2000 cofounder, recounts his early encounters with Lerman and her work, which bridges dance and communal worship for Jewish audiences:

We got lucky at Synagogue 2000 – Rachel Cowan, Rachel Levin and Bruce and Shelley Whizen [the group's supporters] -- they believed in all this stuff and had the money to support it Then the next thing ... was word got out [about] what we're doing and people in the [Jewish] funders' network asked us ... if we could do a Shabbat for them. That put [Lerman] in touch with all the [Jewish] funders who fund everything across the country (March 18, 2004).

From Fringe to Mainstream

From a fringe element in the early Jewish renewal movement of the 1970s, Lerman has become a recognized and lauded national figure in contemporary American Jewish life. In Jewish terms, that Lerman was once considered an outsider in the Jewish community, this is a major acknowledgment of her acceptance into mainstream Jewish life. She has addressed national gatherings at the International Association of Jewish Theaters, the National Havurah Institute, the Taube Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford University, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) and the Council of American Jewish Museums, to name a few recent invitations. Again, while Lerman's influence with these organizations is limited to those who see her company, hear her speak, participate in her workshops, or read her published writings, those who are moved by her words and her dances (she frequently will perform a solo or bring along one or two company members to perform at these addresses) are able, even motivated, to bring Jewish arts into synagogues and other Jewish venues and to build or support a socially and artistically as well as religiously literate Jewish community.

Putnam describes Lerman as a contributor to social capital – his conception of how people in society must connect and build communities and community-oriented and -motivated projects together. Lerman's own *Shipyard Project* was one among a dozen of Putnam's case studies detailing specific examples of social capital around the country (2003). The 1995-96 *Shipyard Project* in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, featured an ongoing community-participation component and a weekend of site-specific performances that involved local participants and the Dance Exchange. This long-term project seems to have had some lasting residual effects on the place of art and artistic

activities in this transitioning city. Putnam and Feldstein concluded about Lerman's work that it initiates and builds bridges, an essential component of this theory of social capital:

Liz Lerman's professional life is dedicated to building on this particular strength, using participatory dance to create connection across social divides. The Portsmouth dance project aimed to bridge shipyard and town, which were divided both by social class (working class versus professionals) and by ideology (national defense versus "green" peaceniks). The process brought people from the two communities together, establishing intimacy and trust. Although the connection was symbolized by the ribbons joined on the Memorial Bridge in the grand finale, bridging social capital was actually built over the two long years of development and rehearsal, rather than in the performance itself (281).

Her influence on community-based arts, beyond the *Shipyards Project* that Putnam described, has over the years been unparalleled. Beginning in the early years of the Dance Exchange, Lerman has sought out ways to bridge the dance world and larger society. Dance is for everybody, she proclaims. And whether that dance is presented on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, at the base of the Statue of Liberty or on a neighborhood street corner where mini-forklifts dance with children and teens, professionals and novices, Lerman's message is that dance is a birthright and by dancing connections are made and cemented for creating a better society at large. With this message, Putnam finds no one else working in community-based arts on the level that Lerman does in this country:

In the field of community impact on art, she's clearly the dominant person in America. There's no doubt about that. There are other people in America who have had a big impact on community, but nobody else I know has had this kind of impact she has had on the question of the social impact of art (March 15, 2004).

The question remains for Putnam, though, how Lerman's impact on communities can be maintained over the course of time, especially once the company completes its project and moves on. He wonders about the city of Portsmouth, and asks what happens in ten years, or twenty. As a social scientist, Putnam prefers to deal in measurable statistics and what Lerman does with community-based work cannot be methodically measured. He doesn't question the life-changing manner in which welders and even the naval commander were affected by her work in Portsmouth; he's just unsure about whether that can be replicated at other sites and by other artists in other times.

That remains his question: How much of this is a pure genius of someone who is very charismatic and how much of it is a technique that could be utilized in many places. "I'm agnostic on that question. If I thought it was entirely Liz we probably would not have included that chapter in our book," he says. "On the other hand, I do think it is an interesting question and the jury is out" (March 15, 2004).

It's a question that Lerman and her colleagues at the Dance Exchange are also wrestling with. It's the reason why Lerman has focused on teaching teachers over the years; through workshops and mentorships a number of dancers and others have learned her techniques. The Dance Exchange has developed a thick three-ring binder – a tool-kit of sorts – that sets out various exercises and describes community settings in which these exercises will work best. It's a start, but not yet an answer for what part of Lerman's influence is based on her own charismatic personality and what part is teachable to others in the field.

A Place at the Table

Away from the dance studio and choreographed performances where she began her career, Lerman now is more frequently found at the lectern or the roundtable – “by invitation only,” echoing one of Lightman’s definitions of public intellectual. Her keynote address, frequently titled “Hiking the Horizontal,” debunks the hierarchical structure that Western culture has valued for millennia into a simple, concise and profound statement, spoken gesturally as she moves her hands to indicate the tectonic shift from vertical to horizontal notions of organization. Recently Lerman has been speaking to a broader range of organizations, on national forums and panels representing professions and communities of editors and financial planners, rabbis and Jewish educators, classical music conductors, non-profit foundations and university academic departments. At the behest of these organizations, Lerman is an invitation-only speaker who delivers an inspirational and motivational message about the relationship between the arts and other areas of life, about the need to reassess longstanding logical cultural and social structures. She personalizes her address with life stories from her own experience growing up and becoming a dancer and choreographer. But her message is also political, saturated with assertions that Westernized conceptions of society need to be turned upside down, if not at least sideways. It’s a new way of performing for Lerman, who has been accustomed to using her body and her dancers’ bodies to promote her message. This address, which changes each time she gives it depending on audience response and the requests of the presenter, has become what Lerman calls her repertory piece, the signature work that’s associated with a particular dancer or company (Feb. 27, 2004).

Earlier “New York City Winter” served as her rep piece, and in more recent years Lerman’s solo, “50 Modest Reflections on Turning 50,” has also become a rep piece. But the keynote does exactly what Lerman wants it to do: it motivates, shakes up, and awakens audiences to fresh thinking about their own lives. It’s ironic that the less Lerman dances and the more she speaks, the closer she gets to the heart of her artistic ideals and to becoming a public intellectual for a new century. It’s a mystery, as well, that many on the traditional side of the public intellectual podium, still have difficulty recognizing art and especially moving art like dance as legitimate in expressing meaningful ideas for audiences of other intellectuals and the general public.

In 1976, when Liz Lerman founded the Dance Exchange she wanted dance, her dance, to “make a difference,” as the organization noted on its early publicity materials. Nearly 30 years later she persists, working to bring dance to a broad array of audiences, to introduce dance to those who may not have had access, to create works that engage people politically, ethically, physically, spiritually and socially. Simultaneously Lerman has found a measure of acceptance outside of the dance studio, at the table of public discourse alongside public intellectuals, alongside national Jewish leaders, alongside artists and community activists. She doesn’t sit at that table always for she still needs time in the studio to create with her dancers.

Today, as she has throughout her career, Lerman continues to speak, to write, to lecture, to teach, to advocate, first and foremost about dance. But, ultimately, Lerman uses dance and choreography, the arts and the classroom, the stage and the lectern, as a means of addressing issues of social and political importance to her. Her work and her life unquestionably have had an agenda. Her dances deal forthrightly with issues as

diverse as creative lifestyles for senior citizens, politically liberal agendas, identity issues of race, religion, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Her dances, her lectures and her writings pose the same big questions that public intellectuals address. Liz Lerman has followed her life's path, invented herself as a dancer, a choreographer, and, most recently and importantly, as a public intellectual. Because her choreography does not typically stay long in the company's repertory, her work as a speaker, a writer and a thinker – a public intellectual – will ultimately be Lerman's most important and lasting contribution to dance and to the world at large.

Appendices

Appendix 1

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Identification of Project/Title	Bringing Dance to the Table
Statement of Age of Subject	Liz Lerman: Dancer, Choreographer, Public Intellectual
Please note: Parental consent is always needed for minors!	
Purpose	<i>I, the participant, state that I am over 18 years of age, and agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Lisa Traiger in the Department of Dance at the University of Maryland, College Park.</i>
Procedures	<i>The purpose of this research is obtain personal perspectives and experiences on the artistic, community and public work of dancer and choreographer Liz Lerman. The procedures involve a series of several one to two hour interviews, which will be tape-recorded. These interviews will involve questions and conversations about dancer/choreographer Liz Lerman.</i>
Confidentiality	<i>I give permission for direct quotations from this (these) interview(s) to be used and for my name to be used in this research and any subsequent publication resulting from this research. I understand that I may request not to be identified by name, or by other indicators of identity. <input type="checkbox"/> I agree and prefer to have my name used in investigator's reports where I am cited or quoted.</i> <div style="text-align: right;">Initials _____ Date _____</div>
Risks	<i>I understand there are no foreseeable risks associated with these interviews.</i>
Benefits, Freedom to Withdraw, & Ability to Ask Questions	<i>The research is designed to help the investigator learn more about the work of dancer and choreographer Liz Lerman. I understand that I am free to ask questions or withdraw from participation at any time and without penalty. Upon my request, the interview(s) or specific portions of the interviews will no longer be used.</i>
Ownership	<i>I give permission for this (these) interview(s) and audiotape(s) to be used in perpetuity by Lisa Traiger only and to be archived in her collection of personal papers and manuscripts. I understand that I will not be paid for my time or for use of the interviews.</i>
Contact Information of Investigator	<i>Lisa Traiger: (301) 881-8958 or lisatraiger@aol.com Faculty Advisor: Karen Bradley, Department of Dance, University of Maryland, College Park (301) 405-0387 or kbradley@wamum.edu</i>
Participant's Name, Signature	NAME OF PARTICIPANT _____ SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT _____
Contact Information, and Date	DATE _____ ADDRESS _____ PHONE _____ E-Mail _____

Appendix 2

Choreography by Liz Lerman (1974-2002)

Title of Work	First Performance	Year
“New York City Winter”	St. Mark’s Danspace New York, NY	1974
“Woman of the Clear Vision”	Mt. Vernon College Washington, D.C.	1975
“Memory Gardens”	Washington Project for the Arts Washington, D.C.	1976
“Ms. Galaxy and Her Three Raps With God”	Baltimore Theatre Project Baltimore, MD	1977
“Elevator Operators & Other Strangers”	Dance Exchange Washington, D.C.	1978
“Still Life With Cat and Fingers”	Dance Exchange Washington, D.C.	1978
“Bonsai”	The National Arboretum Washington, D.C.	1978
“R.S.V.P.”	O’Neill Choreographers’ Conference Waterford, CT	1979
“Who’s on First?”	City Dance, Warner Theatre Washington, D.C.	1979
“Fanfare for the Common Man”	City Dance, The Mall Washington, D.C.	1980
“Journey 1-4”	Washington Project for the Arts Washington, D.C.	1980
“Current Events”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1981
“Songs and Poems of the Body: In the Gallery”	The Kennedy Center Washington, D.C.	1981

“Docudance: Reaganomics”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1982
“Songs and Poems of the Body: In the Text”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1982
“Docudance: Nine Short Dances About the Defense Budget And Other Military Matters”	Marvin Center Washington, D.C.	1983
“Variations on a Window”	New Music America The Old Post Office Washington, D.C.	1983
“Pavanne for Two Older Women” The Old Post Office	New Music America Washington, D.C.	1983
“Second Variation on a Window”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1984
“E. Hopper”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1984
“Ives & Company”	National Portrait Gallery Washington, D.C.	1984
“Space Cadet”	Washington Project for the Arts Washington, D.C.	1984
“The Transparent Apple And the Silver Saucer”	Sidwell Auditorium Washington, D.C.	1985
“Russia: Footnotes to History”	Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, CA	1986
“Still Crossing”	Liberty Dances Battery Park, NY	1986
“Black Sea Follies”	Lenox Arts Center Lenox, MA	1986
“Atomic Priests: Coming Attractions”	Dance Arts/Moving Arts Washington, D.C.	1987

“Sketches from Memory”	Dance Arts/Moving Arts Washington, D.C.	1987
“Atomic Priests: The Future”	Dance Theater Workshop New York, NY	1987
“Ms. Appropriate Goes To the Theater”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1988
“Reenactments”	The Kennedy Center Washington, D.C.	1989
“Floating Hand”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1989
“Five Days in Maine”	Maine Festival Portland, ME	1989
“May I Have Your Attention Please!”	Union Station Washington, D.C.	1990
“Docudance 1990: Dark Interlude”	14 th Street Dancecenter New York, NY	1990
“The Perfect Ten”	Serious Fun! At Lincoln Center New York, NY	1990
“A Life in the Nation’s Capital”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1990
“Anatomy of an Inside Story”	Dance Place Washington, D.C.	1990
“Short Stories” (version 1)	The Barns at Wolf Trap Vienna, VA	1991
“Short Stories” (version 2)	American Dance Festival Durham, NC	1991
untitled	Meredith College Raleigh, NC	1991
“The Good Jew?”	Israeli/Jewish American Dance Festival Boston, MA	1991

untitled site-specific work	The Kennedy Center Washington, D.C.	1991
“The Awakening”	McKinley High School Washington, D.C.	1992
“Incidents in the Life of an Ohio Youth”	BalletMet, Ohio Theatre Columbus, OH	1993
“This Is Who We Are”	George Washington University Washington, D.C.	1993
“Spelunking the Center”	The Kennedy Center Washington, D.C.	1993
“Safe House: Still Looking”	Cowell Theater San Francisco, CA	1994
“Flying Into the Middle”	Joyce Theater New York, NY	1995
“Faith and Science on the Midway” (Shehechianu, phase I)	The Lansburgh Theatre Washington, D.C.	1995
“Room For Many More” (collaboration with Kimberli Boyd and company members)	The Chicago Historical Society Museum, Chicago, IL	1995
“Portsmouth Pages”	The Music Hall Portsmouth, NH	1995
“Sustenance Dance” (collaboration with Michelle Pearson and company members)	May Fair Allentown, PA	1996
“Bench Marks” (Shehechianu, phase II)	Lisner Auditorium Washington, D.C.	1996
“Nocturnes”	Lisner Auditorium Washington, D.C.	1996
“Shehechianu”	The Lansburgh Theatre Washington, D.C.	1997
“Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty”	University of Arizona Tucson, AZ	1998

<i>Hallelujah</i> : “Gates of Praise” And “In Praise of Animals And Their People”	Lisner Auditorium Washington, D.C.	1999
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “First Light”	The Dock Eastport, ME	2000
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “In Praise of Ordinary Prophets” (collaboration with Peter DiMuro and company members)	University of Arizona Tucson, AZ	2000
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “In Praise of Fertile Fields” (collaboration with Martha Wittman and company members)	Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival Beckett, MA	2000
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “Stones Will Float, Leaves Will Sink, Paths Will Cross”	Skirball Cultural Center Los Angeles, CA	2001
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “In Praise of Constancy in the Midst of Change”	Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, Burlington, VT	2001
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “In Praise of Beauty And Disorder”	Walker Arts Center Minneapolis, MN	2001
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “In Praise of The Creative Spirit”	Bates Dance Festival Lewiston, ME	2001
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “In Praise of Paradise Lost and Found”	Power Center University Musical Society Ann Arbor, MI	2001
“Uneasy Dances: Anatomies and Epidemics”	Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church New York, NY	2002
“Uneasy Dances: Dances at a Cocktail Party”	Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center Tampa, FL	2002
<i>Hallelujah</i> : “In Praise of Borrowed Blessings”	The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at Maryland College Park, MD	2002

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