



Double Exposure  
RAWdance  
ODC Theater, San Francisco, California, October 27, 2017

Aretha Franklin's voice surges warm and bosomy from the sound system, singing the 1960's Sam Cooke classic, *A change is gonna come* . . . As she sings, two dancers cavort below, an inane little chirping noise intrudes, and what we gather are tweets from the choreographer David Rousse'Ve appear above, emoticons and all. His favorite note from Aretha is about to come, he tweets. Listen for it . . . *That one*. The one that makes him feel *mmmm*. The way Wendy and Ryan are dancing, that's the way that note makes him feel, he says. And he goes on to tweet that he didn't understand how he felt about this song as a young black boy. As a grown black man, he understands. But he still doesn't understand how he feels when he sees this . . . the song cuts, shots sound, we see grainy video of an unarmed young black man being shot by police officers. The dancers convulse and tremble. A dance can communicate how he feels, Rousse'Ve tweets. *But is it enough?*

It was one of those rare dance moments when the air became atomically charged, a hush prevailed, but in that silence and in the hair pricks on your skin you could feel the horror and the compassion and the confrontation with reality connecting everyone in the theater. It was, in a word, powerful. And it was shrewdly chosen and perfectly timed as the height of tension in "Double Exposure," a marathon performance that began in 2015 when Wendy Rein and Ryan T. Smith, directors of RAWdance, began commissioning 13 West Coast choreographers to make two-minute duets for them to dance.

This is no mere showcase of snippets. Rein and Smith premiered the first iteration of "Double Exposure" in RAWdance's home city of San Francisco in July 2016, then reworked it for Jacob's Pillow and New York's Joyce Theater. Doing so, they discovered its strengths, which are distinctive, charming, and ultimately very valuable. As Wendy says during one of the show's moments of taped video interlude, "It's not about proving we're superstar contemporary dancers." Ryan finishes her thought: "We're not."

But they are good dancers, with great brains. (Their dance partnership began 19 years ago at Ivy League Brown University, where Wendy majored in computer science.) They chose a balanced anthology of choreographers, from emerging to acclaimed, abstractly ascetic to exuberantly campy. And they zeroed in on their urgent point of investigation: “It’s about having a conversation with these choreographers,” their video selves say. A conversation about what dance can do.

That’s quite a range. In Shinichi and Dana Iova-Koga’s contribution, dance can bring you into a surrealistic image of nature, Ryan standing with a tree branching growing from his head, Wendy curled half-naked and writhing at his feet, the muscles of her back squirming like a primordial inchworm. In Kate Wallich’s jumpsuit-costumed entry, dance can dazzle you with geometry, turning arms into vectors and torsos into tilted planes. In Monique Jenkinson’s spectacle, dance can use stock jazz chassés and struts to assert a defiant, tender pride in the face of gender expectations.

These were my favorites in a medley that includes cheeky talk-while-dancing from Joe Goode, exquisite formalism to Mozart by [KT Nelson](#), and grunting wrestling-in-silence by Tahni Holt. But the beauty of “Double Exposure” is that if you’re bored with a duet, it’s over in two minutes. While betwixt and between, Rein and Smith are dependably charismatic.

Humility is their ace to play, and they play it often, Ryan lamenting that his right knee no longer straightens, Wendy that her left hip refuses to turn in, both apologizing for their singing but delivering perfectly on key karaoke (“Just the Two of Us,” “Two of Hearts,” you get the idea). We learn that Wendy hates dating, and that Ryan lost his virginity to Sade on repeat. There is some philosophizing about what they’re trying to do up there—be their most genuine selves, or the genuine selves created by a choreographer’s assignment to not be their genuine selves? Wendy calls herself lanky (“There’s not an ounce of fat on her!” was the way the woman behind me saw it), and jokes that singing “Tits and Ass” from “A Chorus Line” as a little girl didn’t get her any. The most “live” moment between them, I thought, comes when Ryan discusses once dropping Wendy, face down, on concrete, and Wendy laughs that it didn’t hurt so bad, really.

I wonder if Wendy might, going forward, be a bit more loose and laughing in her dancing. Her default mode is one of wide-eyed daze, a kind of disassociated eeriness. Ryan is quite muscled, and mostly frighteningly intense while dancing, but his speaking voice is light and insouciant, a wonderful foil.

For now, they’ve made brilliant decisions in arranging the duets for emotional escalation and denouement. How to follow the devastation of Roussève’s grief and fear? With a forgettable silent dance by Los Angeles choreographers casebolt and smith, then a talking duet of goonish absurdity by Ann Carlson. The closer? A silly little prom dress-costumed romp by Amy Seiwert set to a David Bowie cover. Then Ryan came back out with a piñata, which Wendy smashed, releasing the audience to candy and mass revelry. We could go on with life, soothed enough—but the chill of Roussève’s dance was in our memories and bodies and hearts. Roussève’s dance was the reason for the immediate standing ovation, I think. That’s what dance can do. I don’t know if it’s enough, but I’m grateful.

[Amy Seiwert](#)[Dana Iova-Koga](#)[David Roussève](#)[Jacob's Pillow](#)[Joe Goode](#)[Kate Wallich](#)[KT Nelson](#)[Monique Jenkinson](#)[ODC/Dance](#)[RAWdance](#)[Ryan T. Smith](#)[Shinichi](#)[Tahni Holt](#)[The Joyce Theater](#)[Wendy Rein](#)

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