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DANCE

Making a Career With One Eye on a Gender Gap

By APOLLINAIRE SCHERR

“WHEN I feel scared that my voice is not meant to be heard, it doesn't come out so smoothly,” said the choreographer Ellis Wood, 36, on a bright October day in an empty cafe in Little Italy. “But I have an intense need to speak.”

Her most recent work, “Funktionslust Slut,” commissioned by Dance Theater Workshop, opens on Thursday and runs through Sunday at the Duke on 42nd Street in Manhattan (on a double bill with the premiere of Lisa Race's “Social Climb”). Sharp swings, from awkward constraint and self-deprecation to forceful assertion, shape not only Ms. Wood's conversation but also her dance.

Leslie Johnson, Michelle LaRue, Jennifer Phillips, Kristine Willis and Ms. Wood burst from imaginary running blocks only to race in tight circles. Ms. Phillips, tangling her arms round her legs, cries, “Help! Help me!” and almost as frantically: “Really, you don't have to pay me. I'll do it! I'm free!” Ms. Johnson leaps skyward — to volley an invisible ball? To touch a glass ceiling? Ms. Wood throws her arms overhead like a victorious athlete, then shouts, “Am I too loud?”

Eventually a couple of the women whisper, “I'm hot, I'm soooo hot,” and glance over bare shoulders while rolling their hips. They're not trying out sexiness; sexiness is auditioning them. In “Funktionslust Slut” (made-up German for “the love of being a slut”), women are put to the test even in their regular roles: seductress, femme fatale, dancer.

“Funktionslust Slut” is simultaneously a homage to modern dance's early pioneers and a deliberate if elliptical response to the endemic humiliations of women in today's modern dance. Women's status in the American workplace has generally improved over the last century, but in American modern dance — female-rich since the art form's beginnings — women have become a less and less powerful majority. Their financial support as choreographers, in particular, has fallen below even the abysmal level of their male peers, and the women's work is rarely seen on the national stage.

Ms. Wood follows in the tradition, as she put it, of “Isadora, Martha and my mom.” (Her mother, Marni Wood, performed with Martha Graham throughout the 60's and then helped start the dance program at the University of California at Berkeley with Ellis's father, David Wood). Ms. Wood resembles Isadora Duncan and Graham not in her movement or her theatricality but in the influence her experiences as a woman have had on her work.

Duncan rose to stardom as women gained the right to vote. “Although she was by no means the first or the most effective feminist, she was certainly among the most flamboyant,” wrote the ballet and Broadway choreographer Agnes de Mille. Discarding shoes, stockings and the corset to frolic in a loose tunic and bare feet, she added, “Duncan was the sensational public advertisement of women's freedom.”

Graham adopted less joyous personas. In her 1943 masterpiece, “Deaths and Entrances,” she said, the Brönte sisters are “women unable to free themselves of themselves to follow their hearts' desires.” Many of Graham's heroines are similarly afflicted.

The movement technique Graham developed — with her first, exclusively female troupe — described imprisoned desire in erotic terms. As Pearl Lang, a longtime Graham dancer and a choreographer, has said, “The breath in the body goes way down from the genitals up through the center and finally bursts out.” Graham put it more

Apollinaire Scherr's most recent dance article for Arts & Leisure was about the Bessies and modern dance.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Ellis Wood, right, and Michelle LaRue rehearsing Ms. Wood's “Funktionslust Slut,” commissioned by Dance Theater Workshop and opening this week in Manhattan.

bluntly. “Move from your vagina,” she instructed.

Duncan and Graham turned outward to the world and inward to the psyche to invent a female-oriented modern dance. Ms. Wood has turned to the dance scene itself for inspiration — to episodes that she and her female peers have experienced in the wings.

Ms. Wood has interviewed dozens of women in professional companies and university dance programs for a Manhattan-based dance research and dancer's support program called the Gender Project. She described numerous instances of the double standard that women struggle under but asked that they be kept off the record to maintain the confidentiality of her subjects. Nevertheless, there is plenty of visible evidence to bear her out.

In a 1976 article in *The Village Voice* entitled “When a Woman Dances, Nobody Cares,” Wendy Perron and Stephanie Woodard presented a statistical comparison of men and women in dance. While women constituted the majority of choreographers, dancers, administrators, teachers and students, men reaped a disconcerting proportion of prizes and opportunities. A quarter-century later, these findings still hold. And among the leaders in modern dance — the choreographers — men have become more prominent than women.

Among the current generation of American modern-dance choreographers — artists 35 to 50 years old who are generally no longer emerging but have yet to become institutions — most of those appearing at the American Dance Festival, the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival,

the Kennedy Center's “American Dancing” and the Joyce Theater are men. Only small theaters with local followings, modest budgets and limited producing capacities, like ODC Theater in San Francisco and P.S. 122, Danspace Project and Dance Theater Workshop in New York, represent women in proportion to their presence on the scene.

Men also receive substantially more financial backing than women. In 2000, 18 modern-dance choreographers, ages 35 to

Despite her successes as a choreographer, Ellis Wood finds that men get the money and attention in modern dance today.

50, received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. The endowment is only one of the sponsors of modern dance but national in scope and, as a government agency, held to strict account for gender, racial or ethnic bias. Thirteen of the 18 recipients were men. The men received a total of \$200,000, with a typical grant of \$10,000; the women received a total of \$45,000, with a typical grant of \$5,000. Grant recipients are also the choreographers whom the nationally known performance spaces present and produce: if one has the

financing, it's easier to get produced, and vice versa.

So, what's going on?

Choreographers are dancers first. As long as there are fewer male dancers, men will receive a disproportionate number of scholarships and paid positions because dances need them: men move differently from women and signify other things — socially and psychologically — to us. Women's chronic awareness of their inferior market value “seeps into the rest of our careers,” Ms. Wood said.

Imagine you are Miriam Modern-Dancer — devoted to your art, grounded, barefoot. You could be any number of the women Ms. Wood has spoken with and worked beside. You could be one of the many talented female choreographers, now in their late 30's, whose careers are stumbling.

At the start of your career, you watched the few men in your daily dance class get the bulk of the teacher's attention while you, better trained, took instruction from the mirror. At rehearsals, arranged to accommodate the men's busy schedules, male dancers had the option of chomping on chips between steps while you paid scrupulous attention to the choreographer's every move, conscious of how replaceable you were. Now years later, after choreographing and teaching workshops for a while — no, sorry, you don't teach workshops because you have no draw: you are not a choreographer with backing, who might later employ the workshop participants.

So, years later, typing away at your day job, you get a call from a college friend. He invites you to the premiere of his evening-

length work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In 1995, the National Endowment for the Arts discontinued its grants to individual artists, a main support of modern-dance choreographers. With the federal defanging of modern dance, you feel genuine relief at your friend's recognition. But you wish your own situation weren't so bleak. Your last gig was at a local, weekend dance festival where you and 70 other “self-producing” choreographers (most of them women) were each given 10 minutes onstage.

Lately, you've started to wonder whether your lack of funding and visibility has made your work suffer. Or maybe you just haven't got it. Or maybe, you think, the problem isn't your work — maybe when the funders, producers and curators see you coming, they stop looking: women like you are a dime-a-dozen. But you'll never know, will you?

Ms. Wood's much-coveted commission from the grassroots service and presenting organization, Dance Theater Workshop, covers a weekend in the theater with all advertising expenses paid and an additional \$3,000 for the cost of costumes, music and a year of rehearsals. For the occasion, she has taken a complex of anger, defeat, weariness and the abiding suspicion that one harbors a fatal flaw visible to everyone but oneself and converted it into a true and awkward work. Many of us have been able to escape the feminine affliction that plagued our mothers. In the dance scene, it's still epidemic, but the passion it arouses is rarely brought onstage anymore. “Funktionslust Slut” lets it dance again, in all its furious glory. □