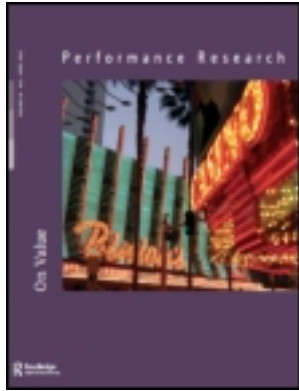


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

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Published online: 01 Nov 2013.

**To cite this article:** Blakeley White-Mcguire (2013) Re-examining the Inevitable Rise, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 18:4, 42-47, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2013.814370](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.814370)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.814370>

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# Re-examining the Inevitable Rise

BLAKELEY WHITE-MCGUIRE

Falling is a physical reality. Humans and other beings encounter and/or experience it nearly on a daily basis throughout a lifetime without necessarily considering the meaning associated with this symbolic gesture. In the canon of Modern dance, the fall is a catalyst to the rise – an intentional heroic recovery. Extant physical performance practices within this canon embody falling's metaphorical significance as a performative and creative act.

Through my many years of physical performance work as principal dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company, I have developed an internalized understanding of the kinaesthetic risk involved with truly, physically falling. This muscular, emotional and sensory knowledge of what motivates fall and rise in performance is directly related to the concepts and ideas that comprise the Modern dance canon's technical and metaphorical fall and recovery practice. While countless individuals and groups have developed such techniques and methodologies over time and in relationship to culture, here I will examine those practices specific to Western Modern dance and their resonance with practitioners making work today.

In order for a fall to be effective in dance performance, its edge (kinaesthetic and metaphoric) must be continuously re-discovered. From my own embodied practices of falling, I know that its phenomenal potential lay in the liminality where/when I physically feel time's suspension through a conscious control of my body moving in space and in response to forces such as gravity and momentum. Through this visceral and perceptual shift in time-space relationship,

I move out of the rhythm of the ordinary and expected (outer landscape) into an exploratory, even transgressive, space of acute listening to my inner rhythms – into *feeling* my own, individual inner pulse. As blood moves through my veins in response to my particular breath patterns and imagination, my physical body acts in response to these inner realities, subsequently birthing a personal movement interpretation. This interactive dynamic of internalized versus internal intelligences synthesizes learning from the world outside while simultaneously acknowledging that there are experiences (such as intentional falling performed through physical training and virtuosity) that release the body's personal internal wisdom. Such experiences create visceral knowledge of the ever-present human movement language. Any verbal articulation of these revelations can only be approximate as the dance form is experiential – the lessons learned are housed in the individual's experience.

The purpose of learning and teaching techniques for performing a fall is to consciously execute it in a heightened state of physicality without the dancer's body incurring physical injury – an unusual feat for most untrained bodies. 'Since dancing is essentially an art of risks, risks against gravity, risks against ordered measure, risks against inertia, it should not also be one having to do with uncertainty of performance' (dance critic Doris Hering cited in De Mille 1991: 374). Of the codified practices that best prepare the dancing body to fall and recover in unusual but organic ways, the most famous are the techniques of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey.



Twentieth-century practitioners of falling par excellence, both Graham and Humphrey demonstrated effort and heroic recovery controlled by the individual dancer. They showed the effort of being in the world through embodied metaphor, which to me articulates an inner strength paramount to survival, to continuing in the face of obstacles or challenges (physical or meta-physical). Graham said famously that ‘my dancers fall so that they may rise’ (Ireland 2008: unpagged) implying an intentionality to demonstrate the human capacity for resiliency through the medium of movement. Biographer and choreographer Agnes De Mille writes of Graham’s falls in the context of choreography:

One began a spiral fall by pivoting on both feet while leaning back and contracting on bent knees, descending and turning simultaneously until the shoulders grazed the floor and one came to rest on one’s back. The element of excitement was supplied by the fraction of a second during which the body was totally off balance and falling. One recovered by reversing the process, jackknifing, circling forward, and rising to stand erect. (De Mille 1991: 89)

Dance offers one avenue (and there are many) to reflect upon the poetics of being physically present in space and time. It provides an alternative lens through which to view physical potential and gain understanding of the dynamic relationship between somatic experience, emotion and presence. The rigorous physicality of the dancer’s fall and rise can be exhilaratingly endorphin-inducing; but like a sprinter in a race against their own best time, there is no competition or external reward, only the experience and the learning gleaned from it. As inner kinetic revelations come, any emotion that arises from this process is discovered in the doing, not an imposition upon the movement. If the performer is listening, feeling, perceiving and remembering in the moment of doing then new knowledge may be created and transferred through the body of the performer into the imagination of the observer. Such a transference requires both attention and personal vulnerability from the performer as well as the audience.

For choreographer Martha Graham (1894–1991), the fall was more than a metaphor – to fall and rise was (and for me *is*) a physical articulation

■ Figure 1 Falling in the studio. August 27, 2012. New York City, NY. Dancer Blakeley White-McGuire. Photo Paula Lobo, courtesy of Paula Lobo

of a quality of the human spirit. One student of Graham's technique, Robert Moulton, wrote in his personal account from 1953: 'Martha talking about falls – "You never go down and up, but from lightness to darkness and back to light again. For a moment the earth and gravity conquer the body, but it fights back and wins!"' (De Mille 1991: 216). Although I did not study personally with Graham my education in her techniques came from her first generation of dancers. Dancer and choreographer Pearl Lang taught a particularly difficult fall that began upright on two feet and then fell to the ground – one's body splayed out like a starfish. Once fallen we were expected to rise, in one beat, to standing upright on two feet again – using only the centre of the body. In one beat! It was nearly as impossible for me then as it is now. However, I believe that the ultimate point of this demanding exercise was to challenge our will and our spirit. There was a shock and a thrill in accomplishing such an extreme task, and also in witnessing other dancers succeed in doing it. Dance is inherently a community driven act in which we learn and develop through observing and dancing with others who are embedded in its processes.

Technical exercises in the Modern dance tradition of fall and recovery such as Graham's 'sitting and standing fall series' continue to be mastered in the physical lineages of both Graham and Humphrey. Choreographer Doris Humphrey (1895–1958) employed her falls to demonstrate physical potential in the world based on physics and philosophy. Practitioners of her technique intentionally set their bodies in motion allowing the physical forces set upon it to construct and reveal a recovery. In the book, *The Dance Technique of Doris Humphrey and Its Creative Potential*, Ernestine Stodelle wrote that for Humphrey:

Force (energy) is investigated as a creative element in itself: The desire to move stimulates organic matter to reach out from its center of equilibrium. But the desire to maintain life stimulates a return to equilibrium or another reaching out of matter sufficient to balance the first, and so save the organism from destruction. (Stodelle 1978: 2)

Humphrey's work addresses our human instinct for survival in a physical practice. She says: 'At either end of the movement there is death – the static death or constant equilibrium or the dynamic death in too extreme movement away from equilibrium' (Stodelle 1978: 2). The fall and recovery are completions of each other representing literally the life and the death of the action. As an expert on the techniques and theories of both Graham and Humphrey, Professor Sandra Kaufman of Loyola University Chicago (LUC), recently stated in an interview with me that:

"For Modern dancers the fall is the preparation for recovery. The physics of falling is a renewal because of the kinetic energy created by the very act of falling. There is no risk without falling; wanting to fall creates the moment of potential energy".

In my present-day performing, I employ technique for falling as a means of executing Graham's choreography (thus carrying my character through the dance) and also as a means of technical safety (so I may continue dancing for years to come). Graham's iconic body of dances provides a range of emotional and performative contexts in which I may employ falling as theatrical device. As the lead dancer in *Chronicle* (1936), I fall backwards into the waiting arms of a fellow dancer only to raise myself up again to standing – an expression of individual will; in *Rite of Spring* (1984) The Chosen One falls and quickly rises again and again demonstrating her falling as simultaneously defiant and desperate; in *Appalachian Spring* (1944) the Bride falls into the Husbandman's arms as an expression of playfulness and trust. These works, and many more like them, may appear from the outside to be prescribed but in my experience they are not. This is because for me a dance, a fall, a rise – these exist in their doing. The action, the emotion, the learning from movement live in the moments of doing and in the memories of the performer and audience, once performed. All of which are temporal and personal.

In these ways, the experiences of dancing repertoire and creating new work offer similar rewards.

For a dancer primed in falling techniques, working with a choreographer in the creative/rehearsal process can present opportunities to translate outside direction into a personal expression or statement through one's active body. The dance *Chasing* (2010) by Taiwanese choreographer Bulareyaung Pagarlava, offered an opportunity for me to investigate the state of continuous, relentless falling. At one particular moment during our rehearsal process, Pargarlava directed me to 'start falling'. His direction, without explanation, required that I kinetically discover for myself *why* falling belonged in the scene and what my relationship was to the other individuals who were simultaneously interrelating. In my anonymous character's physical expression, I discovered that her/my metaphorical embodiment was that of disconnection from presence. I wandered into the space aimlessly to the sounds of a howling wind, meandered through three fully present dancing bodies and slowly began to fall.

At first, my fall was so quiet and soft in energy; I believe it was hardly noticeable

among all of the other on-stage movements. As my inner engine revved, my presence expanded. In both rehearsal and performance, I remember feeling my body heat up like a furnace as my movement statement *in falling* gained strength. Through embodying the action, my reasons for falling became clear to me and I must assume to the choreographer as well because this three-minute sequence was immediately integrated into his dance. My movement research bore non-literal insight into the fall's meaning – creating an internal rhythm from my actions, which I followed like a score. As the group galvanized, noticing at last my state of furious falling and rising like a tornado moving through the space, they quietly observed me, until finally, with all energy exhausted, my storm dissipated and we continued on with the dance. In the context of this work, the focus of action was not on rising, as in the Graham tradition, nor was it on the inevitability of physical kinetics as with the Humphrey technique. My intention in falling was to challenge what I perceived as an assumed



■ Figure 2 Wendy Whelan and Brian Brooks performing *Fall Falls*, August 16, 2012. Vail, Colorado. Photo Erin Baiano, courtesy of Vail International Dance Festival

physical response, instinctual and societal, to the expectation of seeking verticality. My falling dance expressed the effort of detaching from the idea of needing to be upright. Contrasting with the traditional Modern dance philosophy of (re) discovering the way to rise, I was performing getting up *in order to fall*.

Another example of a Contemporary choreographer mindfully employing the fall in their work is Brian Brooks' recent duet with lithe ballerina Wendy Whelan, *Fall Falls* (2012).

This dance reveals an artist truly invested in the fall's potential as a tool of emotional exploration and is a window on suspension and cushioning a fall with one's body in order to facilitate an inevitable recovery. Here, one dancer is supported from completely falling by another; their efforts together create the illusion of almost floating in the atmosphere, disregarding the realities of gravitational pull. The underpinnings of this illusion are revealed, however, in the supporter's physicality and grounding. In *Fall Falls*, Brooks and Whelan explore falling as risk-taking. Unlike the heroic, individualistic fall and recovery of Modern dance, here Brooks takes responsibility for Whelan as she risks her performance by literally falling in space with faith that her partner will be there to help her successfully resist the pull of gravity and halt the dangerous momentum of the fall. Upon landing, Whelan relies on her accumulated, practised kinaesthetic intelligence for minute, subtle shifts of weight. This iteration of the fall in process provokes the audience/witness/observer to see the effort that is required to keep a falling body from fully falling and to experience the beauty of a trustful relationship.

Falling in performative acts of live theatre elucidates the profound value of actual physicality in our daily lives by demanding our attention, thought and presence to it. Martha Graham said: '[T]he dancer does what the body is capable of doing' (as quoted in the film *A Dancer's World* (1957)). To me this means that the dancer consciously engages with the body, mind and spirit – and the relationship of each to one another.

The dance form presents falling as a creative source of potentiality (for somatic awareness, relationships, metaphor, etc.) by its provision of a necessary construct to practice recovery. It confronts the audience with the reality of gravity, that unseen but deeply effective force that impacts our every earthly movement. These tangible experiences serve to remind us of our personal ability to respond to internal calls to action. Consciously willing a fall and recovery is a defiant plan set in motion and completed through the act of resisting the presumed outcome of gravity's ever-present pull and the force of seemingly inevitable momentum – it is an expression of accumulated human knowledge and individual willpower lived in the present moment. Investigating these kinds of defiant experimentations generates curiosity about what else is unseen or unknown in our world.

An audience member's attention to a performer's actions as well as the performer's own intention in following through with their movements, are factors in how we humans translate movement, embodied or observed, into meaning. New enquiries arise from acts of live performance that offer clues to unexamined pathways in human physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual being. In a study of brain stimulation by the National Institute of Health (NIH), entitled 'Building a motor simulation de novo: Observation of dance by dancers', neuroscientists and researchers found: 'A striking and consistent result is that the motor and premotor areas that are classically associated with movement preparation are also active when simply observing the actions of others' (Cross, Hamilton and Grafton 2006: 2). What this means for choreographers, dancers and audience members alike is that a person observing the immediacy and universality of the physical action of falling, as in a dance performance, will experience empathetic responses both physically and neurologically through the brain's generative mirror neurons. The literal, relational, metaphorical and/or abstractly constructed contexts provided by acts of live performance serve to heighten an

individual's awareness and potentially prime a community for fresh enquiry into little known, forgotten or unexamined aspects of being in the world. Falling as a mode of investigation examines how performers cope with the forces of nature upon our beings and our affective reactivity to these forces, through conscious observation of both gesture and metaphor. These findings are not shared in traditional scientific ways; they are culled into knowledge through doing and teaching from dancer to dancer, teacher to student and performer to audience. The impact of which can potentially birth a new movement – even a new movement form – that is, new ways of knowing and enhanced ways of being present.

For more than a decade now, practising precise falling techniques from within the Modern dance idiom has provided me with physical strength and a common movement language to express both surrender and self-willed resilience in performance. It has given me ways to temper the effects of gravity and momentum and it has given my audience – if so willing – the time to sit with the very idea of gravity's weight and momentum's thrust upon us and our potential physical responses to it. The instantaneous choices that a dancer makes to suspend their body in time and space, to resist the forces of nature or to somehow dance with them, finds form through embodiment and reflects the human internal strength that animates our spirits.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Devora Neumark for her significant contributions of time, encouragement, guidance and knowledge through every step of the writing process and Daniel McGuire for his patient listening.

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