

POSSIBLE MEETINGS

the dances of Susan Rethorst



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Susan Rethorst & Susan Braham in Rethorst's *Sons of Famous Men*

by Paula Clements

Two women are standing shoulder to shoulder. One lifts her arm and walks away. She stops, jumps, and hops, while the other woman shifts her weight and backs up a little. They move past each other, trading places. One woman leans to the side and the other falls forward to the floor and rolls to her back. The one leaning walks around behind the one lying on the floor. She keeps walking, wobbling her elbows by her waist as she lowers to the ground. She gets up and again walks behind the woman on the floor and kicks swiftly, just grazing the prone woman's head. She steps back, does some flicking motions, stands upright, extends an arm to the side and runs past the woman lying on her back, who raises her arms, marking a spot in the air where the first woman has just passed. Her arms continue moving, circling around her body, bringing her head to face out the other direction. The standing woman crisscrosses her hands in front of her face, then abruptly turns and walks away. The woman on the floor is motionless and the lights go out.

The two women are Susan Rethorst and Susan Braham and they are dancing in a scene from Rethorst's *Sons of Famous Men* (1985). This is a bare-bones description. It just barely suggests the sense one gets from Rethorst's dances of a room with no walls, of time lapsing, lagging, accelerating, or standing still. It omits the quality of mind that is the most identifying characteristic of a Rethorst piece.

There is a gesture that has appeared in a number of Rethorst's dances. Her right hand rests on her chest while her other arm reaches out in front of her in a peculiar blend of desire, acceptance, and satisfaction.

The gesture is from her memory of a ceramic statue of a boy who held a set of books in place on her grandfather's shelf. The boy had a counter-part bookend, another boy, who knelt and held a puppy. As a child, Rethorst says, she would relieve the two bookends of their duty on the shelf and set them facing each other. There was something both yearning and joyful manifest in their relationship—in the situation of wanting something, and yet feeling content with the knowledge that it was close by, if still out of reach.

Rethorst says that the standing boy continues to appear in her dances because she keeps trying to get his position just right. Each time she gets a little

closer to her memory of the exact weight of his hand, or the position and relationship of his head, neck, and chest, so oddly reminiscent of a loosely held port-de-bras. But there is always an elusive element because what she likes about the bookend boy is that his position doesn't depict a known emotion. His image is a starting point for a wide range of feelings and he is a character in a story with many plausible plots. This interest in the panorama of human nature compacted into a single gesture, is at the heart of Rethorst's work.

Gesture is almost the wrong word, except that its meaning as "an expression of thought" is apt. Neither flamboyant (Rethorst doesn't project metaphors to the audience) nor abbreviated, her gestures emanate from what I imagine is a spinal mind. It is the particular way this mind is thinking that makes Rethorst's dances appear to be linguistic.

In Rethorst's earlier work, the dancers often appear to be placing shapes and gestures outside of themselves, as if laying movement out and looking at it. An arm might extend out in order to measure, not the distance, but instead, the weight or implication of its action. The possible meanings of each moving limb would be allowed to register before an ensuing movement

could attract the dancer's attention. Rethorst refers to this as her "pedantic period." It was first inspired by a game she was taught by Simone Forti in an endeavor to get a specific quality of movement. Forti put six objects on the floor and they took turns moving them one by one. Rethorst became intrigued by the kind of concentration that developed and how the act of choosing places for the objects became a story in itself. She decided to try and put that quality into her body. Placing an arm or leg in space, she would stand in that position thinking about what the possible reactions to the position might be, and also what it was that had engendered those reactions in the first place. The result was somewhat ponderous, but it got her started on a new approach to movement.

Her next phase still had a quality of 'placed' movement, but there was a more active intent to respond to the attitude as well as the position of a limb. The emotional content of movement began to be incorporated. When she makes movement or teaches it, Rethorst says that she frequently finds herself noticing her attitude toward what she's doing. Often it will be the attitude that attracts her to a particular movement.

Watching Rethorst's older dances, I remember having an almost exaggerated feeling of being an onlooker. The dancers seemed to be situated in an unidentified location. I sometimes felt like I was looking into an aquarium, becoming hopelessly involved with the fluid minutiae of the activity within the tank and feeling that disorienting sense of identification with the occupants.

In her more recent work, Rethorst's relation to movement has changed. I used to think that she too was an onlooker to her own dancing, but now

the unconscious for other sources of information.

I suspect that *The Tale of Genji* also comes to mind in connection to a courtliness in some of Rethorst's movement. But this is not a permanent impression, because as soon as I detect it, a different quality sneaks in to circumvent anything remotely palatial.

Contributing to the sense of formal social setting, are the three women in long aqua dresses who glide in and out at various junctures of *Sons of Famous Men*. They move with a sinewy, distracted grace as if from another period of history, characters from a different sort of novel. They are in their own world, and yet they freely intrude upon Braham and Rethorst, sometimes dancing with them, sometimes placing themselves in discrete locations in the room. They seem to know without looking,

exactly where Braham and Rethorst are. With backs turned, they might echo a movement from across the room.

The women in their long dresses suggest guests in a drawing room. With their ghostly social maneuvers, their exits and entrances, and finally with the dip of their shoulders as they leave for the last time, the three women offer an illusion of the here and now. It is an illusion that accentuates the expansiveness of Rethorst's and Braham's presence in the room.

The walls drift away and I imagine a window frame that keeps shifting from foreground to background. Sometimes, Rethorst is outside of it looking in, other times she is inside with the window behind her. The effect is of a livingroom becoming a landscape. But it is a cinematic landscape, with no fixed vanishing point, and always unrolling. →

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Susan Braham & Susan Rethorst

(cont'd.)

The following are Susan Braham and Susan Rethorst's respective views of what is happening at the end of the third section of *Sons of Famous Men*. It is the same scene I describe at the beginning of this article.

Susan Braham:

We are standing next to each other. I put my arm out at Susan R.'s shoulder height. As I walk away, I make an indication where Susan R.'s shoulder was. I stop and hop to change my energy. The impetus of landing makes me walk back towards and past where Susan R. is. As the momentum of the hop dies down, my right leg gets lazy and I drag it. Stepping over my dumb leg I turn 180 degrees so my torso is twisted open toward the front. My hand is near my thigh and it makes an opening gesture towards Susan R. I wait for Susan to fall. When she falls, my arms spread apart, bent at the elbows. My left leg extends back causing a turn over the still dumb right leg and also causing me to keep walking over to the other side of Susan R. I am standing with my arms still bent at the elbows, moving my arms to and from my torso as if making nonsense talk about Susan R. having fallen. I lower to the ground, like Susan R., but not wanting to be there, I put my left shin flat on the floor, place my left hand under back of my thigh and swing my left knee forward to stand up. My left leg lands slightly ahead of my right. I stand facing front. My right hand between thumb and forefinger hits my right shoulder turning me around and causing me to take three or four steps around to the right, stopping close to Susan R.'s upper torso on the ground. My right foot wipes a line in front of me, and lifts off the floor. I am wondering if Susan R. and I will look at each other. My right leg swipes forward and comes back next to my left. My heels pop off the floor. I go to step on my left foot, but then transfer the weight back again. My knees pop forward at Sue R. My right hand hits my right hip joint, causing a turn, which causes a crouch. My left hand goes to back of left thigh and my right hand goes on top of left thigh. The right hand stays and the left hand wipes away. I stand up facing back with my weight on my left leg. I extend my left arm to the side and think about taking a step on the right foot. My right foot touches down on the floor, once, twice. Then I leave that shape and run downstage past Sue R. I face away on a diagonal in front of her. I've stopped myself with my hand crossing in front of my face. Both hands cross and go to the right side, blocking or shielding something from my face. My right hand goes over my head and then rests on top of it, causing me to turn to the back. My right leg bears no weight and I think about stepping on to it, but instead I go to the left walking past Susan R. still with my hand on my head. Two thirds of the way across the room, my hand drops into a limp midchest port de bras arm. My focus goes to the floor, I keep walking, leaving Susan R. behind, and the lights fade out.



Susan Rethorst:

I step away from Susan B. as if I'm going to leave, but then I back up with a change of mind. I let myself bump up against Susan B. We stand there next to each other. Susan B. puts her arm straight back creating a ninety degree angle in front of my body. Dropping my left shoulder, I walk along the line delineated by Susan's arm. We are on the same line but both of us are walking away from each other. I keep walking until I get to the place where Susan B.'s hand would have been if she had still been there. I walk downstage continuing the U shape of the path of Susan B.'s arm. I stop with this idea of Susan B.'s hand completed and now I am ready for new information. I am looking at Susan B. facing the audience. We are in line with each other and I am feeling a certain competitive edge that has something to do with Susan facing the audience. I want to do something like run towards her. Instead I fall forward, as if at her, meaning to make her feel my fall like a punch in the arm or a nudge to turn away from the audience. I roll to my back, my left knee and left arm in the direction of the audience, echoing Susan B.'s glance that way. I put my right fingertips in my left palm to collect that side of myself and fold it up on to the right side. I lie there. Susan B. walks past on my right side and both my hands reach up, in her direction, thumbs touching. My right hand drops so the thumbs swivel. Just as Susan B. has gone around me, my hands go around themselves. The right hand keeps dropping to my left armpit, my arms moving to the left while my legs go to the right. My left arm keeps drifting down to the floor bringing the weight of my upper body, as the weight of my legs goes into the floor on the other side, making the twist equal. This swiveling seems to relate to the turning of my hands and to the relationship between Susan B. and myself. I am lying in this position and the lights fade out. ⇐



Braham & Rethorst

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