



In the Presence of Absence

By Terri Cohn

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*The pandemic caused by the coronavirus changed and governed everything...in ways overt and oblique. ...the world has been transformed...”**

These words, part of a powerful and prescient article published by The New York Times on March 16, 2020, elucidate how the coronavirus pandemic dominated progressive debates during the election that year, and how the leitmotif of national healing superseded discussions of other issues, which “suited this moment of utterly warranted panic.” * This statement also captures the overriding themes and sentiments that are expressed in the powerful dance theater piece *In the Presence of Absence*.

How to creatively express this life-changing experience through art has been unsettling and challenging. Everyone has had a different experience, based on their personal and collective circumstances. The initial trauma of escalating illness and deaths due to Covid-19 was heightened by what else was happening in our world during that time: wildfires across the West and the demise of the natural environment; toxic government; Black Lives Matter and the

*Frank Bruni, “A Debate for the Moment of Truly Warranted Panic,” NYT, 3.16.2020

acknowledgement of systemic racism in American society. With no available vaccine or effective treatment during the first year, we were told to isolate; to stay home, to wear masks. People were laid off from their jobs en masse; the economy tanked.

In the Presence of Absence—envisioned and realized by Deborah Slater, choreographer/artistic director of Deborah Slater Dance Theater—in collaboration with culture curator and racial equity consultant Tammy Johnson—addresses these singular and collective experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic through a powerful dance theater presentation of stories. Performed by a remarkable ensemble of 5 young dancers—Anna Greenberg Gold, Calvin L. Thomas Jr., Colin Frederick, Erin Yen, and Moscelyne ParkeHarrison—and 8 elders, ** the work is complemented by a musical suite composed by Marcus Shelby. Collaborators include Olivia Ting, video; Cliff Caruthers, sound design; Dana Kawano, costumes; Chi Chi Okonmah, production and stage manager; and Allen Willner, lighting design.

Deborah Slater and Tammy Johnson began this project with community outreach, and in early 2023 began to tap into the local art community. They invited individuals from across the country to share their stories about the pandemic remotely and interviewed the performers and collaborators who participated in the show. (Full disclosure: I was among those individuals). During the initial in-person meetings, we spent time writing about those experiences, and exploring some of the movements Slater and Johnson were probing in this early phase of development.

The activity of being both witness to and participant in the process of collaboratively envisioning and creating a major dance theater piece—along with choreographers and dancers—was enlightening. As a writer and visual arts professional with minimal dance background, showing up through 6 months of weekly rehearsals was challenging and ultimately life changing.

In the Presence of Absence is an evocative title for this interwoven collage of stories, music, dance, and video projections evoking the global pandemic; it captures the palpable sense of longing and loss that defined this period. The Portuguese word for it is *saudade*. The mood of this multi-media anthology (“collection of poems,” from the Greek) is set as the Dancers and Elders step into the darkened space of the stage. One by one, each enters alone. There is nothing in the room except 8 empty chairs. A subdued tapestry of voices can be heard. Each performer moves into the space somewhat tentatively, looking at the back wall where a partially curtained phantom window is visible. As we watch that portal periodically vanishes and another is revealed. These ephemeral windows have a dream-like quality, evoking visions and memories of our own experiences—of the threshold between our interior and exterior worlds—which during the beginning of the pandemic felt so threatening, so remote. The interior spaces of our homes, our lives, our minds felt safe...enough. Crossing over to the exterior world was dangerous. And sometimes necessary.

**The 8 Elders include Courtney Stack, Denise Larson, Elizabeth MacLeod, Grace D’Anca, Sybil Meyer, Patricia Silver, Terri Cohn, & Mary Hones.

Once inside that dark space the dance piece begins to unfold. We venture out tentatively and circle each other, moving in different directions. No eye contact or touching, adjacent to one another, circling each other like ants in their dance of survival. Ants inside the house symbolize something needing to be fixed; outside they thrive and symbolize communication. Tension builds. That image of the ants is projected on the wall. Here they suggest a seeming loss of identity as we were only able to go out, with great caution, to get food; to do essential work; to get essentials at the local pharmacy. Nothing more. Everything less. The disease is lurking everywhere, and in this early phase there was not yet any prevention, or cure. Everything felt somewhat surreal.

The young people (the dancers) venture out first. They share stories of this inceptive period: some recounting tales of driving hours to swim in icy rivers or hike in the hills; trying to make sense of their isolation, needing to rely on virtual relationships. Desperately needing the closeness of bodily contact—intimacy—love—sometimes reduced to just sharing a cigarette on a deserted street. We elders, in our white Tyvek suits, initially sweep them out of the center of the stage—to safety—as we cross to the other side. Proceed with caution is the message.

The second narrative is Erin's' story, told from the confines of her tiny apartment, shared with her boyfriend. It is a compelling tale: their space is too small, with no room to move or breathe. Erin's respite is playing the computer game *Animal Crossing*, which is enacted on stage by the four other dancers. Their colorful masks and movements enliven the space. But the moment of levity crashes in with Erin's stories about Asian grandmas being stabbed; the sound of honking car horns disrupts the playful portrayal of the video game. The Elders move to the edges of the apartment space and reassure this young woman with a gesture to let her know she will be safe.

Two of the stories—written by Grace d'Anca—are told by Patricia Silver, a founding member of Word for Word. In *Just Before After*, we Elders mime her memories of everyday events: a trip to the pharmacy—getting a cup of coffee—going to the library—and the milieu of fear and anxiety that our lives were reduced to during the early pandemic. Patty foregoes her Chinese take-out and pupusas and returns home to watch the news. She remembers that her parents survived “influenza, stock market crash, the Depression, World Wars, and the Edsel...” (the audience exhales and laughs). In *Knocking*, she recounts memories of boxes piling up outside her door—being an elder and alone...yet...still making art. Delighting in a visit from her grandson—the innocent child, “splashing smiles” as he bolts through the house, “looking for surprises.” Dancing in her kitchen. Small hopeful moments—a neighbor checking in. We begin to realize, perhaps we will be alright after all?! What we don't realize is that grandpa has passed away; sadly, that is an experience shared by several women—including Deborah Slater—who were part of this dance theater production.

We elders take our chairs and return to our starting places in the room. Dancer Mossy tells the story of Weyam—needing to live in a sex positive house—roommate trouble—driving hours to

swim in a cold river; and her own story of meeting her boyfriend for forbidden trysts on cold pavement—circling each other as if nothing was safe. The deserted streets feeling almost as remote as early Zoom and FaceTime get-togethers were—for some young people, taking place in the bedrooms of their childhood homes. These approach-avoidance stories seem dreamlike. If only they were... *saudade*.

We all go out again and walk—this time in diagonal configurations. Creating intersections—points of contact. Still staying away from each other but making slow next steps towards coming together.

This early pandemic story ends with a monologue told by Nanay, a Filipino nurse. Her narrative, written and read by Zoe Dorado of Youth Speaks (and daughter of the nurse) is incredibly touching. She talks about the nurses brought to the U.S.—twenty thousand compelled to leave their homeland every year—and how so many died during the pandemic...how it's critical that we all get vaccinated. "95% efficacy...she tells me [her daughter], 100% effective in preventing serious infection or death from Covid...." A tragic tale beautifully told, with Nanay's poignant closing words: "I will be safe, you will be safe; I will come home to you." This statement is simultaneously so sad, and so hopeful. We cry....

Act 2 begins with some comic relief, introduced in the form of a game show, The Lockdown Showdown, hosted and performed by the dancers, all adorned in short sequined dresses and led by dancer/emcee Calvin L. Thomas, Jr. We have fast-forwarded to 2021, when vaccinations have become available, toilet paper, food, and medicine were often in short supply, and the politics and economics of living with Covid-19 became acutely visible. The poignancy of Calvin's satirical narrative is punctuated with his backhanded comment that "the prizes are all won by one person."

During this time, cities were slowly coming back to life, and we began the early transition to leaving shelter-in-place. As Dancers and Elders express their joy with careful greetings—elbow bumps and retaining some social distancing—we are moving into the next stage of the Pandemic. The impact of the Covid-19 years on young people's relationships is emotionally represented by the push-pull relationships of the dancers in a quartet, and then a quintet. During these dances the Elders' role has tangibly shifted. We help the young people stand up when they fall; we circle them to let them know we are here and will remain—and send them on their way. We stand as witnesses to their pain and hold out hope for them.

In the Presence of Absence comes to a close with Mossy's final poetic monologue "Hope is....," which expresses desires, dreams, and longings that are universal as well as personal. The Elders stand quietly and empathetically, as she dynamically declares, "hope is: seeing someone again...the sun blazing right in my eyes...finding the other sock...Beethoven's piano concerto #5...leaving something to be desired...sharing a favorite song...free WiFi...making eye contact...smiling and walking away; feeling everything/seeing nothing...exact change...the perfect tomato...knowing how it ends...getting in with no reservations. ...psychological capital...letting the grass grow...yes—but also no...forgetting where you end and we begin...."

We gesture together in unison as she delivers her closing words: “coming back, completely different.”

The pandemic really did change our world. Four years in, the transformation continues to materialize as the outcomes unfold.

The range of experiences and emotions powerfully expressed by the 5 dancers who performed In the Presence of Absence is, in part, made possible by the beautiful and sometimes haunting music composed by Marcus Shelby. As one audience member, a musician, described it, “the music was a huge factor in creating essential atmosphere for the piece. The juxtaposition of the colorful, active, and very expressive dancers with the muted appearance and ‘tempo’ of the elders was very effective, also enhanced by the lighting.” Another viewer, who is a dancer, described her impressions as “beautiful, haunting, and powerful...the elders holding space, witnessing, beautiful dancers flowing undulating movements; interesting stories with amazing dance.”

