



On Murray Louis

By Ruth E. Grauert
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This article was compiled from notes made in the early 80s at the request of Nikolais who was working on a biography of Murray.

THOUGH THE WORKING CAPITAL of any artist is the sum total of his experience—his private moments of beauty and horror—his art must stand alone no matter the “who, what, where, why, when, or how” that is fed into the artist’s bank of being. His working image comes from his personal perceptions. His aesthetic decisions are ultimately autonomous. He alone is responsible for his product. No artist would have it any other way. Created out of his personal bank of being, each dance is a moment or an eon in an artist’s perception of his world. So it is with Murray. It is all there: the tender and the tough, the steady and the mercurial—singlefocused, multifaceted, and practical visionary—this unique aesthetic, earthy and ethereal, the gregarious loner, the sad clown Murray Louis.

Journal (1957) was the first of Murray’s ballets I saw from the front of house. I had been in Cincinnati with the Playhouse Dance Company, a performing group from the Henry Street Playhouse that presented Nikolais’s ballets for children. I arrived at the airport, taxied to the Playhouse at 466 Grand Street and snuck into the balcony. I was overwhelmed. I had never thought of Murray as being beautiful, but by God he was! Sensitive, delicate, deep, lyrical, dramatic, poetic, moving, and inexorably beautiful.



Journal (1957)



Journal (1957)

Here was rascal Murray as poet (he wrote the spoken words), as musician (he edited all the music), as designer (the costumes and décor were his), as choreographer (group dances and solos) and, above all, as performer. I had stage managed the premier in January. Then I saw it in March. I was accustomed to Murray’s multifaceted dance perceptions. I had seen his delicate insights into the “human condition” in his numerous small dances that had been presented as part of joint faculty and student recitals, such works as *Little Man* (1953) and *Small Illusions* (1955) whose titles almost explain the work. I saw his motional development of human drama in works like *Antechamber* (1953), which was preformed in silhouette to a resonant monotonous drumbeat with Murray lying on an “examining table” with a fist pulsing from his chest. I knew his mercurial motional translations from works like *Harmonica Suite* (1956), five short presentations of his cat, and his ability to add a motional voice to classical musicality in *Affirmation* (1954), a group work choreographed to Bach. He showed me his courageous staging in *Monarch* (1955), where he lay on a set piece inclined 30° to the footlights and wore the most horrendous black, felt wig. (He certainly gave us his opinion of monarchs.) And I recall *Incredible Garden* (1956). The stage was festooned with all kinds of lush stuff, such as cellophane ribbons. *Garden* was a group work, but within it Murray did a solo that consisted of trembling for perhaps four minutes. (Just try it. What a tour de force!) So you see, although I was accustomed to the vision of his work, I had always, as production stage manager, been pressed by those demands. Thus, my first experience as spectator of his work in *Journal* gave me a life-lasting spectator experience.

Almost every aspect of Murray's work is a seesaw—a chimera, whose visible form changes while you look on. A thread of clowns in this chimera begins with *Little Man*, a Chaplinesque series that deals with the troubles and dreams of the little man, and extends through *Entre-Acte* (1959), wherein the vulnerable performer puts on a mask (literally) to create the various figures of a circus world and is left unmasked and naked at the curtain. Then *Suite For Divers Performers* (1963) introduced a more sophisticated perception of the covers that clowns maintain. *Junk Dances* (1964) releases the childlike glee of dance clowning against hum-drum daily doings. *Disguise* (1971) was "high camp." But it is in *Hoopla* (1972) that the gregarious loner, the vulnerable tough clown gives his galloping good fun to one and all before the crowd. When alone, this clown tenderly reveals dreams of starring beauty with his solos and then explores the duality of a clown's ambitions in a remarkable duet.

Then there is *The Canarsie Venus* (1978), the latest refinement of *Little Man*, replete with pedestrian gesture and naive self-preening in the beginning and in the end the wondering hurt of "everyman." How much over the years Murray tells us about himself and ourselves!



Suite For Divers Performers (1963)
Murray Louis, Bill Frank, Phyllis Lamhut, Roger Rowell



Proximities (1969)
Murray Louis, Fran Tabor, Michael Ballard, Sara Shelton,
Raymond Johnson, and Phyllis Lamhut

glibly decide to proceed with any of these no's. Each was committed to the stage under his deep conviction that each was right for that time in that dance. It is his persistence in his singular visions that pervades his art and which leaves him vulnerable—so vulnerable that he could scream out with devastating clarity in his solo in *Index* (1973).

There are facets of Murray's choreographic schema, of Murray's "art view," found in *Interims* (1963) that appear throughout his repertoire. Some of his very early solos treated time as an ongoing, rather than a metered element, an aesthetic that Nikolais taught and that Murray made his own. *Antechamber* (1953) had to grow in tensions that were dependant on resonance between performer and environment so that the time element had to remain open. Much later, despite their differing concepts, the opening of *Moments* (1975) has the quality of "time binding," and in *Glances* (1976) the dancers gather, wait and depart, and time is not counted—time waits for the audience to "see" time. The nodding gentlemen in *Aperitif* (1982) and an echo-image in *Interims* seem to acknowledge that there is no hurry to catch the beat. Then again, time in Murray's dances can be "a-one-and-a-two," when "a-one-and-a-two" says it, as in *Junk Dances* (1964).



Interims (1963)
Roger Rowell, Phyllis Lamhut, Bill Frank, and Murray Louis



Chimera (1966)

One of *Interims'* "time spins" settles with the quartet facing the audience where they develop a deliberate smile. This is the kind of "out of motion" contact between performer and audience that threads through Murray's work—the ballerina's facial attitudes and Murray's wink in *Proximities*, and the business with the chair in *Deja Vu* (1977). Frequently these mimetic gestures pop into his choreography. "Pop" is the word for their occurrence because their appearance presents a shift of focus, a surprise, a resolvable logic—as do the "out-of-time" (pedestrian) gesture developed in *Chimera* and in the second solo in *Personnae* (1971). When you go home and think it all through, you "see" it. Gesture can be the heart of a statement. It can twist the viewer's senses as in "The Gold Trio" from *Hoopla*. It can state the content of the ballet as in his first solo in *Index*.

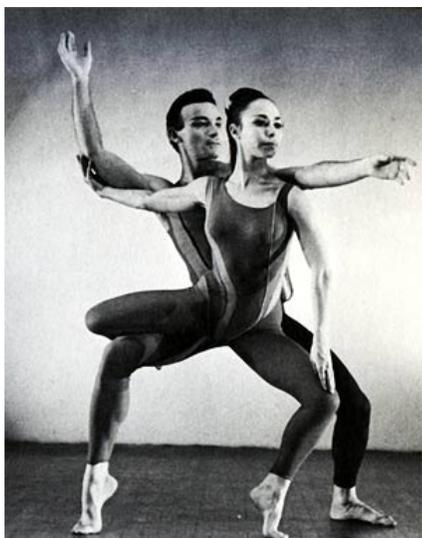
Murray has no "vocabulary," no movement building blocks that he can order to construct different dances. He dips into the resource of his perceptions to use whatever suits the purpose of his statements. If the moment demands a familiar gesture, so be it. And on occasion he does resort to dances long out of repertoire to use a fragment to build anew.

An example of such is the hypnotist from *Entre-Acte* (1959), which grew into a solo in *Personnae* (1971). (It has always irked me when I hear a member of the audience say, "I've seen that before." How many ladies' faces did Renoir paint? Why cannot dancers be as free as painters to perfect their visions?)

Murray's sensing of another dancer's muscles, a major building block in *Interims*, has been another constant in his choreography—for example, Gladys Bailin Stern's performance in *Courtesan* (1954), lightning quick, balanced, and clear. Although he choreographed many pieces for Gladys, always with the vision of her full, swift exactness, he hit the jackpot in *Facets* (1962), a work in which he welded Gladys's motional range with his own. Ten years after its premier the ballet was especially revived at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. *Facets* is pure motion!



Entre-Acte (1959)



Facets (1962)

Murray Louis and Gladys Bailin Stern

In *Odyssey* (1960) he choreographed Beverley Schmidt Blossom as a crumbling Colossus of Rhodes with all her strength and acting presence, complete with serpents swaying. The vision of crackling strength, of the "bigger than life" image emptying into frenzy has stayed with me these many years.

In the many roles he created for Phyllis Lamhut (she remained a member of his company until 1969), he took fair advantage of her quirky motional impulses, as in *Interims* and in her role as the frustrated housewife in *Junk Dances* (1964). With Phyllis and Carolyn Carlson he created the trio *Illume* (1966), a memorable sculpting, which utilized the physical and poetic diversity and personal facilities of all three.

In March 1978, I saw a Louis program at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The bill was *Schubert* (1977), *Déjà vu* (1977), and *Glances* (1976). To me that program was what seeing dance is all about. I'm a lazy spectator. To that program I didn't have to bring a thing but me. I didn't have to know who Schubert or Brubeck was. I didn't have to know what it was that Murray was "déjà vu-ing." I just soaked in dance from beginning to end and I loved it. In the lobby after the performance a "critic" (I use this term loosely) had only one comment: "Where is

the old raw edge of modern dance?" I could have mowed her down but figured it was not worth my time or energy. It was as if she had seen Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* and wanted it to be the *Guernica* or vice versa. Pick any artist in any art and one can ask, "Where is...?" How deprived that critic—unable to savor the dinner because the breakfast, though long since digested, had tasted good.

Murray hears music kinetically. We see the results of his listening to classical music beginning with *Affirmation* (1953), which he choreographed to Bach. We see the resonance he sets up between motion and music. He has an appetite for that resonance. Following *Affirmation* and through the several decades since, he has used the music of Bach as well as of Vivaldi, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel, and Schubert. (And I have deliberately avoided any composer with whom a junior high school band would be unfamiliar.) He adds an additional voice to whatever music he chooses. Although he loves and respects what he hears, he may fracture the classical sense of form. He does so without seeming to violate it because in those fractures he places a completely consonant vitality, something that Bach or Brahms, Beethoven or Schubert might add today. To the music Murray adds his own “life view.”



Bach Suite (1956 and 1964)

One can easily find within a familiar musical framework Murray’s choreographic skills. Soloists frequently move against the group, much as an instrument against an orchestra. Within the group motion is frequently passed from dancer to dancer as differing voices in music toss the theme. In much the same way in his own solos, he passes the motion from body part to body part. One can’t catch it with the mind. One must catch it with the body. You have got to feel the motion to see it.

Within his works the male/female duets are unhampered by preconceived male/female patterns. Men and women frequently perform the same motional material. They talk to each other as equals. Was Murray a voice in the feminist movement?

I don’t know what Murray thinks of human history except from my interpretation of what he does. From the Romeo and Juliet legend through various Greek myths runs a thread of old stories renewed, not just retold. In the ballets *Star Crossed* (1953), *Odyssey* (1960), *Scheherezade* (1974), *Cleopatra* (1976), and *Cannarsie Venus: Aphrodite Rising from the Sea* (1978) he treats each story as if today where we stand is all of history, and we who are today can reach into any time, pluck threads from then and now as the image may dictate and weave these old stories into fresh cloth. *Scheherezade* even ventures into the future. He makes such time fractures seem consonant. With the same skill as the tale spinner of the Arabian Nights, wherein these tales, now centuries old, had flying machines and time warps, Murray courageously ventures where imagination points. And we go with him.



Michael Ballard as *Scheherezade* (1974)
Photo by Jack Mitchell for
Dance Magazine, December 1975



Interims (1963)

Bill Frank, Murray Louis, Phyllis Lamhut and Roger Rowell

I don’t know how many times I saw *Interims*, and yet each time I saw it was like the first time—only better because some of it was cherished and familiar, like a favorite Christmas carol: some of it is new like crystals catching a changing light. *Interims* is a quartet of four soloists, each distinct in movement and character and each giving his own motion to the others, a sort of barter of motion, illustrating in a very particular manner how Murray can create to suit the particular facilities of his dancers.

The original cast was motley—Murray with his motional flights, Phyllis Lamhut with her itches and flits, Bill Frank with head and hands like no other, and Roger Rowell with a stretch like a ballerina. He used it all and molded it to Foss’s music into a time suspension extraordinaire.

Murray once said after a performance of *Journal*, “I had to hold back. I was afraid I’d levitate.” Well, perhaps I remember levitating while I watched *Interims*.

There are memorable dances that were presented only during their premier performances. Each one has its own reason for its demise. *Rialto* (1961) had one performance in Chicago and one in New York. It was a romping trio, which included Murray as an amorphous, manipulative Merlin figure, Don Redlick as prince and villain, Phyllis Lamhut as lady and witch—all three in satisfying juxtaposition. It had a set piece by Paul von Ringelheim made of Stonehenge-proportioned Styrofoam blocks, which first presented a storage problem and then a touring problem. Despite many presented designs and lots of discussion about inflatables and fold-upables, these monumental blocks were never replaced by pieces more suited to travel. While this work presented a unique duality of characters, it is likely that the unwieldy set pieces were responsible for its demise.

Paul designed another décor piece for Murray for *Concerto* (1966). The piece was some six feet in diameter and designed to be flown. Its structure resembled the complex formalism of the music and deserved preservation somewhere. *Concerto* was mothballed after its premier and six performances, again perhaps because of the problem set piece. Murray loved that “wreath” (my nick-name for it), but Murray is practical and had other solos to make and perform.



Illume (1966)
Phyllis Lamhut, Murray Louis, and Carolyn Carlson

Illume (also 1966) was another matter. Its décor was a clear plastic drop, something that could be stuffed into a goods bag or carried in a briefcase or handbag. A trio with Murray, Phyllis, and Carolyn Carlson, it used all the wondrous shaping of trio forms that those three could sculpt. I have the distinct memory of three floating and swimming figures around and through one another, creating another of Murray’s unique visions. For years following its run, *Illume* was a favorite with the P.R. people for the wonderful series of photographs by Max Waldman. The reconstruction of *Illume* was never done, possibly because the forms depended on the figures and facilities of the original three. Does every ability have a liability flip side? Here Murray’s talent for using the instruments his dancers present to him makes the combination unique and therefore irreplaceable.



Junk Dances (1964)
Murray Louis and Phyllis Lamhut

Then there was *Disguise* (1971): “nightmarish discotheque costumes,” “dancers in camp setup,” “Louis’s swaggering solo,” “Jaded, decadent view of our society,” so said reviews. After its Chicago opening run that solo was replaced in subsequent performances on that tour. I wasn’t there so I didn’t see anything of *Disguise* but the glorious preparation, the fun of concocting, and the fun of poking fun at the “jaded and the decadent.” It was lavish, extravagant, and high camp. The world of 1971 needed that kind of look at itself. I asked Murray why he dismissed it. He said he couldn’t stand doing “that dance” again (his solo); it was so excruciatingly demanding on his “gluts.”

Catalog (1975) had a “book” as did *Junk Dances*, which commented on the then current art scene, and *Hoopla*, which contained not only the joy of clowning but also the tender revelation of the “inner” performer. *Catalog* dealt with the body politic at the time when the Equal Rights Amendment was under scrutiny. “At the turn of the century a popular image of women was created through songs and the stage. This program is about that quiet courage and resistance that surmounted that image,” says the program notes. It was, along with *Junk Dances*, *Index*, and *Hoopla*, a magnum opus. *Catalog* was multimedia with Victor Herbert’s original recordings, projected slides of items from a pre-World War I Sears Roebuck catalog, and motion picture clips from early newsreels. If one for just a moment reflects upon the task of getting all this together—the finding of them, the selecting, the sequencing, the staging problems that such material involves — one realizes that *Catalog* was an epic even before the choreographic war began. Pictorial records of *Catalog* are very scarce indeed. If I can rely upon bits and pieces of memory, the choreography, the staging, and the costuming met the proportions of the idea. So, why was it put in mothballs? Perhaps it was just that once accomplished in one location and the vision was fulfilled, the task of staging it all again seemed to Murray’s restless, creative mind simply unnecessary.



Hoopla (1972) “The Gold Trio”
Robert Small, Les Ditson, and Marcia Wardell

Because these pages were written in the early eighties, there are later works that have no mention. The last work of Murray's I saw was *Alone* (1994). In it I saw maintenance of his aesthetic of time and gesture, a clarity and directness of statement that struck from his core to mine. Is not such communication what art is all about?



Intersection (1969)
Murray Louis (center)



Intersection (1969)
Publicity photo



Personnae (1971)
Les Ditson, Murray Louis,
Anne McLeod, & Michael Ballard



Personnae (1971)
Les Ditson, Michael Ballard,
Anne McLeod, and Murray Louis

PHOTO CREDITS: Except as otherwise noted, all images included here are from early 1970s publicity photos of the Nikolais/Louis organization (then known as Chimera Foundation for Dance), or from the Murray Louis souvenir booklet published in 1972 by Chimera Foundation for Dance, in which photo credits are collectively listed as David S. Berlin, Boyart Studios, Frank Cowan, Susan Schiff Faludi, Alexander Leber, Seymour Linden, Jack Mitchell, Guy Mognaz, Milton Oleaga, Gary Osius, Michael Podolski, David Shaw, Robert Sosno, Max Waldman, Morris Weinstock, and Dan Ziskie.

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