

## “herStay in Conversation with 'Nature'”

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- Leah Garland

When dancer/choreographer, Monica Emilie Herstad, first named her artistic company, herStay, I was very aware of the first part of the name. Now, some fourteen years later, I am more cognizant of the later part: Stay. “Stay” in English means “to remain.” As Herstad creates more and more dance performed outdoors, the meaning of staying strikes me profoundly.

The environmental crisis readily springs to mind when contemporary artists engage with “nature” in their work. Herstad's choreography offers a unique reflection on that crisis. Hers is a meditation within nature, as she responds in the moment to that which surrounds her. By taking her choreography to Oslo gardens, Herstad invigorates the understanding of the present in her work. In “Sketches for Spring,” her recent performance-in-process in Oslo's Botanical Garden, Herstad brings her savvy feminism to contemplate how the trees, grass, and quiet spaces of city gardens offer an important reminder to the preciousness of these spaces.

There are obsessions that I see in Herstad's oeuvre: the black or white dresses, high-heeled shoes, and certain movements all remind me as a spectator that I am in Herstad's signature artistic world. In “Sketches for Spring,” Herstad dons a cream-colored dress over black tights and turtleneck, thin black belt, a black shawl, black sunglasses, and black, high-heeled, platform boots. She looks exquisite in her uniform of simplicity.

Herstad often refers to her choices as simple, but as spectator, I am aware of the femininity Herstad presents on stage. The *Her* of herStay easily reminds one of the feminine pronoun as well as the first syllable of Herstad's surname. It is both personal and gendered. So is Herstad's choreography. In everyday life and on the stage, Herstad wears simple dresses or skirts that loosely cling to the body, revealing her slender feminine frame. Likewise, she is often in heels, which on stage emphasize her slim figure as well as the

layers of construction that build our readings of *femininity*. Thus, Herstad's Butoh-influenced choreography draws attention to the living, breathing person whose impulses interact with her surroundings to create readings of her gender. Herstad's work has always been, and still is, a commentary on identity, herstory, and the present.

Herstad's choice to recently more often stage her choreographies (hence NoNameDance (2007), EWIG/ Forever/ Toujours (2008 - 2009), Sketches for Spring (2011 - 2012) - in a retro-spective more of a triptych) in city gardens though she has begun to choreograph out of doors since the nineties suggests her desire to bring the dynamism of nature into her contemplation of women and Nature. By staging her dance in public gardens, Herstad allows for more sensual stimuli to affect her dance. The neighboring cacophony of city noises and the garden's own sounds offer unpredictable stimuli, as do the parks inhabitants themselves. Here is where the “Stay” in her company's name intrigues me most. That which Herstad is seen against appears precious. Rather than an ubiquitous black box theatre meant to highlight the live body on stage, the cultivated growth around Herstad participates in her dance. In short, the interaction of Herstad with her environment brings attention to multivalent movements as well as her physical response to it. Her seeming stillness at points reflects the seeming permanence of life around her. Herstad highlights *the ability* to stay as an opportunity, one that she exercises in her dance.

In a personal interview with the choreographer, Herstad shared with me that sounds of bird songs, leaves in the wind, distant voices and cars influenced her dance, as well as the movement around her. This could be a tree or passerbys who react unpredictably and cause an abrupt response in Herstad. Eleven minutes into the video for “Sketches for Spring» (May 6th 2012) a woman comes right up to Herstad and takes Herstad's place leaning a hand on the tree that Herstad, seconds before, had been leaning against. It has a sudden impact on Herstad's gestures and breath, and she moves away. The woman watches then follows Herstad and aggressively brushes past. Thirty seconds later a young girl with a stuffed bunny wanders near Herstad and receives a smile from the dancer.

There is more opportunity outdoors for the unexpected to inspire Herstad immediately and sensorially. To me, bringing nature—in this case cultivated gardens—into her on-going contemplation of Nature demands more attention to that which inspires impulse in her. Herstad shares the stage with blades of grass and wind-shaking leaves, with blooming flowers and their scent. They are in fact unknowingly her dance partners. This imbrication of sound and movement suggests that that layering of life with that man-made is a constant composition of our lives. It reminds me of the title, *INvisible Planet* (2000), and its self-consciousness of being within the world.

Thousands of miles away in Los Angeles, I view Herstad's works via Youtube, where I am not able to experience the full force of her live performance. I hear a synthesized soundscape which she includes live performed by the composer, and for the video. I can only imagine the fragrance of wet spring winds from my own memory. I am not in Oslo to feel the light rain that Herstad experienced in performance, nor am I there to take in the social landscapes of Oslo with its grief since the mass shooting in July of 2011. Yet, from my (dis)vantage point, I am most aware of how the greenery dominates the visual scene, making Herstad seem more diminutive. Away from the grief that Norwegians have experienced this past year, I instead am drawn to Herstad's breaking from conventional public behavior with her exceptional dance.

Even though parks offer relief from work and urban anxiety, expectations for physical behavior still pervade. It is a qualified release, since laws and social codes limit the populace's movement. Herstad's dance breaks with that narrowness to explore unexpected bursts of gestures. Her sinewy arms fling out at moments and then elbows draw back awkwardly as if they had an agenda of their own. Her pace seemingly erratic thwarts expectation. She privileges her own desire to move how and when she feels the impulse. This unpredictability, in turn, draws attention to the possibilities for impulse, which makes the wind's effect on branches and leaves and grass stand out.

This flux of movement with stillness highlights the notion of sharing the planet. In light of the current environmental crisis and the increasing reminders of global warming, that sharing seems important to consider. Herstad's dance not only extols nature as a reprieve from urban pains, but it also posits nature to be as fragile as the urban dweller herself. They both share a moment of life together in relation to the other and both seem in need of the other. The *Stay* of Herstay comes to mind. Herstad's reference to Time takes on new rigor when it is the earth's ability sustain vegetation and clean water in question.

“Sketches for Spring” is a performance-in-process. The artist embraces the term “sketch” to define that exploration. Herstad offers, “Sketches is more of a try, an attempt at, a research and a vague sketch of new knowledge. It serves as a helpful tool, because in this state of mind before the practical work starts, in the beginning, in the emotional and intellectual phase there is the source of inspiration; there is a question.” Herstad's explanation reveals much about the philosophy which underlies herStay's productions. Each show begins and sustains the act of questioning. She herself cannot predict how she will feel in performance and what will inspire to move. While her well-trained dancer's body is a constant, she leaves unresolved how she will react to the sounds and sights and energy of the stage space. It is meditative for her and for her audience, much like the peacefulness of a city garden.

In performances like *INvisible Planet* (2000) and *Come What May* (2001), the sound designer's choices were prompted by Herstad's movement and vice versa. Likewise, in *Disturbed ID* (1999), the lighting design and she shared a duet of sorts. Historically, Herstad's choreography centers around the carrying out of impulse. It suspends spectators in the present and is, for this spectator, relaxing. Thus, I am struck by the complexity of Herstad's dance in a garden. “Sketches for Spring” reminds spectators of the life force which causes the surrounding sounds and movement. Herstad presents herself as uniquely attuned to that dynamism, which is available to us even in cultivated spaces like gardens.

The Oslo Botanical Garden is in the eastern part of the center of the city. The social context of this site-specific work is more easily read for those in attendance in the spring of Norway, 2012. Standing on that specific green demands an awareness of how current social events affect Norwegians. Herstad offered that her dance is “a sort of re-orientation for a post-traumatic society.” Herstad describes her social concerns thusly: “Recent acts of violence add a certain quality to the movement of the population in general. The bodies of the society are affected by the uncertainty and un-protected spirit. The non-trust starts to awake and establish itself in different manners, mentally, but also bodily, and psychosomatically.” Herstad sees her work as a timely healing for a nation in mourning.

Herstad moves faster in “Sketches” than in previous works, but still with exquisite care. There are many moments of opening the chest, widening of the shoulders, opening the hips and leaning back, exhibiting a dancer's grace and flexibility. Feet staggered apart. Arms and legs like branches in their twists at the joints. Her face reaches to the sky and open to the sun. It is particularly these moments of bending back and opening the joints that exhibit Herstad's many years of ballet and modern dance training. Also part of her training is her daily practice of listening to her impulse. At one moment, she leans her head to a tree trunk giving her weight to the trunk. She grips the air with tensed fingers - as the torso curves in. I interpret her openness she inhabits on stage as emblematic of the trust Herstad hopes Norwegians gain from somatic healing.

When I asked Herstad what was the inspiration or motivation for her recent work, of that which she cited, one issue suggested problemized was the sudden increase in statisticly reported violence [such as rapes], in Oslo of the past three years, a local politically engaged observation.

With the relative safety net of an audience during the day, Herstad had the luxury to be even more at ease in a city garden. The perhaps necessary defensive readiness could evaporate allowing for her to receive other influences. Herstad in heels on the uneven ground testing her balance underscores her malleability and vulnerability.

The spectator is reminded from Herstad's costume, her gentle movement and long hair that she is a woman, perhaps an idealized one. Her presence in the Garden is gendered. It reflects the desire for a public space protected enough for a letting go of fears. It is an imagined space where women and men trust each other.

- Leah Garland, August 2012

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