

GHOST DANCE (2004) by Douglas Wright
-- RICHARD CANNING

Joys impregnate. Sorrows bring forth
-William Blake

This is one of two epigraphs to *Ghost Dance*, a dancer's memoir which won Wright the 2005 New Zealand Society of Authors EH. McCormick Best First Book of Non-Fiction Prize, but remains little known outside his native country. This untypical autobiography is utterly idiosyncratic, utterly urgent, utterly beautiful ... and utterly overlooked.

Douglas Wright's career may be readily susceptible to précis. But the formal inventiveness, stylistic deftness, and -yes- utter integrity of *Ghost Dance* are hard to convey. They relate, however, to his many other talents. As a dancer, Wright proved capable above all of supporting complex narrative; he "wrote" it through his step. As a choreographer, he is (clearly) a born dancer. As a writer, he is fluent, to a terpsichorean degree.

Anyone seeking the essence of the male dancer's animus looks in vain in Nureyev's 1963 memoirs (a money-earner), or in Nijinsky's insane diaries (1936/ 99; obsessive but scarcely expressive). Wright's own dancing career--with the Paul Taylor Company in New York; later, with Lloyd Newson and London's DV8 on *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*; then from 1989, with his own company back in Auckland-is impressive. Its impact, though, was curtailed, as *Ghost Dance* relates, initially by something in Wright's temperament. After a time in Manhattan, his yearning for New Zealand's Arcadian idylls became overwhelming, though Wright must have known that such distance from the world's epicenters of cutting-edge dance, its audiences, critical coteries, and funding, might well do for his career (he was then in full flight as a performer). Indifference, narrow-minded-ness, and hostility on the part of (much of the) New Zealand theater-going public and arts establishment made the inevitable transition to choreography scarcely less traumatic. Second was Wright's diagnosis as HIV-positive, the single circumstance which generates this book's energy, spinning it into each eddying, finely contoured digression: Buddhism, bird-watching, immune deficiency, distinguished New Zealand author Janet Frame, the London tube, a difficult adolescence, immune symptomatology, Vaslav Nijinsky, paganism.

There's a darker successor memoir, *Terra Incognita* (2006), whose

account of the genesis of a new dance work, *Black Milk*, is among the most self-aware accounts of artistic genesis committed to paper - up there with Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*' essays on writing fiction (1969). Its wrenching account of Wright's experiences at a respite center for those with HIV is among the truest reflections on the syndrome's enduring stealth.

Still, *Ghost Dance*, if not self-evidently the better book, is the more vital, open one, ranging across the peaks and insecurities of a whole life with insight, often devastating phrasing, and caprice. Old photographs, postcards, letters, and sketches litter these pages too, in a multiform technique also deployed in Carole Maso's (fictionalized) AIDS memoir, *The Art Lover* (1990). With the wrong eye for placement, the effect of these supplements could be all-too-predictable: catharsis; self-celebration; hubris even. With Wright, however, the imagery adorns, beguiles, moves, but never collaborates with the text. It's an aesthetic impulse that would instantly belong and make sense in a gallery but is arresting between the covers of a book.

David Gere's *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic* (2004) has delineated how North American dance has responded diversely to AIDS; thus, it does not draw on Wright's choreographic experimentation. Rudolph Nureyev, of course, died of AIDS--but in denial. Only his drenched, near-cadaverous appearances at the last Parisian curtain calls gave his late work an 'AIDS signification.' Robert Mapplethorpe's self-portrait with skull is a more fitting encapsulation of the new aesthetic the syndrome imposed on a peer group of artists. One was Hervé Guibert. It seemed, through the 1990s, that nobody would equal the honesty in Guibert's self-flagellating engagement-in prose, and then in the video diary *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* (1992)--with HIV/AIDS. In the second "chapter" of the epidemic (post-treatment culture; loosely, post-1997), Douglas Wright's *Ghost Dance* alone has done so. (Gere relates poignantly how one gay man asked choreographer Joe Goode of his 1998 dance piece *Deeply There*: "Why are you making a piece about AIDS now?" Goode interpreted this as meaning: "We are in this respite from having to go to memorial service, so why am I making him think about this?")

Ghost Dance does something remarkable with Wright's diagnosis and progressively precarious health. He places these concerns center stage, but in the same gesture upstages them. This involves a principle of inversion, a discontent at the relationship between center and margin,

which has been pivotal to Wright's choreography. It also, logically, relates to the innately topsy-turvy universe of AIDS--a world in which one ex-boyfriend, Warren, "was the one in a million recipient of side effects so severe they killed him," as Wright deadpans. *Ghost Dance* poses at the outset questions that undermine many dominant narratives. This early fatality leads Wright to wonder: "When does a side-effect become central?"

He confronts the retrovirus with all manner of responses. Everything is used by turns, it seems; everything except self-pity (though many circumstances prove pitiful indeed). You respond by thinking the unthinkable: it's as if it's taken this long for the syndrome to meet its rhetorical match; and in someone who never thought himself a writer, before HIV. *Ghost Dance*, in a sense, did an unintentional discourtesy to the newly cohering genre of AIDS memoir too. Wright gets it so *right* you start to distrust everyone else on this subject.

Ghost Dance also displays a most beguiling and worthwhile critical intelligence. For Wright is that rare thing: the prodigy who won't be schooled; the self-taught, polymath individualist. There's sometimes a predictable roll call here. But there *are* such people: Arthur Rimbaud; Raymond Radiguet; Pablo Picasso; Ronald Firbank; Charles Ludlam; Arthur Russell. Nijinsky – of key importance to Wright - was another; never so much taught as tolerated by his Petersburg tutors, and not so much promoted in terms of his technique as contained by Diaghilev and the whole *Ballets Russes* vehicle.

What Nijinsky did that was transgressive was the sum of all the things he couldn't or wouldn't do. Nobody can tell such people what to do. They're nature's instinctual rule breakers, propelling culture forward primarily by *not listening*. When they outgrow or transcend existing aesthetic protocols, it is never in ignorance of them. Their capacity for learning is limitless. But they also have an unusually strong instinct not to be weighed down by their knowledge.

So it is with Wright, a physical stunner as a drug-taking teenage bohemian dropout, but a bohemian vagrant nonetheless. Wright needed direction; perhaps encouragement; nothing else. A friend asked what he wanted to do in life ("Dance.") and why he wasn't doing it. Wright reacted the only way he could: with a vortex of self-propulsion. He put himself through the most punishing dance classes, at the fastest speed, just as Nureyev did, compelled to propel himself out of Ufa, then out of Petersburg, and so on.

I mentioned Guibert. It's surely intentional that *Ghost Dance* begins with a sentence reminiscent of the extraordinary opening of *To the Friend who Did Not Save My Life* while also updating it. Guibert, in 1990, had thrown out the impossible conjecture that he "had AIDS" (had it, that is, and got over it). Wright's first chapter, "Invalid," reads: "It was after more than a decade of living with a disease once thought fatal I began to suspect that somehow, somewhere along the way, without noticing it, I had already died." So *Ghost Dance* opens with an equal but oppositional conceit: that the "voice" you read/ hear is spectral. Wright's autobiography purports to go to, and come from, the one place "life writing" can never go - the place where life itself is exhausted.

Within a few sentences, he reports the "slow-breaking news of my possible reprieve." Even here reactions are never expected or commonplace. He resents this return of (relative) good health, and announces how he began "perversely, to secretly mourn a death I felt cheated of". We swiftly learn how hard the journey of a survivor might prove to Wright. He is (was?) utterly impossible, he concedes: "Face-to-face conversations with the rudely healthy felt at times like being gnawed at by rats"; "I longed for insults, any excuse to narrow my circle of friends." How many accounts of AIDS, or any illness, are capable of taking the writer's subject-position into account, even Critiquing it? ("I became extremely touchy").

Wright's perceptive originality and remarkable turns of phrase endow each aspect of the by now rather dull, preformed AIDS illness narrative's trajectory with striking freshness: there's "ecstatic diarrhea"; a pill's name which "sounded like a concentration camp for Martians." Of his own body shape, induced by the treatments, he notes: "although my doctor was thrilled with my bloods, I looked like a pregnant stick-figure." *Terra Incognita* refers to Wright's occasional experiences of depression: it was "as if the shadow of a bird was flying right through me."

There's a DVD about Wright's dance career entitled *Haunting Douglas* (2003). Stage highlights are intercut with personal testimony from acquaintances and peers, plus more awkward exchanges with Wright himself. Rehearsal footage reveals a relentless, punishing approach to dance. His hunger for excellence, is so unmediated that Wright as choreographer can't bring himself to attend his own premieres if the dress rehearsal reveals them as imperfect. (He watches soap operas in his dressing room, instead listening to the footfalls.) Still, just as he is clearly an inspirational choreographer, Wright could prove an

outstanding teacher of creative Writing. Take the start of “Raptor,” *Ghost Dance*’s second chapter: ‘As I looked out over the landscape of my personal history I found that wherever I directed my attention, something was blocking the view.’ The blockage turns out to be his commitment to, and worries about Malcolm, stymied artist, ex-lover, and close friend. Wright does something necessary, simultaneously self-serving and altruistic: he invites Malcolm to go bird-watching with him. He cannot proceed without getting to the bottom of Malcolm, with whom “Raptor” directly unfussily concerns itself.

Ghost Dance is characterized by a remarkable generosity of temperament - something vital to the art of the memoir, but seldom considered intrinsic to it. Aspects of Wright’s self-staging as “difficult” make this repeated deference to others surprising. But it is there-most winningly when he feels “sorry” for the friends he gathers to reveal his HIV diagnosis. As they struggle to say the best things, Wright gently intrudes with this commentary:

They were like actors who had forgotten their lines, trying clumsily to help each other fill the greedy silence. And it was my job to let them know they hadn’t failed. This I tried to do as best as I could, in the same fumbling way.

Wright, whose own performance capabilities fast distinguished him from his peers, is also movingly empathetic toward other dancers’ plight: the professional hurdles and disappointments. He compares the unselected hordes of talented New York dancers to “tireless mountain-climbers with the summit inside their heads, clawing for a toe-hold on almost sheer cliffs,” marvelling at their cheering him even as he eclipses them. The “it-could-have-been-me” instinct later informs an unforgettably laconic account of friends lost: “Jim died, Chris died, my older brother Phillip was killed on his motorbike, my cousin Christopher took his own life, and other friends died while they were still new.” Wright reads this with mesmeric understatement to camera in *Haunting Douglas*.

Toward the end of *Ghost Dance*, he notes a new keenness for walking: “These days when I’m out walking I’ve started to see faint, overgrown traces of other less frequented paths and now I take them.” The same curiosity informed his adolescent drug experiments, his re-envisioning (nothing less) of the possibilities in contemporary dance, and his capacity for sketching previously unstated facets of life with AIDS. Wright may joke that he’s dead. I’m tempted rather to argue that he’s the first,

possibly the only writer yet, to consider from first principles just what “living with AIDS” means.

For one who has lived life globally and experienced it so greedily, it comes as a surprise to read, latterly, in *Terra Incognita*:

For myself, I have no desire to travel anywhere physically, content with the magnolia in flower, art of all kinds, my mother, friends, the warring cats, and the “joy that comes in the making.”

Like Derek Jarman, another multitalented artist displaced from his preferred discipline by advancing, AIDS-related debility, Wright acknowledged the relentless urge to create, answering it by determining to “make” something else - “a living garden to weed for my dead.” (Jarman’s garden at Prospect Cottage, Dungeness, endures today, as something of a shrine.)

Wright would be too self-effacing to promote his books as examples of spiritual revelation (nor, incidentally, are they ever apologies for a life ill lived). I’d be indifferent to any book described in that way. But *Ghost Dance* especially left me with two startling impressions: first, of having encountered someone of great integrity - someone necessary to one’s own well-being; second, of having read, and learnt, something about grace - the ability, that is, to embody and evince the essentials of living a good life.

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