



FROM THE WIP

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Joe Goode's Meditation on Eco-consciousness: *Shedding our Excesses and Learning to Live Lighter*



by Emily Wilson
-USA-

Reviving a piece doesn't happen very often in the dance world, but director, choreographer, and writer Joe Goode doesn't do things like other choreographers. For one thing, he loves language as much as movement, so in his pieces, his dancers tell stories with words as well as dance.

This summer Joe Goode presented his dance/theater piece, *Traveling Light*, at the Old Mint in San Francisco. This wasn't the first time *Traveling Light* has appeared at the Mint – Goode's performance group staged the meditation on excess and eco-consciousness there last year as well.

For *Traveling Light*, Goode worked with longtime lighting designer Jack Carpenter to create a dance that addresses ecological issues. The dancers' bodies show the strain and struggle of trying to stay afloat in a world that is changing environmentally and economically. They struggle with what they need to do to change, what they need to let go of, and what to hold on to.

But Goode doesn't preach to his audience. One of the wonderful things about Goode's work is his use of humor – there is one dancer in a rolling dress, another addresses the audience from a balcony telling viewers about the joys of being wealthy, and a third, single figure carries cabbages that keep rolling out of his arms.

The choice of venue is particularly poignant for a show about changing our excessive lifestyles. San Francisco's Old Mint, an 1874 Greek-revival structure, used to be the most active mint in the United States, storing one-third of the nation's gold reserves. Dances about our relationship with materialism in such an opulent setting – there are pillars, balconies, and a huge inner courtyard – underscore the story of how things have changed and are changing.

Goode studied with the famous modern dance choreographer Merce Cunningham. While Goode, unlike his teacher, uses narrative in his dances, he believes in the simultaneity of events that Cunningham championed. He says Cunningham did what he did—not having a central focus, using chance to determine the order of dances – to wake people up. Goode wants the same thing.

After watching *Traveling Light* I sat down with Joe Goode to discuss the performance, eco-consciousness, and Merce Cunningham.

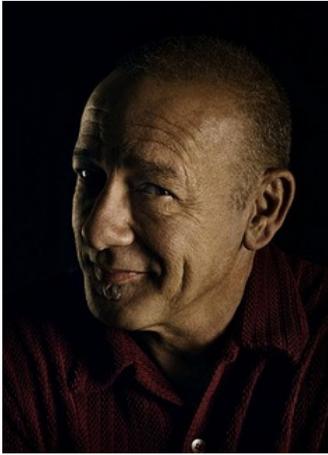


• Jessica Swanson and Melecio Estrella in Joe Goode's "*Traveling Light*." Photograph by RJ Muna. •

• Choreographer Joe Goode. Photograph by RJ Muna •

You performed *Traveling Light* at the Old Mint last year. Why did you decide to do it again?

It's so unusual to do that because of the structure of the dance world - all grants are based on doing new work. We're a touring company so you always have to have a new work for touring. But I just felt this work was important for me as an artist. It is such a timely piece and speaks to a lot of people about these strained



and troubled economic times and the effect it has on the human spirit. I wanted to see it have a longer life.

What do you think people are responding to?

I think people are afraid of losing their jobs. Some have lost their jobs. We all know many people who are underemployed or unemployed. There's this sense of fear that we're not going to make it, that we're not going to be OK, that we're not going to be able to pay for our children's schools or our medical expenses. It's not a new thing. It's happened before in our history and that's something I try to reference in the piece. It is something new for our generation and people are puzzled and a little afraid.

One of the great things about art is it can acknowledge the communal angst and say, 'Yes, we're afraid.' These are troubling times, and we're all fallible and we're all susceptible to a loss of adequate work and self-esteem. These things are tied together, and it's a very fragile ecology. That's one of the things we have to learn

perhaps.

How did you try and address environmental issues and eco-consciousness in the piece?

That was the genesis of the piece. Given that we're all slowly becoming aware of our carbon footprint and our responsibility to tread lightly on the planet, how are we going to learn that? Or how are we going to unlearn things we've already learned? And what is it going to mean to us emotionally and spiritually to be living more carefully, more precisely, with more measured steps? It's a really interesting concept, and a lot of things are going to have to change - a lot of ways in which we see ourselves and our entitlements. There's a bit of a monologue about somebody watching on TV polar bears swim while the iceberg is melting away. Feeling like he is a polar bear [and] feeling such a connection with that sense of desperation and the disappearing norm. You know, "I'm paddling desperately and I can't get there because what was normal...is literally crumbling beneath me." I think that's sort of a desperate thing we all can relate to.

How are you trying to address ecological issues through dance?

Well, dancing is such a visceral activity. There are a lot of different things going on in *Traveling Light*. The dancing that accompanies that monologue about the polar bear, [the dancer] is literally kind of grasping.... And there's a sense of straining to stay afloat. There's a lot of tension in the upper body and the arms trying to stay on top. There's literally a kind of discomfort and a precarious nature to the balances. When you're looking at it, you feel it in a visceral way that there's some real urgency to stay alive, to stay afloat.

The Old Mint is such a poignant space to have this dance. Oh my God. When I first walked in there and I saw that obscene opulence, I just thought oh, my goodness, why do you need this to make money? They used to literally press the ingots into coins there. For me it was a repulsive reminder of the haves and the have-nots. Clearly there were people who were used to being treated in a certain way and wanted to be reminded of their own grandeur, and to go in and pick up a bag of money, they had to be in a ballroom. I just thought that says a lot.

You had the idea for the dance first before you found The Mint, right?

Yes. It was going to be a large, raw space, like a huge warehouse, and there was going to be a traveling light, quite literally, through which the action would happen, and the viewers would have to move and follow the action. This evolution, this traveling light was going to be a representation of the movement towards shedding some of our excess and learning to have less and live lighter.

These things always change when you get into the process. We were looking at spaces on Treasure Island and Oakland and South of Market in San Francisco, and we weren't finding a compelling space. Then we got directed



• Andrew Ward (background) and Alexander Zendzian (foreground) perform in the Mint Courtyard. Photograph by Austin Forbord •

towards the Mint. I thought, well it's a little urban. It's not exactly what I'm looking for. I looked at it kind of reluctantly, and the minute I walked in there I thought, this is what *Traveling Light* is really about.

Then I realized this whole issue of ecological living is tied to our own idea of prosperity and how we see what should be the reward for our hard work and our discipline. I live in Berkeley and you go into the East Bay, and you see these ginormous McMansions, and you realize there's probably two people living in there and they've got the huge garage with a truck and a fancy car. That's a lot of house to power up every day, and those are a lot of cars that guzzle a lot of gas, and people live that way. It's so seductive and so engrained in our culture, and no question about it that's going to have to change if we're going to save the planet.

You studied with the choreographer Merce Cunningham. How did he influence this piece?

It was a very poignant moment for me because last year right before we opened the show, Merce died. [This piece] is not something Merce would ever make - he's much more abstract. He doesn't really deal with narrative. But I realized, I couldn't be making this piece if it wasn't for Merce - what he did with his chance process and his fervent belief in the simultaneity of events, and letting things happen at the same time that are equally complicated. What I do very much in this piece is I don't say, 'This is the important narrative.' There are several narratives that are free floating and careening around, sometimes smashing each other sometimes missing each other. That is a direct homage to Merce, and I hadn't realized it till I learned of his death.

I just think he's a seminal artist in that he really asked us all to look at what we're doing in a different way. I revolted against him in a way. Against these faceless, abstract dances. I want to hear the dancers talk, I want to know their stories, I want to create an emotional revolution to this kind of dispassionate thing he was doing. I moved away, but I moved away with a new knowledge.

For you, what is the appeal of narrative in dance?

It's what I'm attracted to. I'm somebody who grew up with stories. I grew up in the South with Eudora Welty and Tennessee Williams and Flannery O'Connor. Stories, the inner life, the psychology, the inner drama of a human being - those things are just really interesting to me. That's why I love theater, and I've always loved theater and dance equally and wanted to embrace them both in my work. When I starting doing that in the late 70s that was just totally unheard of. Audiences have always loved that because we all tell stories. We're all making up stories all the time, about other people, about ourselves, about where we think we'd like to be.

About the Author:

Emily Wilson is a native Californian, living in San Francisco. She studied journalism at Columbia Univeristy, and has written for a variety of radio, print and online outlets, including *Latino USA*, *KQED*, *NPR*, *KCBS*, *KALW*, *Agence France-Presse*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The East Bay Express*, *Alternet*, *Diverse Magazine* and *Edutopia*. Along with writing, Emily teaches at City College of San Francisco.

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