

# The New York Times

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## DANCE

### Husband and Wife, Marrying Art Forms

By Claudia La Rocco



MIKE VAN SLEEN

Above, Molly Hickok in "Comme Toujours Here I Stand," a piece by Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, bottom. Below, Ms. Hickok, left, and Tymberly Canale in the work, which incorporates the Nouvelle Vague classic "Cléo From 5 to 7."



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IN conversation Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar have a tendency, like many married couples, to complete or interrupt each other's sentences. On a recent Sunday morning over coffee and pastries in Brooklyn, their comments jostled together in agreement and courteous contradictions.

Ms. Parson and Mr. Lazar weren't talking household chores or child rearing (though they do have a son). They were talking art, more specifically dance and theater, and most specifically Big Dance Theater, the genre-exploding, award-winning company they founded in 1991 with the performer Molly Hickok. Ms. Parsons directs and choreographs, and Mr. Lazar directs and acts.

"There's no escape," Ms. Parson said when asked if they ever left their work in the studio. She added a wry "Sorry" to her husband of almost 22 years, who had begun to say something, but only shook his head and laughed.

Their latest project, "Comme Toujours Here I Stand," a French Institute Alliance Française commission, opens Thursday at the Kitchen. The title comes from a Robyn Hitchcock song and hints at the work's source material: French cinema, particularly the script of Agnès Varda's classic New Wave film "Cléo From 5 to 7."

"Often we start with a mistake," Mr. Lazar said, referring to their incorrect assumption that the commission mandated a French subject. Both artists like obstacles and challenges, employing esoteric material and orchestrating dizzying cultural collisions.



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In their 2004 work “Plan B,” for example, the Watergate tapes were part of an intoxicating brew that also included Old Testament passages, written accounts of the 19th-century feral child Kaspar Hauser, musical reinterpretations of Taiwanese movie scores and dances based on the films of the early-20th-century Kabuki actor Matsumoto Kōshirō VII. “Somehow, in one seamlessly flowing hour, this is all woven together in a long thread of a story in which each element is clearly visible,” Jennifer Dunning wrote in *The New York Times*.

This time out, after deciding on a movie, they chose not to watch the actual film until late in the process so as not, Mr. Lazar said, to be “under the claw” of Ms. Varda’s influence. (The filmmaker gave permission for the project after speaking with Ms. Parson and viewing the English translation of her film’s script; she has yet to see the piece, which had its premiere in *Les Subsistances’ Ça Tchatche Festival* in April in Lyon, France.)

The screenplay is treated as a found object, and left virtually untouched. The plot (a not-so-talented pop singer waits to hear if she has terminal cancer) is

complicated by extra-script directions and periods in which the actors take “film breaks.”

These breaks are not ironic asides (“I hate winks,” Ms. Parson said), but integral elements of a kinetic, dreamy world in which the performers’ inner and outer worlds tangle and unspool. Meaning accrues from a complex

## *Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson excel in integrating disparate influences.*

yet spare interplay of actions and objects: a French folk song, video by Jeff Larson, luscious costumes and props evoking French couture, even a razzle-dazzle dance routine that refers to choreography from a Godard film. The set itself moves around the performers, and is continually reconfigured by cast and crew in a tightly choreographed whirl. “Paul and Annie-B raised the bar in terms of thinking of dance and theater combinations,” said David Neumann, a choreographer who has performed in several Big Dance

Theater projects, and who moves fluidly between forms in his own work.

Brian Rogers, the artistic director of the multidisciplinary theater the Chocolate Factory, agreed.

“These two people come very deeply out of certain backgrounds that should never fit together, and then they merge them together in a way that’s revelatory,” he said. “I’m not so sure that I’ve seen anyone who has done it as well, or justified it as well. A lot of people, actually, that I present in my own theater really want to reject training and tradition. They really don’t do that.”

You might think such genre straddling would double the audience for Big Dance Theater, which has won an Obie Award and two Bessies, or New York Dance and Performance Awards. And both Mr. Lazar and Ms. Parson have substantial solo careers: a former Wooster Group associate member, Mr. Lazar acts widely in film and theater, and Ms. Parson won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007 and recently choreographed for David Byrne’s 2008-9 world tour. Yet sometimes



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their work has fallen between the cracks because of the different expectations of theater and dance audiences, a result of a persistent, often arbitrary divide between the disciplines.

Sometimes traditional theatergoers are flummoxed by contemporary choreography, as was the case for some viewers at "Orestes," which the couple directed this year for the Classic Stage Company. Meanwhile dance audiences, particularly in the experimental realm where Big Dance Theater exists, can be impatient with an emphasis on narrative and text.

"It's a problem," Ms. Parson acknowledged. "We've had the right piece in the wrong theater."

The division of labor between Ms. Parson and Mr. Lazar has blurred over the years, and "Comme Toujours" is, in many ways theater oriented, even though Ms. Parson took the lead in its creation. Yet its grounding

is also firmly choreographic.

In rehearsals "we usually start with everything that's not the words," Ms. Hickok said. "We're staging things before we even know the lines. It's like a big — I wouldn't say playground — but you just get in there and you're pretty hands-on really fast. There's no getting used to the material and sitting around a table absorbing things. You're on your feet right away, testing it out in space. So everything's very kinetic and very visual. It's through that that all the other stuff comes."

Ms. Parson can't imagine it being any other way.

"For years we made dance, and then the better we got with theatrical elements, the more they were around," she said. "But it seems funny to me to have any theatrical event where people don't dance. It just doesn't feel true."