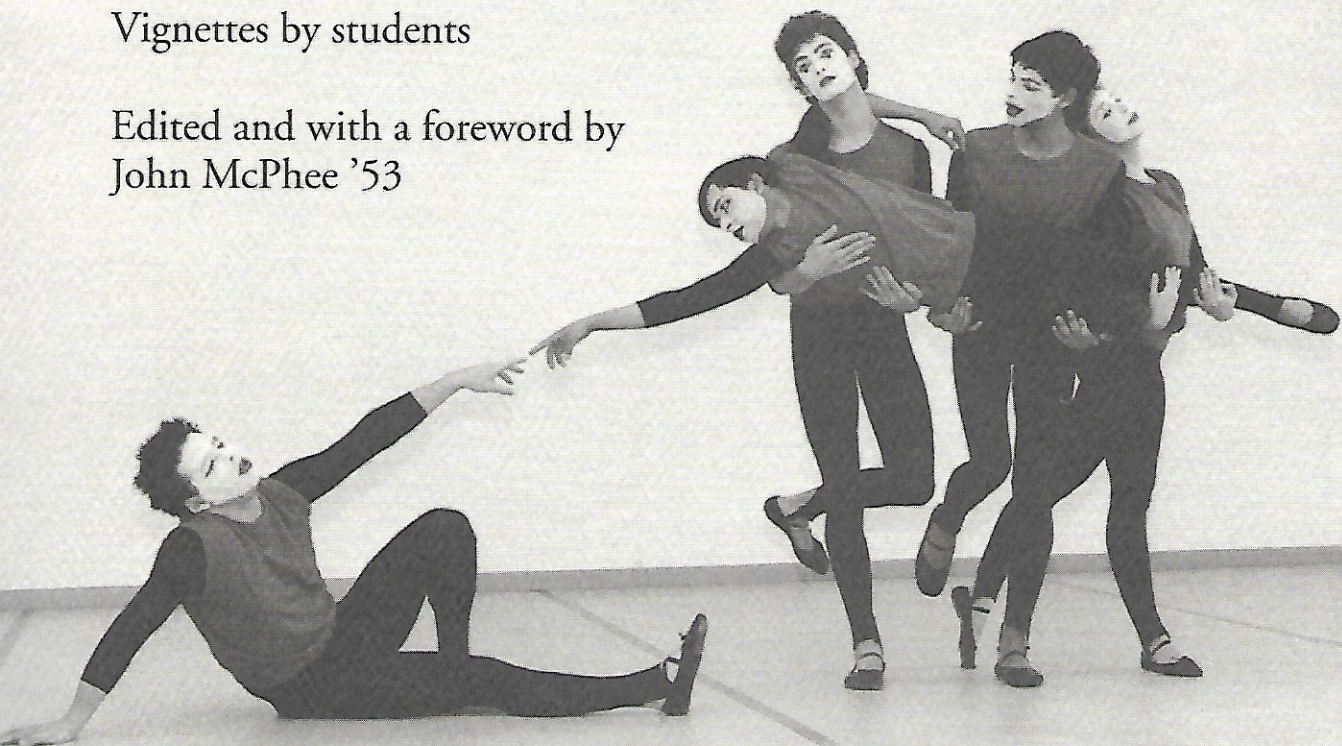


The Creative Arts at Princeton

Vignettes by students

Edited and with a foreword by
John McPhee '53



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More Than Skin Deep

ELIZABETH BELTON '95

Before entering Princeton, I had devoted all my dance energies to classical ballet. My uniform was a black leotard, pink tights, a skirt, and pink slippers. As a result of my first involvement with the dance program at Princeton, I found myself on stage in Richardson Auditorium wearing — instead of my safe pink tights — a pair of fishnet stockings. My feet were bound together and I had a dog leash around my neck. Beside me stood a dancer whose cropped tank revealed the ring through her belly button. Behind me stood a woman carrying a whip.

This piece about domination and submission was performed at the annual February dance concert. Even though I had had, as yet, no formal training in modern dance, I was used in several

pieces. I was no exception in the department; dancers are generally used in multiple pieces. I was welcomed with open arms into the diverse family of the dance program.

The plunge into modern dance was more than unexpected; my bohemian and liberal friends at home had said that conservative attitudes ran rampant at Princeton. Yet here I had discarded my pink canvas slippers and felt for the first time the friction of a marly floor. I soon realized that layers of tender skin were being peeled off my feet. Calluses eventually would form only to be ripped away again as I struggled with turns unmediated by shoes.

I felt vulnerable — more so than if the sparkling belly button in Richardson Auditorium had been mine. My toes, instead of being held in posi-

tion by shoes, felt clumsy when let free. At least I had little chance of tripping on myself in the piece with dog leashes, since my feet were bound together for the greater part of the dance. In the other pieces I was unfettered, and I discovered not only the fear but also the excitement of moving with new freedom.

The next semester I enrolled in a modern dance class in which the choreography section was taught by Ze'eva Cohen. As the head of the dance program, she is the motivating force behind it. Ze'eva had been the first to encourage me to try modern dance. Once I had started, it took me some time to recover from my shock at hearing Ze'eva speak sacrilegiously about ballet. She believed in the god of modern dance and did not hesitate to denigrate the rigidity and structure of ballet whenever possible. Though at first I found this hard to stomach, I decided to hear her out.

She told us to move through space leading with our elbows, with our heads, with our feet. I followed the angle in my arm, the heaviness of my brain, and the integrity of my foot, which suddenly moved like the head of a snake. I felt my whole body change as my energy was concentrated in

those different points. Instead of vulnerability, I felt a strange but powerful consciousness in my own movements.

Ze'eva nurtured our individuality and allowed it to grow into personal choreographic styles. For our first choreographic effort, she asked each of us to create a piece inspired by phrases she had written on pieces of paper. Her only instruction was: Don't translate the words literally into dance — dance should be something that can only be said through movement. My phrase was "the crack between the bed and the wall." How could one act this out literally, even if one wanted to? How could one be an empty space? If what she warned us not to do was impossibly difficult, how could we do what she did want? I began to wish I had a crack between a bed and a wall into which I could disappear.

Ze'eva then said that all movement involves the entire body whether or not the entire body actually moves. The slightest gesture can alter the audience's perception of a pose. The body is a language through which we create grammatical constructions. I began to relish the thought of such creative power.

Ze'eva Cohen has rounded shoulders and dark springy hair that falls in thick curls around her ears. Her eyes can become slanted apostrophes, sending the effect of a smile through her whole face. She told us she is Israeli and that this means she is completely on the level. She believes in metaphors, but she also believes in direct truth.

Dance can be seen as metaphor carried out physically. Ze'eva uses verbal metaphor to help students reach physical metaphor. She told us that air is a substance that must be carved with our bodies, that our movements must change the texture of the air itself, and also that stillness is often the most powerful statement the body can make. She believes in experience of movement. Instead of lecturing on theories of choreography, she led us into improvisational dances to which she was midwife as we moved.

Later, I collaborated with another dancer. We decided to do a piece about anger. I wanted to break all the rules of ballet; he wanted to branch out into something not tried before. We threw and kicked each other around the stage, playing with weight and violent emotion, but mostly just playing.

Ze'eva is blunt. If she doesn't like something, she says so.

She said so.

"It was a useful exercise, but it's not a dance. You are not communicating, you are moving at each other. Throw it out and start again," she said.

The final result of our collaboration involved the same themes we had tried to convey in our first attempt, but it was much more satisfying to us and met Ze'eva's approval as well. She understands that politeness can actually be harmful. I trust that she will tell me when something is just awful, no matter how much I wish she wouldn't.