

PERSPECTIVES & OPINIONS

Liz Lerman

# TO ENTERTAIN, STIMULATE, AND ENLIGHTEN

A CHOREOGRAPHER WITH A  
WIDE-RANGING CURIOSITY AND SOCIAL  
CONSCIOUSNESS TAKES ON THE  
HUMAN GENOME.

Paul Fetters

For 30 years, Liz Lerman has been creating dance performances that are at once joyful and thought-provoking. Through her company, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (based in Takoma Park, Maryland), she seeks to explore, in movement, concepts no less profound than nature, faith, identity, and ancestry. In her latest work, *Ferocious Beauty: Genome*, Lerman addresses challenges to humanity posed by the unlocking of the human genetic code.

IN THE SPRING OF 2002, I was asked to lead a public discussion on “Gene(sis),” an exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle that revolved around genetic research—its discoveries, its potential, its implications. Preparing for the event got me thinking about my teenage daughter and the choices her generation might face. Soon after, when a radio interviewer asked me what my next project would be, I found myself saying I’d like to develop a project on the genome.

I often approach new areas of interest this way, as making dances gives me a platform on which to muse, to talk, to learn. It’s a fabulous educational process.

During the development of *Ferocious Beauty: Genome*, I met with many wonderful scientists. At a lunch with science faculty at Wesleyan University, I asked them to think about how a performance piece might teach the public about the genome. Because they had to filter their remarks through a picture of what it means to present this knowledge theatrically, their answers were far different from their usual ones.

When the lunch was over, I thought to myself, “If nothing else happens with this project, at least we’ll all go back to our laboratories newly energized. Both artists and scientists will be better off because we had this fresh thinking.”

It has been a goal of mine to see whether people who may not know math or science, but who might be worried about genetics and the future, could walk away feeling that they have some understanding of this and maybe even do something about it. I don’t want to scare the hell out of people or make them depressed. On the other hand, I don’t want to make it an easy ride.

I must also say that once we entered the very large realm of genetics, genomics, and developmental biology, we realized we had tumbled into a place far deeper and stranger than where Alice landed after her fall down the rabbit hole. I soon realized that this project could be

about capitalism, or religion, or nutrition, or population control. It could be about race and identity, or about ethics, or about policy and professionalism. It could be strictly about the mechanics of the genome, using dance to describe biological processes. It could be about the future. Ultimately, the piece poses small and large questions, but it doesn’t try to address all the questions currently being generated by scientific research. No single work of art ever could.

The first act gives the audience some basic scientific information, through videos of scientists, text, and dance, and it spotlights the interaction of science and art. It is also when they’re introduced to Gregor Mendel, who makes regular appearances and acts as kind of a spiritual guide. I think it’s useful for us to be reminded that he was a religious figure doing science.

For the second act, I picked three issues: ancestry, the pursuit of human perfection, and the nature of aging and death and our desire for greater longevity.

I didn’t mean for the piece to be so much about evolution, but of course it is. I thought I understood evolution before, but I didn’t really get it. In the performance, we have a character who is full of angst and ennui. She doesn’t know who she is at all. But Mendel leads her to the skeleton of a whale, which is shown through a video to be one of our (her) ancestors. It’s a powerful moment.

I hope that the audience not only loves the performance but also, when they next read or hear about genetics, will have a little more insight. They don’t have to feel numb about it.

One thing art can do is wake you up. I think that the piece begins to do this. ■

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INTERVIEW BY ALICIA AULT *Liz Lerman’s work has been commissioned by Lincoln Center, the American Dance Festival, BalletMet, and the Kennedy Center, among many others.*