

P[lay]ROCESS

Making “Guts”

By [Grace Smith](#)

“Left sitz bone, right ear.” Choreographer Tracey Norman directs dancers Niko Markakis and Miles Gosse. I am a silent observer sitting on the floor. The goal is to bring these two body parts together. The dancers interpret a string of physical prompts, written on a chalkboard, to create an intertwining duet.

Twenty-one hours squeezed into two weeks during December 2017 is the second creation phase for Norman’s upcoming piece in the 2017/18 DanceWorks CoWorks Series. The first phase took place during the previous summer. Markakis and Gosse are dancing alongside Justine Comfort, Sarah Dowhun-Tompa and Denise Solleza, forming Half Second Echo dance collective. This is the first time I’m observing these dancers together. “I’m hoping to come away with a lot of guts,” Norman says, using the punchy word for new choreography. The process won’t continue again until March.

Gosse comments that the directions are like the game Huckle Buckle. This game is played in partners, starting on opposite sides of the room. The leader calls out two body parts - “Hand to elbow!” - and the partners run to each other, connect the two parts and run back to their starting spots before the other pairs. To win, players must follow their instincts. “Don’t analyze it, just go for it,” Norman says, pushing the dancers to act as kids playing Gosse’s game. She doesn’t want them to worry about how they look - something difficult for dancers who have been listening to beloved teachers squawk about pointed feet and rounded arms for years.

Gosse and Markakis start moving together without a plan, chuckling when they end up tangled around each other. “It’s like Twister,” says an upside down Markakis. Other game-like movements are peppered throughout the choreography: the dancers form a whisper circle (Broken Telephone) and later hold hands, creating a barrier while Solleza pushes through (Red Rover).

During a rehearsal with all five dancers, the recipe (for guts) is again written on the chalkboard. It’s up to the dancers to create their own solos. Tracey steps in once there is material to work with and begins the editing process: cutting, pasting, smoothing and sharpening sections of movement to make a full piece. Out of five solos, a quintet is built.

After pulling the parallel between Norman’s process and playing (she actually said “play” eight times in one rehearsal), I researched how the brain handles instincts. A study conducted by the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), published online in *Nature Neuroscience*, finds a direct connection between the brainstem and the prefrontal cortex. The brainstem is in charge of your instincts and the prefrontal cortex is in charge of keeping your instincts in line - making sure you don’t actually say what you’re thinking when the boss grates on your nerves. The prefrontal cortex develops during teenage years, which is why kids throw temper tantrums and why adults can keep their mouths shut.

My thought: to create authentic work, the dancers refer to their earliest ways of reacting.

Save the temper tantrums.