

# A MOMENT IN TIME

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**Photography** Lois Greenfield

TO WATCH CONTEMPORARY DANCE IS TO WITNESS A PARTICULAR KIND OF RELATIONSHIP – THAT OF DANCER WITH DANCER. IN SILENT LANGUAGE THEY COMMUNICATE AS MUCH WITH EACH OTHER AS WITH THE AUDIENCE. *SUBLIME* SPOKE TO ANOTHER FIGURE WHO IS PART OF THE CONVERSATION: LOIS GREENFIELD, DANCE PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILM-MAKER



profile



PHOTO BY MARC-HENRI CYKIERT



Thundering music, strobe lighting, bodies hurtling through the air, contorting in mid-flight and landing somehow unscathed on the bare floor. A solitary figure dressed in black stands in the centre of the stage and trains her lens on the dancers. Less than a second later the photo appears projected on two giant screens. Did we really see the dancer do that twist, we wonder? We can't remember. Before we can contemplate the matter further, the dancers have moved on, the image has been replaced.

Welcome to *Held*, the Australian Dance Theatre's latest tour de force and assault on all the senses; a 'collision between dance and photography' according to internationally acclaimed New York-based photographer Lois Greenfield, who takes the photos live every time. Greenfield has made her name photographing the lines, shadows and shapes of the body in movement. 'If you see the moment,' she likes to say, 'you've missed it.' And since she is capturing these leaping bodies at 1/2000 of a second, there is no room for reticence. Or mistakes.

What makes Greenfield's live work so remarkable is that she is seeing the photo at the same time as the audience is. In some cases, when she's working at the back of the stage and facing the audience, she doesn't see the images at all. There's no editing, no selection, no cropping, no touching-up. The 300-odd photos she takes each performance are different every time. And if the photo doesn't work, she can't do anything about it. 'Tonight I felt I was chasing the moment instead of waiting for it,' she says reflectively after the company's performance in *Woking in March*. 'I missed some shots.'

**IT IS RARE TO HEAR A PHOTOGRAPHER** of Greenfield's experience and calibre question themselves so openly about their work, but then this is live performance and it is about what happens on the night. If Greenfield 'flows', then her shots flow too. It is safe to say, however, that most people would not notice the difference anyway. Every shot is so awe-inspiring that it is hard to fault a possible and imperceptible delay.

Greenfield describes her relationship to the dancers she shoots on stage as a 'duet . . . we meet at the moment of the flash,' she continues. There must be some sort of symbiosis, in other words. **W h e n** Greenfield gets to know a dancer well, a shoot can be seamless. She mentions a dancer on the tour

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**Margie Gillis**

The force of Margie's legs thrown into the air sent her dress all the way to the other side, giving the illusion that the dress was solid and was supporting her one-armed handstand.

whom she has known for a while, and says they 'could do a whole session without talking'. When there is a strong energy exchange, there is no need for words.

The same improvisational element is underlined by Greenfield's use of strobes in a lot of her work, both in this show and in her studio shots. By keeping the lens open and setting her strobes to take six flashes for one exposure, she depicts the various stages of a dancer's fall or jump in a single image. A descending body looks like it has wings and a veiled skirt as the moments of the fall are incorporated into the finished tableau.

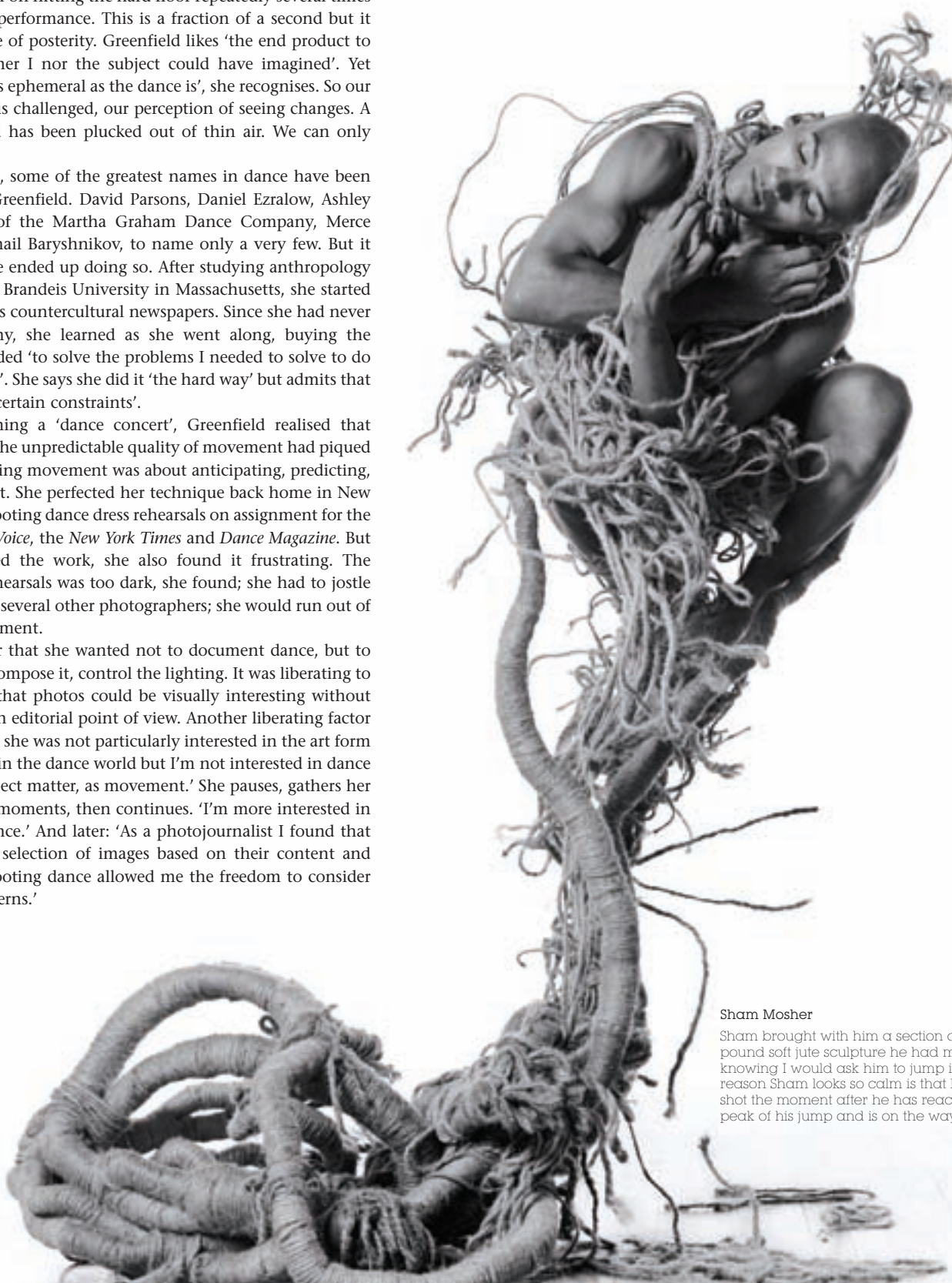
**UNDER THE ARTISTIC DIRECTION OF GARRY STEWART**, the Australian Dance Theatre has perfected a particular brand of 'ballistic choreography'. Greenfield's lens softens the violence of the kamikaze dancers, making their ascent or descent look 'angelic', defying gravity. The photos do not allude to the pain that the dancers (despite the knee-pads) must feel on hitting the hard floor repeatedly several times over an hour-long performance. This is a fraction of a second but it takes on the mantle of posterity. Greenfield likes 'the end product to be something neither I nor the subject could have imagined'. Yet 'these pictures are as ephemeral as the dance is', she recognises. So our perception of time is challenged, our perception of seeing changes. A 1/2000 of a second has been plucked out of thin air. We can only marvel.

Over the decades, some of the greatest names in dance have been photographed by Greenfield. David Parsons, Daniel Ezralow, Ashley Roland, members of the Martha Graham Dance Company, Merce Cunningham, Mikhail Baryshnikov, to name only a very few. But it was chance that she ended up doing so. After studying anthropology and film-making at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, she started working for Boston's countercultural newspapers. Since she had never studied photography, she learned as she went along, buying the equipment she needed 'to solve the problems I needed to solve to do what I needed to do'. She says she did it 'the hard way' but admits that it has 'freed her of certain constraints'.

After photographing a 'dance concert', Greenfield realised that trying to represent the unpredictable quality of movement had piqued her interest. Capturing movement was about anticipating, predicting, it was about instinct. She perfected her technique back home in New York and started shooting dance dress rehearsals on assignment for the likes of the *Village Voice*, the *New York Times* and *Dance Magazine*. But though she enjoyed the work, she also found it frustrating. The lighting in dress rehearsals was too dark, she found; she had to jostle for position against several other photographers; she would run out of film at a crucial moment.

It dawned on her that she wanted not to document dance, but to mould the photo, compose it, control the lighting. It was liberating to discover, she says, that photos could be visually interesting without having to express an editorial point of view. Another liberating factor may have been that she was not particularly interested in the art form itself. 'I'm at home in the dance world but I'm not interested in dance other than as a subject matter, as movement.' She pauses, gathers her thoughts for a few moments, then continues. 'I'm more interested in dancers than in dance.' And later: 'As a photojournalist I found that editors made their selection of images based on their content and what they said. Shooting dance allowed me the freedom to consider only aesthetic concerns.'

WHEN GREENFIELD GETS TO KNOW A DANCER WELL, A SHOOT CAN BE SEAMLESS ... WHEN THERE IS A STRONG ENERGY EXCHANGE, THERE IS NO NEED FOR WORDS



Sham Moshier

Sham brought with him a section of a 800 pound soft jute sculpture he had made, not knowing I would ask him to jump in it. One reason Sham looks so calm is that I have shot the moment after he has reached the peak of his jump and is on the way down.



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Daniel Ezraclow & Ashley Roland

This moment could never be repeated, not even by Danny and Ashley themselves. Like many of my pictures, this is a uniquely photographic event. It only exists for a 500th of a second.

Greenfield famously tells all dancers who walk into her studio for a shoot to be sure to leave their choreography at the door. She also finds it more interesting to shoot straight after or before the 'peak' moment, preferring the relaxed 'angelic' quality and 'graceful athleticism' of the fall. On the way up the body is striving, Greenfield has said; on the way down there is release. In some of her more recent work, her fascination with what the body can be has taken a turn for the mysterious.

Her *Bodyscapes* series is an intimate yet ambiguous exploration of the 'puzzle-like forms' of the human body close up. These images capture a section of midriff and a pert nipple caught in mid-air; the complicated folds of an impossibly twisted body; or sections of two faces where one is facing forward, one is in profile and the noses merge (something the dancers on the *Held* tour christened the 'Picasso'). Greenfield calls these 'found objects' that have their own singular proportions and dynamics. 'You see something but you can't explain it rationally,' she says. 'Something confounds you.' The square frame of her pictures enhances this by creating unusual boundaries and playing with the notion that the figure or dancer has just come into view. And that something may be happening just outside the frame, beyond our reach. 'I like the square [shape] because it's an unnatural way of seeing,' Greenfield says.

**GREENFIELD USES A NIKON ON STAGE** and a Hasselblad in the studio. She never uses a motor drive ('I'm looking for one moment only'). She has adopted digital for some of her work but says it hasn't improved her photography. 'Taking more shots doesn't ensure you take good shots.' She says she doesn't prefer digital but then adds, 'But without it there wouldn't be *Held*', and smiles. Having collaborated on *Held*, Greenfield has become fascinated with alternative ways of presenting her work. She's created installations, such as *Euclid's Dream*, which transposes her imagery onto a clear plexiglass cube that spins on its axis. Greenfield has recently created a series of still images of boxers. These photographs will be sequenced into scenes as a substitute for filmed action, for a film by Jodi Kaplan. Greenfield and Kaplan are also in the initial stages of making a film called *The 18th Parallel*, which explores dance as prayer around the world. She says she is at a 'crossroads' and that she 'may give up photography and concentrate more on film'. When pressed further she says, 'I'd like to not have to worry about the business side of things'. She leaves the question open. Like her famous studio shoots, she likes not knowing what will happen next. ■

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